

Running Free: Consultation on preserving the free use of public parks – LGA response

Local Government Association (LGA) response

About the LGA

1. The LGA is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government. We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of over 370 local authorities in England and Wales to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government.

Key messages:

2. The LGA appreciates the Government's desire to support the long tradition of free use of public parks as well as the principles behind the parkrun concept of providing a great way to use parks through the volunteering efforts of local communities to organise parkrun events.
3. Councils see parkruns and junior parkruns as helping them to increase physical activity rates in their local authority areas, which in turn helps improve health and wellbeing amongst their communities and ultimately manages or reduces the increasing costs of treating illnesses.
4. Since 2004, when the concept of parkrun started, local authorities have been supportive of having parkruns in their local parks and open spaces. After 13 years of parkrun, no principal council has charged for a parkrun to take place in its parks or open spaces and only one parish council has tried to charge for the continuation of parkrun on their local park.
5. Given this, the LGA does not feel that the introduction of legislation to prohibit councils from charging for parkrun, junior parkrun or other similar events in their local parks or open spaces is the right way forward and immediately introduces tension between councils, parkrun and other groups, where they might otherwise negotiate amicably to achieve a positive solution.
6. The most constructive way forward is to take an informal approach by supporting good practice, investing through Sport England to develop more parkruns and other physical activity, and helping principal councils (and local parish councils) to try new ways to maintain and support parks and open spaces. This should form

part of a coherent Government policy towards ensuring the sustainability of public parks, so that they can continue to be enjoyed by everyone.

Valuing parks

7. Councils understand how important parks are to residents and the value they have in promoting health and fitness, local heritage, public art, festivals and appreciation of wildlife.
8. Ensuring parks remain open and accessible to our communities is a key concern for local authorities. However, over the previous Parliament central government funding for local authorities was reduced by 40 per cent in real terms and they continue to experience funding pressures. By 2020, local government in England will have lost 75 pence out of every £1 of core central government funding that it had to spend in 2015 - this is money used to pay for services like collecting bins, filling potholes, protecting children and caring for elderly and disabled people. Almost half of all councils - 168 councils - will no longer receive any of this core central government funding by 2019/20 and Councils face an overall £5.8 billion funding gap by 2020 - even if councils stopped filling in potholes, maintaining parks and open spaces, closed all children's centres, libraries, museums, leisure centres, turned off every street light and shut all discretionary bus routes they still would not have saved enough money to plug this gap by the end of the decade.
9. Despite this difficult backdrop, councils are doing everything they can to provide the best possible park services. They are taking innovative approaches to using park spaces, such as providing pop-up spaces, hosting local events and giving communities a say in how their parks are run.
10. While charging is an option for some discretionary add-on features, like tennis courts and coffee shops, discussions with LGA members have not suggested that any council is considering charging for activities like parkrun, which make such a fundamental and valuable contribution to other council objectives such as promoting public health.

Strategic approach

11. The recent Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee Inquiry into Public Parks recognised the important contribution that public parks make to our communities and how they are valued by them. The report also highlighted the challenges facing them in terms of sustainability and the funding pressures that councils continue to face.
12. It is important that Government takes a coherent and structured approach to parks policy and assists councils to protect and maintain this valued resource. The wider issues facing parks should be considered as a whole rather than as individual issues. We are ready to help the Government address wider culture, tourism and sports issues, and we look forward to their response to the CLG Select Committee.

Parks and sports strategy

13. The proposals in this consultation should also be considered in the context of the Government's approach to promoting sport and physical activity. The LGA has consistently made the case for a more localised approach to sport and physical activity which was recognised in the previous Government's sport strategy, published in December 2015.
14. Councils have an important leadership role to play, bringing schools, voluntary sports organisations (including parkrun), County Sports Partnerships (CSPs), National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs), health, and the private sector together to forge partnerships, unblock barriers to participation and make the local sport and physical activity system deliver better.
15. Councils and their partners are well placed to lead a step-change in sport and physical activity participation rates that will improve the nation's physical and mental wellbeing. Not only are local authorities the biggest public sector investor in sport and physical activity, spending over £1 billion per year (excluding capital spend), most also have responsibility for other functions that impact on sport and physical activity, such as public health and transport.
16. The Sport England strategy 'Towards an Active Nation 2016-2021' recognised that in order to increase participation rates, especially among the inactive, more innovative measures need to be adopted. The LGA works closely with Sport England to support measures to achieve this, including the 'Local Delivery Pilots' initiative, which is investing at least £130 million over the next four years in 10 places to develop and implement local strategies for physical activity and sport.
17. Councils are therefore already working hard to promote physical activity and sport, and see parkrun as a valued contributor to those objectives.

Parks and public health

18. The LGA also works closely with Public Health England to support councils to implement programmes that will improve the public health and wellbeing of local populations. Supporting initiatives like parkrun forms an integral part of this approach to promoting increased physical activity among our communities.
19. Since 2013, councils have been responsible for public health in their localities and therefore shares with the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the desire to improve the population's health and wellbeing through increased physical activity. In Newcastle, responsibility for funding public parks has been taken on by the public health team there, in recognition of their contribution to public health.
20. The transfer of public health from the NHS to councils in 2013 has enabled councils to integrate physical activity into public health policy, as part of a shift from a system that treats ill-health to one that promotes wellbeing. Demand for costly health and social care interventions can be reduced by a locally-led

approach that leads to higher participation rates, maximising the wider benefits from investing in sport.

21. Councils see parkruns and junior parkruns as helping them to increase physical activity rates in their local authority areas, which in turn would help improve health and wellbeing amongst their communities and help manage or reduce increasing costs of treating illnesses. Charging parkrun or other organisations for access to the parks would run counter to these objectives and, in the long-term, likely increase the costs to the public purse.

Councils and parkrun

22. Overall, councils have overwhelmingly supported parkrun and more recently junior parkrun on council owned parks and open spaces since their introduction in 2004. To date, only one parish council (out of over 370 principal councils and some 9000 local councils - including parish councils) has taken the decision to charge parkrun organisers to stage a parkrun event and subsequently, the parkrun has moved to another venue nearby, where they enjoy free usage.
23. In light of this, and given that LGA engagement with principal councils has not suggested any appetite to charge for parkruns, we do not believe that a legislative or regulatory approach is an appropriate response to this issue. The popularity of parkrun will ensure that, if a council should consider charging, councillors will be held democratically accountable at the ballot box.
24. A legislative or regulatory approach would also appear to be inconsistent with the recent strengthening of existing charging powers by measures contained in the Localism Act including the extension of the General Power of Competence to eligible local councils. We do not believe there is a case for rescinding this policy.
25. However, we do believe Government can play a role in supporting parkrun. In response to the Sport England strategy consultation, the LGA mentioned the positive impact that parkruns are having on increasing participation rates and called for investment from Sport England to help establish more parkruns by paying for the initial start-up fees (£3000) that parkrun charges local volunteers/organisers who want to set up a new parkrun as well as financial support to councils to help sustain parkruns. We would welcome a Government commitment to this approach.

Conclusion

26. The LGA appreciates the Government's desire to support the long tradition of free use of public parks as well as the principles behind the parkrun concept of providing a great way to use parks through the volunteering efforts of local communities to organise parkrun events.
27. However, the LGA does not feel that the introduction of legislation to prohibit councils from charging for parkrun, junior parkrun or other similar events in their local parks or open spaces is the right way forward and immediately introduces

tension between councils, parkrun and other groups, where they might otherwise negotiate amicably to achieve a positive solution.

28. The most constructive way is to take a more positive approach by supporting good practice, investing through Sport England to develop more parkruns, and helping principal and local councils to try new ways to maintain and support parks and open spaces.
29. The Government's response to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry on parks offers the best way to do this and the LGA is in discussion with the DCLG parks team about identifying and sharing good practice in parks management, new models of management, engaging communities in them, and building networks among officers. The LGA would be happy to build in communication around the value of parkrun into this work. This would be a more proportionate and more effective way forward.