

Scottish Health and Inequality Impact Assessment Network (SHIAN)

Report

HEALTH IMPACT SCOPING OF PUBLIC PLACES GUIDANCE

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This is a report of a Scoping Exercise held on 2nd June 2020 to review English Guidance on Safer Public Places, in order to inform development of similar guidance for Scotland. The exercise involved members of the Public Health Scotland Social and System Recovery: Environments and Spaces Group. Group members used a health impact checklist¹ to identify populations and health determinants likely to be affected by the guidance.

This report does not review the evidence to support the recommended 2m physical distancing to reduce transmission of coronavirus. Rather it considers how different groups of people may be affected by the measures in the guidance, and potential wider impacts on health determinants. The report is based on the group discussion with some additional suggestions based on recommendations from the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland² and NICE guidance on Physical Activity and the Environment relating to Public Open Spaces³.

Present

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Ali Macdonald – Public Health Scotland
Simon Bonsall – Scottish Government
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The Guidance

The guidance reviewed is available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ebbb57ae90e070831aeb0d3/Guidance_Safer_Public_Places_During_Covid_v5.8.pdf

It provides design principles for owners and operators of urban centres and greenspaces, to allow physical distancing as Covid19 restrictions are eased. This does not cover Scotland but Scottish Government are working on similar guidance and this exercise was held to inform that.

¹ Checklist available in guidance at: <https://www.scotphn.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Health-Impact-Assessment-Guidance-for-Practitioners-SHIAN-updated-2019.pdf>

² <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/47546/temporary-street-measures-during-the-coronavirus-crisis.pdf>

³ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng90>

Affected Populations

The guidance will affect a range of users of the spaces, including pedestrians, cyclists, people in wheelchairs, parents with buggies, car users. People may be moving through the spaces for utilitarian reasons to access work, retail or services, or may use the space for physical activity, play and recreation. Businesses and their customers may also make more use of public outdoor spaces to help reduce the risk of transmission in crowded indoor spaces. The issues arising in rural areas are likely to differ from those in urban areas.

The group identified the following populations that would be differentially affected by the guidance.

- Older people: May have mobility issues and slower walking speeds, may find standing in queues difficult and may need benches to allow them to rest. Are also at higher risk from Covid19.
- Children and young people: Family groups may need more space, children may find queuing difficult and need spaces for play to support child development.
- Working parents who need to take children to school or childcare may find staggered working hours more difficult. This may also reduce their ability to travel by active modes.
- Pregnant women may also find standing difficult and need facilities to sit down.
- People in wheelchairs need sufficient space and level access, including dropped access at points where they will need to get on and off the pavement.
- People with mobility issues may need consideration of ease of access, non-slip surfaces and places to sit down. Poorly placed signage may act as a barrier to them.
- People with sight loss will not be able to read signage and need to be able to navigate the spaces. If using a cane they need barriers to be detectable by cane. If guided by another person or an assistance dog they will need more space. Assistance dogs are not trained to physically distance from others, nor to follow paint or markings.
- People with learning disability may find signage difficult to understand, and may not understand the rationale for the changes.
- People with mobility issues, sight loss, learning disabilities or dementia may become more dependent on others if the environment is more difficult for them to navigate.
- Carers will need consideration of their need to be close to the person they care for, and may need toileting and other care facilities.

- People with mental health issues may suffer increased stress and anxiety caused by the changes, including the signage, markings and loss of attractive features like planters. Exposure to high quality greenspace benefits mental health.
- People whose first language is not English may find signage difficult to understand.
- Gypsy/Travellers may have more restricted access to spaces they would otherwise use.
- There could be pinch points affecting people attending places of workshop and ceremonies once restrictions are eased.
- People on low incomes are more likely to be reliant on public transport so more affected by changes to public transport hubs. They are also less likely to have private gardens and so benefit more from high quality public greenspace. They may not be able to afford facemasks.
- Homeless people may have fewer places to shelter.
- People with literacy issues may find signage difficult to understand.
- Rural areas are not explicitly addressed within the guidance. There may be less capacity to add the infrastructure needed, for example less road space to allow distancing.
- Staff responsible for stewarding of queues and pinch points are likely to need training and support to communicate the changes, manage anxiety and reduce/manage potential conflicts between different users of the spaces. Cleaning staff may be exposed directly or indirectly to infection. These staff are likely to be on low incomes.

Impacts

The group then used the checklist to identify the range of health impacts that the guidance could affect.

General access to services – if it is more difficult (or perceived to be more difficult) to move around, this will reduce access to important services.

Physical activity – If outdoor space is more difficult to navigate and less attractive overall, this is likely to discourage outdoor physical activity.

Anxiety – Signage, tape and other changes may make the environment overall feel more hostile, which is likely to increase overall levels of anxiety.

Social isolation – If people are discouraged from using outdoor space this may also increase social isolation.

Conflict – There could be conflict between different users of the space, due to queuing, lack of space available for physical distancing and difficulty navigating spaces. This may be exacerbated by anxiety caused by environmental changes and a general perception that the environment is more hostile.

Alcohol and tobacco consumption and exposure – greater use of outdoor spaces by pubs and restaurants may increase consumption of alcohol and tobacco in public spaces. This could reduce consumption in other less controlled settings but alcohol consumption may reduce willingness to physically distance. Smoking in these settings will increase exposure to second hand smoke.

Employment – there will be some new roles as stewards, but businesses that rely on footfall may become less viable if people are discouraged from moving around and using outdoor space. Some people may find it more difficult to get to work.

Removing street furniture and installing signage that appears more 'clinical' will reduce communities' sense of place and sense of belonging.

Play – The guidance does not make provision for play spaces for children. Currently play parks are closed but open unstructured outdoor play is important for child development and should be supported.

Shelter – People queuing for long periods will need provision of shelters and seating for those who cannot stand for a long time.

Rest facilities – The guidance advocates marking/tape on seating to maintain physical distance. Reduction in seating will disadvantage people with poor mobility.

Access to greenspace – Overall the restrictions may discourage people from using local greenspaces. There is strong evidence of the health benefits of greenspace access and use.

Perceived safety – This requires public spaces to be well used, well lit and well maintained.

Recommendations

The guidance should recognise the positive benefits of outdoor space, including physical activity and greenspace exposure. The overall aim should be to ensure sufficient, attractive, outdoor space is available to allow a range of uses by people with different needs. This should be forward looking, aiming to 'build back better' in a way that ensures access to high quality spaces for everyone as well as managing immediate needs for physical distancing.

The guidance for Scotland should recognise specific needs of rural areas and be renamed 'Urban and Rural Centres and Greenspaces'. The guidance should recognise the specific needs of beaches and beachside towns given the high numbers that may visit on sunny days.

Communications should stress the need for consideration of people whose needs may be different. This could usefully use the Active Travel Delivery Partner themes of:

- Be safe – Look after yourself and those in your care
- Be smart – Stay in your local area and plan ahead
- Be kind – Look out for others, particularly more vulnerable groups

The guidance should include images showing users with, and provision for, different needs including wheelchair users.

The guidance should encourage local authorities and other owners of public spaces to consult with local communities and businesses to develop plans that reflect their needs.

Plans should identify pinch points in urban and rural centres, and also ways to redirect some users to other spaces, consider end to end journeys and ensure sufficient space is available for the range of users and uses of the space.

Plans should aim to increase the availability of high quality, well maintained public greenspace, and create a network of connected spaces to allow everyone safe access. This could include redevelopment of brownfield, vacant and derelict sites. Priority should be given to low income areas.

The guidance could highlight outdoor access rights and provide guidance for landowners.

Signage should be reassuring, should use simple language and standard graphics, and should not encroach on walkways. Barriers should be detectable by a long cane.

Designs should aim to preserve the sense of place. Existing street furniture that is meaningful to local communities should be kept. Walkways should be well lit. Planters may be used imaginatively, for example instead of cones to separate pedestrians and cyclists. These could then serve multiple functions by contributing to biodiversity.

Pedestrians should be prioritised and sufficient space provided to allow walkways to be shared safely and easily navigated by family groups, wheelers, and people with different levels of mobility and different needs. Walkways should be well lit, with even surfaces and dropped access at points where pedestrians have to get on or off pavements.

Cycling infrastructure, including bike storage, should be provided but should not be shared with pedestrians or encroach on pedestrian space.

Children should have access to open space that allows unstructured free play. This should be considered in plans for road reallocation.

In areas of high use, additional seating should be provided to enable people to rest while maintaining safe distances.

Pedestrian crossings should be phased to give pedestrians priority, reduce crowding and ensure sufficient time to cross.

Bus stops and other places where people are expected to queue should have adequate shelter and seating.

In high use areas there should be provision of face masks, public toilets, waste collection and handwashing facilities.

There should be continuing support and accommodation for rough sleepers.

There should be support and guidance for Gypsy Traveller sites. The guidance could link to the SG and COSLA framework for supporting Gypsy/Traveller communities.⁴

Places of worship and other places where people congregate should be encouraged to provide stewards at times when crowds might gather.

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-supporting-gypsy-traveller-communities/documents/supporting-gypsy-travellers/supporting-gypsy-travellers/govscot%3Adocument/Covid%2B19%2BFramework%2Bfor%2BLocal%2BAuthorities%2Bon%2BSupporting%2BGypsy-Travellers%2B-Version%2B2%2B%2BApril%2B2020%2BRevised.pdf>

Staff working as stewards should receive training and support to manage queuing safely, to understand the needs of different groups of people and to reduce anxiety and conflict. Cleaning staff should be trained to protect their own safety.

The guidance should recognise relevant seasonal differences- the need for shelter and lighting will become more critical in Autumn/Winter, issues for beaches are more relevant in summer.

There should be monitoring and evaluation of the guidance to enable sharing of good practice and learning about what does and doesn't work.

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