



Local
Authorities
and Housing
Associations

Managing outdoor spaces: Lessons from Coronavirus

How to support communities and ensure value
for money – during COVID-19 and beyond

January 2021

Introduction

One effect of the Coronavirus restrictions has been a steady increase in public use of parks and open spaces, which was in stark contrast to declining demand for other public areas¹.

For local authorities and housing associations facing myriad budget pressures pre-pandemic, this – combined with other urgent COVID-19 requirements – created new challenges.

Now is an ideal time to look critically at experiences since March 2020.

What worked well and what could be improved? What successes did other areas have and what can be learned? How can communities be ensured access to the support they need, regardless of restriction levels?

This guide helps answer these questions.

Tivoli supports local authorities and housing associations nationwide with grounds maintenance, interments, street cleaning, litter collection, tree works and more.

Here, we look at 4 critical challenges and what can be learned from the Coronavirus experience.

From practical strategies to case studies, we give actionable insight to inform the ongoing management of outdoor spaces – and ensure maximum value while efficiently supporting communities.

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**Every £1
spent on parks
provides between
£7 and £100 of value²**

¹ [People need parks \(and parks need people\)](#). Nesta, 24 June 2020.

² [Why parks are a smart investment](#). The Parks Alliance, June 2020.

Challenge 1

Ensuring public spaces are COVID-secure



A key lockdown lesson has been the vital importance of safe, accessible outdoor space.

In fact, 60% of people used a park at least twice a week between 23rd March and 30th July 2020. And 70% said open space had a positive impact on their mental and physical health during lockdown.³

How do you ensure residents continue reaping these crucial benefits in a COVID-secure way? Here are the top lessons from Tivoli's experience working with local authorities and housing associations across the country.

Lesson 1 • Signage must be frequent and clear

Compliance with social distancing is higher when there's clear, regular signage reminding people about the distancing rules. From a behavioural economics perspective, signs are most effective when they specify who needs to do what (precisely) and why (explain the rationale).⁴

Signs should be:

- **Placed at regular intervals** – so users approaching from any direction see the reminders
- **On operator hi-vis vests** – to remind the public to social distance from staff
- **Monitored daily** – to ensure they remain properly placed
- **Printed in font big enough for people to see from at least 2 metres away** – to aid the elderly and those with inferior vision

Enforcement in busier areas worked best when it was pragmatic. For example, local authorities we worked with to implement one-way systems generally saw a low degree of adherence. People remained likely to take the most convenient path and use the most convenient park entrance and exit. However, with the right social distancing reminders in place, there was higher adherence to the distancing rules when they were going the 'wrong' way – which meant the overall safety goal was still being achieved.

“Tivoli teams noticed that using small font on signs reminding people to social distance made it particularly difficult for elderly people, because by the time they were close enough to read the sign they were less than 2-metres away.”

Sam Stevens, Area Manager

60%

of people used a park at least 2x a week between 23rd March & 30th July 2020

³ [Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park research](#), 30 July 2020.

⁴ [Options for adhering to social distancing measures](#), SAGE, 22 March 2020.

Lesson 2 • Prioritisation of services is key

Coronavirus has shown the fundamental importance of regular communication with your grounds maintenance provider. With demand for spaces changing, there needs to be an ongoing discussion of what areas and services to prioritise.

For instance, during lockdowns Tivoli have worked with many local authorities to divert resource away from town centres (which had reduced footfall) and into open spaces. This meant grass in priority areas could be cut more regularly. Maintaining shorter grass ensured more space was usable, which encouraged

users to spread out and facilitated social distancing.

It's also important to be realistic about how people use spaces. Play parks are a prime example. Because they were officially closed for the initial months of lockdown, many local authorities instinctively wanted to stop play park inspections. However, despite being taped off and having signage explaining closures, children routinely jumped over barriers and used the equipment. This meant regular play park inspections needed to continue – and with the right planning, could easily be incorporated into ongoing schedules.



Lesson 3 • Hygiene measures must be enhanced – in an environmentally-friendly way

When play parks re-opened, Tivoli helped councils implement strict hygiene practices. We started with a thorough cleaning and have proceeded with regular disinfection of 'high-touch' areas like handrails, slides and swing chains.

Importantly, these hygiene protocols need to be safe and environmentally friendly. After all, what good is a green space whose grass has been decimated by harsh chemicals? **Tivoli use eco-friendly disinfectant that's 99.9% effective** – the same product used by the FA to disinfect sports stadiums. This ensures current circumstances don't have a long-term negative impact on spaces councils are investing in.



99%

The effectiveness of the eco-friendly disinfectant Tivoli use

Taking a leaf from Arun District Council's book

To discourage people from using closed play parks, Arun District Council decided to let grass grow within the boundaries. The longer grass acted as a deterrent, reinforcing signage warning people not to use the equipment.

This increased compliance and allowed us to deploy that maintenance resource in higher-priority areas.

Challenge 2

Keeping up with waste management

32%

Year-on-year increase in litter within parks during the pandemic



Since the start of the pandemic, councils have seen a massive increase in litter and fly-tipping. In June 2020, an astonishing 258.4 tonnes of rubbish were collected from London's 8 Royal Parks alone – the equivalent weight of 20 new London buses. This represented a 32% rise compared with June 2019.⁵

What drove the increase? One aspect was the greater use of parks and open spaces, as well as the rise of staycationers visiting local sites. Another aspect was the disruption to standard services, such as closures of tips and commercial waste collection.

Whether it's carelessly discarded PPE, dog waste or takeaway food containers, local authorities have faced a major challenge keeping on top of litter and keeping spaces clean.

Lesson 1 • Be ready to deploy more bins • and bigger bins

It sounds basic, but the easiest way to reduce the amount of litter (and therefore reduce the amount of resource required to deal with that litter) is to provide more bin capacity so people can dispose of waste properly. Placing bins at more regular intervals around public spaces encourages people to use them and ensures that, in busy areas, people aren't congregating at pinch points.

For high-footfall areas, consider replacing existing bins with bigger ones. Bigger bins need emptying less frequently, which also makes waste collection more efficient.

Keeping the Coast Clean

For coastal areas, it quickly became clear that beachfront chip shops were a popular lockdown destination. Litter quadrupled as bins overflowed with takeaway containers.

Tivoli recommended that councils install larger, 1,100 litre bins in these high-waste areas.

The simple solution solved what they anticipated being a major eyesore and operational headache.



Lesson 2 • A flexible partnership is essential

It's important then that your waste management strategies are flexible so you can keep up with demand and quickly adapt to the effects of changing policies and guidance.

This is where having a partnership approach with your grounds maintenance company becomes invaluable. They act as your eyes and ears monitoring litter levels. They can then recommend the best ways to prioritise resource to manage those changing requirements efficiently.

Lesson 3 • Litter-picking teams must have the appropriate training

A survey by the District Councils' Network found that 40% of councils have had problems with PPE litter since the start of the pandemic.⁶ Face masks, gloves and other forms of PPE must be treated as clinical waste and handled using specific protocols.

You must therefore ensure that litter picking teams have the appropriate training. At Tivoli, our operatives are trained in litter picking and environmental maintenance wherever appropriate, and we organise additional specialist training when needed – for example to help local authorities manage discarded needles and PPE. And this isn't a new capability – we've offered this service for more than 30 years. It has therefore been a seamless and cost-effective solution for our local authority clients.



Lesson 4 • Residents need clear communication

Lockdowns have seen shutdown shops dumping unneeded stock. The rise in home and garden projects created extra waste amidst tip closures. These circumstances drove an increase in fly-tipping. In fact, some areas saw a 300% increase in fly-tipping during the first lockdown⁷, a trend Tivoli also saw with local authority clients across the UK.

We have worked closely with our clients to prioritise requirements and allocate the necessary resource for managing this problem. A valuable lesson since March has been the importance of public information campaigns.

Councils need to communicate proactively with residents to reinforce the rules around fly-tipping. This isn't just about reminding people not to fly-tip themselves. It's also about encouraging them to take responsibility for their rubbish. For example, this means emphasising that if people hire builders or a man with a van, they're still responsible for ensuring their waste is properly disposed of – and need to check credentials and paperwork to make sure this happens.

A cost-effective approach to a fast-changing situation

Allerdale Borough Council has seen footfall skyrocket as staycationers have flocked to Cumbrian beauty spots since March 2020. Tivoli quickly assessed litter levels and put forward a proposal to help the council manage it. We calculated that by quadrupling the number of bins in high-waste areas, we'd have enough capacity to meet demand.

If the council supplied the extra bins, Tivoli would be able to install and manage them within the existing tender terms because of efficiency gains – because it's faster for us to empty bins than it is to clean up strewn litter.

The council has therefore been able to manage the added pressure while ensuring value for money.

⁶ [PPE litter becoming growing problem, survey reveals](#). District Councils' Network, September 2020.

⁷ [Fly-tipping has soared by 300 per cent during the lockdown](#). Daily Telegraph, 30 April 2020.

Challenge 3

Protecting the vulnerable and reducing the burden on local health and social care services

£8.2 billion

The annual cost of physical inactivity in England alone



Day after day, headline after headline, we're reminded that this ongoing pandemic is having a significant and detrimental impact on local and national health services. Not just directly, as more and more people require treatment or care for coronavirus, but indirectly, too.

Before the pandemic, the overall economic cost of physical inactivity in England was £8.2 billion per year. An inactive person spends 37% more days in hospital and visits the doctor 5.5% more often.⁸ This represents a huge burden on services.

The overall coronavirus and lockdown situation has increased mental and physical health risks – for the general population and particularly for vulnerable communities. It has also placed more strain on local services, making it harder to effectively help those who need it most.

Lesson 1 • Vulnerable communities must continue having access to maintained outdoor spaces legible

Access to outdoor space is critical in mitigating these mental and physical health challenges, particularly for vulnerable members of the community such as the elderly, disabled, those in sheltered accommodation, those in underserved areas or those who live alone.

Research has shown that exposure to green space, even in a limited setting like a garden or street area, is just as beneficial for health as visiting a natural setting or large public park. The benefits extend beyond mental health, reducing rates of heart disease, stroke and obesity.⁹

Therefore, a key lesson from the pandemic is that maintenance must continue for green spaces serving vulnerable communities. The benefits clearly outweigh any marginal savings from halting services.

⁸ [Prescribing green space](#), Centre for Sustainable Healthcare.

⁹ [Recommendations for keeping parks and green space accessible for mental and physical health during COVID-19 and other pandemics](#), Center for Disease Control, 9 July 2020.

¹⁰ [Improving access to greenspace](#), Public Health England, 2020.



Berkshire gets moving

[Get Berkshire Active](#) have partnered with Tivoli clients Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead and Wokingham Borough Council to encourage people to stay active during the winter season. In addition to promoting the importance of exercise and healthy habits, the initiative aims to share stories of resilience and help combat isolation.

£2.1 billion

per year could be saved in health costs if everyone in England had good access to greenspace¹⁰

Lesson 2 • Exercise and healthy lifestyles must be encouraged

Adults and older people can reduce their risk of dementia, cancer and diabetes with regular walks.¹¹ Children develop more robust immune systems when they have access to green play areas.¹² And given that obesity being a key co-morbidity for COVID-19, the importance of a healthy lifestyle has come under the spotlight even more.

Outdoor spaces are therefore taking on new prominence – the Government is even promoting so-called 'green prescriptions' to encourage exercise and improve health outcomes. Research shows that 6 to 8 months after receiving a green prescription, 63% of patients are more active and 46% have lost weight.¹³ This, in turn, reduces the burden on local health services over the short, medium and long term.

Local authorities have taken a range of steps that open up access to outdoor space for exercise – in a COVID-secure way.

These include:

- **Making green space available for free to local gyms and leisure centres** – so they can conduct classes outside

Lesson 3 • Outdoor space plays a vital role supporting mental health

Isolation, health concerns and financial instability have created a new mental health crisis. Mental health disorders account for almost 25% of the total burden of ill health in the UK¹⁴. And poor mental health is estimated to incur an economic and social cost of £105 billion a year in England alone, with treatment costs expected to double in the next 20 years.¹⁵

60% of adults and 68% of young people said their mental health has declined since March.¹⁶ These already high figures are set to increase over the winter months as conditions such as seasonal affective disorder (SAD) exacerbate an already precarious situation.

Outdoor spaces play an essential role in mitigating these negative effects. Research from Public Health England found that greenspace is associated with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes, including reduced levels of depression, anxiety and fatigue, as well as enhanced quality of life. The evidence also showed that greenspace helps bind communities together, improve resilience and reduce loneliness.¹⁷

Residents must therefore have ongoing access to outdoor spaces – and be encouraged to use them.

- **Prioritising regular maintenance and disinfecting of play parks and outdoor gym equipment** – so the public can use them safely
- **Finding cost-effective ways to turn derelict spaces into community gardens and allotments** – which can also become revenue generators
- **Maintaining operations for outdoor sports facilities such as golf and tennis** – and making them more affordable for residents

For instance, we've been in regular contact with sport governing bodies to ensure our local authority clients can safely operate outdoor facilities when restrictions allow. In addition to ensuring tennis courts are socially distanced and adventure golf clubs are disinfected, we've also helped with creative ways to increase engagement. One example was working with councils to offer no-cost tennis court access for residents. This freed up staff who would have otherwise manned kiosks, reducing transmission risks and allowing us to reallocate resource to higher priority requirements.

Regular as clockwork

Since March 2020, Tivoli have worked closely with housing association clients like The Riverside Group, North Devon Homes, Home Group and The Guinness Partnership to keep up maintenance schedules.

For residents, having grass cut so they could sit safely in the garden and hang laundry outside made a huge difference to their mental health and activity levels. And for the many people shielding, seeing maintenance workers was a welcome part of 'normal' life and a vital opportunity for regular human interaction.

Initiatives extended beyond regular maintenance. For example, Home Group North West partnered with us and other community groups to provide Bags of Hope to vulnerable households to help combat loneliness. Tivoli's contribution was a packet of forget-me-not seeds residents could grow, giving them a safe activity they can do outdoors.

¹¹ [Walking tips and advice for older people](#), Age UK, 24 July 2020.

¹² [Greener play areas boost children's immune systems](#), The Guardian, 14 October 2020.

¹³ [Prescribing green space](#), Centre for Sustainable Healthcare.

¹⁴ [Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities](#), The Health Foundation, 18 June 2020.

¹⁵ [Improving access to greenspace](#), Public Health England, 2020.

¹⁶ [How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health?](#) Mind, June 2020.

¹⁷ [Improving access to greenspace](#), Public Health England, 2020.

Challenge 4

Ensuring operational efficiency and value for money



Keeping public spaces safe, tackling an increase in waste, juggling staff shortages, reducing the strain on overburdened services – for local authorities and housing associations, it can feel like the pandemic has brought an avalanche of new costs.

However, by prioritising areas of value-add and optimising operational efficiency, those costs can be mitigated. These lessons will help shape strategies to achieve that.

Lesson 1 • Green space delivers measurable financial value

A key lesson since March 2020 is that outdoor services need to continue. At the beginning of the first lockdown, many local authorities and housing associations had the instinct to stop maintenance and furlough staff.

However, experience over the past months has shown the importance of maintaining these services. The benefits far outweigh the costs when you look holistically at the value green spaces provide.

Every £1 spent on parks provides between £7 and £10 of quantifiable benefit. In England alone, they contribute billions of pounds of value annually.¹⁸

Quantifying the annual value parks provide...

£6.6 billion
to the economy

£2 billion
in avoided health costs

£73.8 million
of benefits from urban cooling,
air pollution removal & carbon sequestration

Lesson 2 • Agility and communication are key to operational efficiency

If the pandemic has taught us one thing, it's that the best-laid plans need regular adjustment. This means regular, open communication with your grounds maintenance partner is essential.

During lockdowns, Tivoli's account managers have had nightly calls with client's Head of Grounds/ Environmental Services Officers to discuss the implications of that day's Government guidance and press conference. Our area managers are in daily contact with the Tivoli leadership team, who then act as a point of contact for knowledge sharing throughout the business.

This has given Tivoli's clients much-needed agility – informed by real-time, on-the-ground experience and best-practice sharing. We have been able to prioritise and address pressing issues – from cemetery capacity and litter picking requirements to ensuring teams can work efficiently in a COVID-secure way.

Lesson 3 • Contingency planning ensures seamless service delivery

The first lockdown was such a challenge because it was sudden and unprecedented. Now, we know what contingency plans are needed to manage lockdown and tier level changes across the UK.

Tivoli's best-practice approach – based on our experience supporting local authorities and housing associations from Scotland to South West England – focuses on resource requirements, PPE and equipment stockpiling, fleet and transport needs, and remote working capabilities.

With these measures in place, plus regular communication, it becomes easy to scale services up and down as needed to maximise value for money – whether it's ensuring cemeteries can meet worst-case planning scenarios or making sure grass in high-footfall areas is cut according to the best schedule.



Best-practice contingency planning for increased restrictions:



- Extra employee wellbeing & support services
- Contingency resources to protect vulnerable employees
- Local lockdown & self-isolation resource plans



- Regional stockpiles of PPE including gloves, face masks, face coverings, hand sanitiser & other safety products
- Additional hygiene, safety & social distancing guidance



- Spot hire contingency plans for extra fleet & transport requirements
- Safety screens in stock & ready to install
- Alternative transport solutions for non-drivers



- Continued work-from-home policy for support staff
- Tested system capabilities to ensure robust remote-working processes
- Upgraded IT equipment where required

“A big conversation at the beginning of the first lockdown was how to ensure teams could work efficiently in a COVID-secure way. Clients told us we really ‘went the extra mile’ to get the balance right. We quickly figured out the right balance of PPE, sanitisation and distancing so we could safely have 2+ operatives in vans where appropriate. We changed rotas to ensure coverage while minimising unnecessary contact. We met the needs of vulnerable colleagues and minimised furloughing – while providing an efficient and cost-effective service to clients.

The feedback has been that our proactive and committed approach has taken a huge weight off clients' shoulders – and given them peace of mind that communities continue being supported the way they need to be as restrictions change.”

Spencer Rock, Chief Operating Officer, Tivoli

¹⁸ [Why parks are a smart investment](#). The Parks Alliance, June 2020.

Conclusion

Outdoor spaces are essential to the local pandemic response and beyond

Thanks to their many physical and mental health benefits, the value of outdoor spaces far exceeds the cost of maintenance. And when you have an open, collaborative partnership with your grounds partner, it's easy to maintain those spaces efficiently and cost-effectively.

Coronavirus has demonstrated the clear importance of prioritisation and flexibility. When you have that collaborative relationship – underpinned by knowledge sharing and best practice from across the country – you have the insight you need to prioritise requirements. Importantly, you also have the on-the-ground information needed to respond flexibly and adjust those priorities as the situation evolves.

This means that – from grass cutting to play parks to litter picking to interments and more – you're in a stronger position to manage key coronavirus challenges and best serve your communities, now and beyond COVID-19.



Tivoli is an award-winning independent grounds maintenance provider

We're known for self-delivering beautifully managed spaces, improving the environment and managing all forms of growth on behalf of our clients.

For more than 30 years, Tivoli have helped public and private sector organisations with a full range of services – from parks/greenspace maintenance and street cleaning to interments, litter collection and disposal, tree works, flood recovery, gritting and snow clearance.

We work with local authorities and housing associations from Scotland to South West England, and have played a vital role helping them maximise operational efficiency and value for money throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Contact Tivoli on 01563 548050 or enquiries@tivoliservices.com to discuss how we can support you and your communities.