

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Running Free: consultation on preserving the free use of public parks Response by the Sport and Recreation Alliance June 2017

Sport and Recreation Alliance

1. The Sport and Recreation Alliance brings together the sport and recreation sector and supports members to tackle challenges and take advantage of opportunities. We are the voice of the sector with Government, policy makers and the media. We help get the nation active at the grassroots by providing advice, support and guidance.

Question 1: Should local authorities not be able to charge parkrun or parkrun junior for the use of public parks?

2. Public parks are valuable assets where people of all ages can be active whether through play, traditional sports or recreational activities. We believe parks have a central role in delivering the outcomes of the Government's *Sporting Future* strategy and Sport England's *Towards an Active Nation*. *Sporting Future* is a cross-departmental strategy so any impact of proposed changes on its effectiveness should be considered.
3. We recognise that local authorities are under financial pressure and budget cuts are highly likely to continue. However, we are concerned that on-going pressures on local budgets will result in sport, leisure and recreation opportunities and facilities being reduced. Especially when we know that physical activity can save the state money in areas such as public health, policing and education so reducing access to public parks is essentially a false economy. We are also concerned that the introduction of charging for currently free activities in parks would result in reduced participation rates. Therefore, we urge decision makers to consider the wider benefits and savings that being active and healthy can have in the long term. (More on this in answer to Q2).
4. Within this context, parkrun is an excellent example of how parks are used to get people moving and bring communities together. parkrun expects more than 700,000 unique people to run, jog and walk, and 100,000 to volunteer at parkrun's Saturday 5k and Sunday junior 2k events in England during 2017. The fact that parkrun is free is central to achieving these figures as it makes it accessible for all.
5. We support the notion that local authorities should make decisions based on the needs of their local communities and they should engage with residents to understand what these needs are. We have previously called for every local authority to produce a robust and comprehensive strategy for physical activity opportunities in response to local need. This should include how areas can create, protect and utilise accessible places where people can be active, such as parks.
6. We would hope that Government wouldn't need to legislate to ensure parkruns and junior parkruns are free and accessible activities as most local authorities recognise their value but we would support such measures if this was what Government decided to do.

Question 2: Is there any specific activity, in addition to parkrun or parkrun junior, that takes place in a public park that does not require exclusive use of the park or a part of the park that should be considered for inclusion in provisions to prevent local authorities charging for that activity, and if so why?

7. The Alliance wants to see public parks remain a site for free, accessible opportunities so that everyone can be active in an outside environment close to their home. Opportunities for generating additional or alternative funding should be sought through developing the infrastructure, for example parking and cafes. Furthermore, as already suggested, charging may have a negative impact on participation rates as people are put off by the charges or are no longer able to take part for cost reasons. The added value of free physical activities in parks should also be recognised as they are already generating benefits to the local community and economy.
8. Public Health England's (PHE) *Everybody Active, Every Day*¹ focuses on 'active environments' and states that 'land use has a big impact on health'. PHE emphasises that it is 'the quality and not just the quantity of public parks and spaces that encourages people to be active, evidence shows that just having ease of access to open space makes a crucial difference [to the public's health]'. PHE also highlights that:
 - Those with close access to green space live longer than those without it
 - The health of older people increased where there is more space for walking near home, with parks...nearby
9. The Heritage Lottery Fund's *State of UK Public Parks 2016*² highlights that 'initiatives to encourage greater participation in sport and promote more regular and active use of parks are on the increase'. The *State of UK Public Parks 2014*³ report summarises research which found that parks can have a positive effect on individuals' wellbeing and their wider neighbourhoods; over 9 out of 10 people believe that parks and public spaces improve their quality of life. The report also highlights that 'urban parks have the potential to contribute greatly to the improvement of the public's health through improving the physical, mental and social well-being of park users'.
10. The UCL Institute for Health Equity⁴ stated that 'increasing the amount and quality of green space can be part of a low-cost package to address health inequalities, improve health outcomes and deliver other benefits'. Other research noted that 'those people who visited urban green spaces more frequently reported fewer stress related illnesses'. Another concluded that the health benefits for the wider community should be an important consideration in strategic policies aimed at protecting and promoting urban green spaces for wellbeing.⁵
11. The Conservation Volunteers Green Gym programme is one example of how parks can be used as sites for free activity that benefits individuals and local communities. Penge

¹ Public Health England (2014) *Everybody active, every day: An evidence-based approach to physical activity*. Available via: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374914/Framework_13.pdf

² Heritage Lottery Fund (2016) *State of UK Public Parks 2016*. Available via: <https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2016>

³ Heritage Lottery Fund (2014) *State of UK Public Parks 2014*. Available via: <https://www.hlf.org.uk/state-uk-public-parks-2014>

⁴ Allen & Balfour UCL Institute of Health Equity (2014) *Natural solutions for tackling health inequalities*. Available via: <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/natural-solutions-to-tackling-health-inequalities>

⁵ See 9

Green Gym was founded in a neglected park in south east London. It brings together local community volunteers and people from a range of referral partners including people with learning disabilities, stroke victims and mental health problems. During 2011-13, 131 Green Gym participants contributed over 4,900 hours to create a vibrant community and wildlife garden. This has created an engaging space and also helped people to be less socially isolated, be more active and have improved self-esteem.

12. Another example is Ramblers and Macmillan's Walking for Health programme which delivers free, regular short group walks. Over a full year, approximately 67,000 people walked with their local scheme at least once, recording over 1 million attendances over the year. Most of these walks were in parks and green spaces as they provide a safe, easy and accessible environment. Independent evaluation found that Walking for Health participants reported improvements in activity levels and mental wellbeing, as well as reduced loneliness and increased social interactions including intergenerational communication.
13. Parks are excellent sites for getting children and young people involved in sport and recreation. Victoria Park, Tower Hamlets, is one of London's oldest and most important historic parks. The Park's East Lake, which was restored in 2012, offers the only free fishing in the area. A recent grant from the Angling Trust's Angling Improvement Fund will pay for improvements to the Lake, for two staff members to become licensed coaches and to purchase children's fishing equipment.
14. Physical activity in parks also facilitates joined-up working, such as the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) working with grassroots charity Tennis For Free and local authorities to improve park courts and roll out schemes such as free 'walk on and play' sessions, fun sessions, bespoke groups, and sessions for schools, community centres and local clubs. Thirty-four sites are already being renovated with more to follow.⁶ The LTA also provides bespoke advice and guidance to local authorities on how they can ensure investment in park sites can be maintained offering different operational models to support and ultimately protect sporting facilities in community settings for the long term.
15. Westminster Council's Sports Team has developed an innovative alternative to charging for use of its parks. The team has worked with the parks division to pilot Park Makers across two of sites over the last two years. Instead of charging providers to run free or paid for activities, Westminster Council asks them to register as Park Makers. The individual or organisation signs-up and the Council runs baseline checks, such as Disclosure Barring Scheme and insurance. The Council helps the provider achieve the required standards if needed. The Park Maker can then run activities in the parks on the proviso that they provide two hours per week of activities that the Council can influence. For example, the Council might identify a need to target girls in a deprived area.
16. The response has been incredibly positive. There are now 44 Park Makers across the two sites and the Council has seen a significant return on investment. The Council is also able to generate more in-depth data on who is being active and how so they can respond better to local need and demonstrate impact. The Park Makers reach new demographics and increase participation rates. Park Makers is now being rolled out across the borough. The Council is also encouraging people to get active outdoors by removing prohibitive signage such as 'No Ball Games' and 'No Cycling'. This creates a more permissive and supportive environment that encourages people to be active where, when and how they choose.
17. As already stated, we believe that local authorities should and do make decisions based on the needs of their local communities and that creating an exhaustive list of activities or

⁶ <http://www.sportsmanagement.co.uk/Sports-news/latest/LTA-Andy-Murray-Wimbledon-facilities-local-authorities/325647>

for Government to differentiate by organisational type is not actually helpful; there is such a diverse range of activities and parkrun is an example of a successful, innovative programme but others may evolve as people's participation patterns change and new activities emerge. Decisions should be made on potential impact and value.

18. However, if Government wants to consider charging for park use, the Alliance suggests that the multiple benefits of free physical activity in public parks are taken into account. The Government could consider issuing guidance for local authorities which looks at charging based on a scale of the type and value of activity provided instead of focusing on individual activities. For example, consideration could go to:
 - The extent to which the activity is volunteer-led or run for profit by a large commercial company;
 - Whether the activity requires exclusive use of the park or not;
 - The economic contribution the activity adds to the local community through spend on parking, in the café etc;
 - The cost-savings to physical and mental health services that the activity generates;
 - The added social value of the activity in terms of bringing the local community together and creating engaging spaces.
19. Such an approach would require joined-up working within local authorities to recognise where cost-savings are achieved, in particular involving Health and Wellbeing Boards and Clinical Commissioning Groups. As mentioned, we have called for every local authority to produce a robust and comprehensive strategy for physical activity opportunities in response to local need.
20. We would also encourage further exploration into any unintended consequences of introducing guidance like this, for example local authorities using it to justify introducing charges that they don't currently enforce.

Question 3: Are there any activities that involve a financial charge to a client/s by a professional or business, that should be considered for inclusion in provisions to prevent local authorities charging for that activity, and if so why?

21. There are examples of where individuals are charging a small fee for running activities in public parks that don't require exclusive use of the facilities. For example, Nordic Walking classes which can co-exist easily with all other activities in an urban park and increase footfall to the park and its café. About half of all Nordic Walking instructors are volunteers who run sessions free or charge a small amount to cover running costs such as training, equipment, first aid and insurance. Other self-employed instructors charge a session fee; any profit is then taxed as part of HMRC self-assessment.
22. Anecdotal feedback from instructors suggests that if local authorities were to introduce charging for the use of the park they would stop running their activities. The threat of charges is also putting off new instructors as it can take several months or even years until they get reasonable numbers turning up to a session. The request for payment of access fees from one area of the council can conflict with messages from sports development or public health teams who are asking instructors to set up new classes to increase physical activity.
23. If Government was to go ahead with guidance for local authorities, we would support moves to prevent charging for activities such as these.