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Guidance

COVID-19: Guidance for managing playgrounds and outdoor gyms

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Please note: This guidance is of a general nature and should be treated as a guide. In the event of any conflict between any applicable legislation (including the health and safety legislation) and this guidance, the applicable legislation shall prevail.

1. Introduction

Playgrounds are a valuable community asset that provide children with a stimulating and tactile experience to exercise and learn through play. Making them available provides important physical, social, emotional and cognitive development opportunities for children. Outdoor gyms provide users with the opportunity to exercise and improve their physical and mental health.

This guidance provides the owners and operators responsible for playgrounds and outdoor gyms with practical advice on how these can be reopened and managed effectively to enable their use while minimising the transmission risk of COVID-19.

Public health is devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This guidance should be considered alongside local public health and safety requirements. Owners/operators of playgrounds and outdoor gyms in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should refer to guidance prepared by the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government.

What do we mean by playgrounds

Playgrounds are defined as:

outdoor structures designed for children to play in or on. They may include equipment such as slides, monkey bars, climbing frames, activity towers, swings, spring rockers, see saws and sandpits.

What do we mean by outdoor gyms

Outdoor gyms are defined as:

An outdoor space containing exercise fixtures and/or machines.

This guidance does not provide advice for the management of play areas that are indoors, nor does it provide advice for indoor gyms which currently remain closed.

Playgrounds and outdoor gyms are currently closed under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020. As announced by the Prime Minister on 23 June, playgrounds and outdoor gyms will be able to reopen from 4 July.

This guidance does not pre-empt any forthcoming changes to this legislation. It is designed to provide the owners and operators of playgrounds and outdoor gyms with practical advice to help them prepare, so that when it is deemed safe for playgrounds and outdoor gyms to reopen by amendment to the regulations, they are able to do so in a way that is safe and minimises COVID-19 transmission risk.

Owners and operators responsible for playgrounds and outdoor gyms will have discretion over when they consider it safe to open for activity permitted by legislation, and may decide to keep these areas closed should they feel they are not able to facilitate their safe usage. It is recognised that owners and operators will require time to prepare for the safe reopening of playgrounds/outdoor gyms.

2. Purpose of this guidance

This guidance is for the owners and operators responsible for outdoor playgrounds and outdoor gyms. Owners or operators are defined as those responsible for the management of a playground or outdoor gym, including assessment of compliance with any relevant legislation or guidelines. This includes, but is not limited to, local authorities, housing associations, private landowners, retail businesses, pubs and restaurants, school governing bodies and academy trusts.

Each owner/operator will need to apply this guidance to the facility they are responsible for, depending on the circumstances, layout and design. This will include taking account of factors including size, equipment, and how it is organised, operated, and managed. They will need to consider implementing processes to protect the users of the equipment and the staff responsible for its maintenance and cleaning.

This guidance does not supersede any legal obligations relating to health and safety, employment or equalities, and it is important that owners and operators continue to comply with existing obligations including those relating to individuals with protected characteristics.

It contains non-statutory guidance to be taken into account when complying with these existing

obligations.

To help owners and operators decide what actions to take, and to ensure the equipment in their playground and outdoor gym is safe, they must carry out an appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment, just as they would for other health and safety related hazards. This risk assessment must be done in consultation with unions or workers.

3. Thinking about risk

Objective: That all owners and operators carry out a COVID-19 risk assessment

Owners and operators responsible for playgrounds or outdoor gyms must assess and manage the risk of potential COVID-19 transmission as relevant to the users of the equipment, such as children, parents, guardians and carers, as well as any staff hired or tasked with the maintenance or cleaning of equipment.

Owners and operators also have a legal responsibility to protect workers and others from risk to their health and safety. Owners and operators will need to think about the risks faced and do everything reasonably practicable to minimise them, recognising that it is not possible to completely eliminate the risk of COVID-19.

Owners and operators must ensure that the risk assessment for the playground or outdoor gym addresses the risks of COVID-19, using this guidance to inform decisions and control measures. A risk assessment is not about creating excessive paperwork, but rather about identifying sensible measures to control risk.

If the owner/operator has fewer than 5 workers, they do not have to write anything down as part of the risk assessment. The risk assessment will help owners/operators to decide whether everything required has been completed. The Health and Safety Executive has guidance for organisations on how to manage the risk posed to users and risk assessment at work (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm>) along with specific advice to help control the risk of COVID-19 in workplaces (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/index.htm>).

Playgrounds and outdoor gyms come in a wide variety of formats, some are small and may be a single piece of equipment such as a slide or exercise machine, whereas some are large and incorporate a number of structures and different materials. Some outdoor playgrounds/outdoor gyms are in enclosed areas with fencing while others are not.

Owners and operators need to consider the unique make up of their playground/outdoor gym when conducting a risk assessment and putting in place measures to enable the effective management of the playground/outdoor gym to minimise COVID-19 transmission risk. It should be noted that in instances where owners and operators share the responsibility for management of a playground or outdoor gym they should work together to ensure that the appropriate risk assessment is completed.

See further information from HSE on promoting a balanced approach to children's play and leisure (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/chilids-play-statement.htm>).

Enforcement

Where the enforcing authority, such as the HSE or your local authority, identifies employers who are not taking action to comply with the relevant public health legislation and guidance to control public health risks, they are empowered to take a range of actions to improve control of workplace risks. For example, this would cover employers not taking appropriate action to ensure social distancing, where possible.

Failure to complete a risk assessment which takes account of COVID-19, or completing a risk assessment but failing to put in place sufficient measures to manage the risk of COVID-19, could constitute a breach of health and safety law.

The actions the enforcing authority can take include the provision of specific advice to employers to support them to achieve the required standard, through to issuing enforcement notices to help secure improvements. Serious breaches and failure to comply with enforcement notices can constitute a criminal offence, with serious fines and even imprisonment for up to 2 years. There is also a wider system of enforcement, which includes specific obligations and conditions for licensed premises.

Employers are expected to respond to any advice or notices issued by enforcing authorities rapidly and are required to do so within any timescales imposed by the enforcing authorities. The vast majority of employers are responsible and will join with the UK's fight against COVID-19 by working with the government and their sector bodies to protect their workers and the public. However, inspectors are carrying out compliance checks nationwide to ensure that employers are taking the necessary steps.

4. Key principles for safely reopening playgrounds and outdoor gyms

Preparing a playground or outdoor gym for re-opening

Owners and operators of playgrounds or outdoor gyms are reminded that in addition to preparations to ensure they are COVID-19 Secure, there will be general maintenance requirements. Owners/operators must ensure playground and/or exercise equipment is safe to use and that risks from damaged or defective equipment are addressed before opening.

Social distancing

Social distancing aims to reduce social interaction between people to minimise the opportunity for transmission of COVID-19.

Following a review of social distancing guidance, 2 metres or 1 metre with risk mitigations (where 2 metres is not viable) are acceptable. Owners/operators should consider and set out the mitigations they will introduce in their risk assessment.

All owners or operators of playgrounds and outdoor gyms should consider how to put in place measures to support social distancing such as signs to remind users of the need for and adherence to social distancing in accordance with existing government guidance. In implementing measures, owners and operators should acknowledge that adults and children with certain conditions will find social distancing difficult.

It is recognised that adherence to social distancing between individuals and households can be particularly difficult in a playground setting. This will mean that other ways of minimising transmission risk should also be considered and communicated to the parents, guardians and carers, who should remain aware of the residual risk.

Potential measures to facilitate social distancing include:

- if an enclosed area, owners and operators should identify an advisory limit on the maximum number of users able to use a playground or outdoor gym area at any one time and use signs to communicate this
- where practicable, owners/operators could implement a booking system so that users can book a slot to use the equipment
- limiting the number of users able to use a particular piece of equipment to minimise the transmission risk of COVID-19. Potential measures include:
 - signs to communicate maximum number of users at one time
 - request those using the play area to only have 1 family member accompanying a child
 - limiting the available number of seats on equipment or numbers of swings available to promote social distancing, including for parents, carers or guardians who might push children on swings for example
 - setting a time limit and using signs to communicate this to users, parents, guardians or carers
 - using adjacent space for queues or waiting areas for users, parents, guardians and carers using barriers, markings or signs where it is safe to do so. When implementing a queue or waiting area, consideration must be taken of its impact on the surrounding space and ensure it does not impede other users or pedestrians, particularly considering those with visual or hearing impairments, mobility problems and invisible disabilities
- for outdoor gyms the introduction of a clearly marked one way system around the fixtures/ machines, to help prevent users from coming into close contact with each other
- for outdoor gyms, where machines and equipment are less than 2 metres apart pieces of equipment should be moved to allow social distancing measures to be adhered to if possible. If not possible, 1 metre distance with risk mitigation is acceptable. The mitigations should be set out in the risk assessment

Cleaning and hygiene

Scientific advice suggests that the virus can survive for up to several days on some hard surfaces, particularly when indoors. These risks are reduced when outdoors, where surfaces may be subject to UV light and/or rain. This guidance applies to outdoor playgrounds and outdoor gyms but the virus could survive long enough on frequently used/touched outdoor surfaces to facilitate transmission.

Owners and operators are advised to manage any potential risk, cleaning high traffic touch points frequently. This could include cleaning regimes for:

- playground equipment for children, usually up to age 14, such as slides monkey bars and climbing frames
- semi enclosed playhouses or huts for small children
- enclosed crawl through 'tunnels' or tube slides
- exercise bars and machine handles on outdoor gym equipment
- entry and exit points such as gates
- seating areas such as benches and picnic tables
- refuse areas/bins

Owners and operators should encourage effective sanitation by users, parents, guardians and carers.

Consideration should be given to:

- using signs and posters:
 - to promote cleaning of equipment by users, parents, guardians and carers, particularly where there are clear touch points such as swing rockers, see saws, machine handles or exercise bars
 - encouraging outdoor gym users to bring their own towel and hygiene products and wipe down equipment after use
 - encouraging parents to bring hand sanitiser gel or wipes to clean their children's hands
 - to encourage hand hygiene with including washing/sanitising hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and water or approved gel and foam sanitiser, particularly at the beginning and end of play
 - to advise users (or parents of users) not to touch their faces, and to cough or sneeze into a tissue or arm when a tissue is not available
 - to remind adults and children not to put their mouths on equipment or their hands in their mouths
 - to promote and remind users, parents, guardians and carers of the need for social distancing
- when communicating safety messages owners/operators should ensure they are able to reach those with hearing or vision impairments. Consideration should also be given on how to assist those with disabilities with complying with the changes
- providing more waste facilities and more frequent rubbish collection
- where practicable, providing hand sanitiser (automated where possible) or hand washing facilities

- at the entry and exit points, in addition to public toilets/washrooms
- using disposable paper towels in handwashing facilities where possible

Public toilet provision

Objective: To ensure that toilets are kept open and to promote good hygiene, social distancing, and cleanliness in toilet facilities

Public toilets, portable toilets and toilets inside premises should be kept open and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

Steps that will usually be needed:

- using signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase handwashing frequency and to avoid touching your face, and to cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into your arm if a tissue is not available
- consider the use of social distancing marking in areas where queues normally form, and the adoption of a limited entry approach, with one in, one out (whilst avoiding the creation of additional bottlenecks)
- to enable good hand hygiene, consider making hand sanitiser available on entry to toilets where safe and practical, and ensure suitable handwashing facilities including running water and liquid soap and suitable options for drying (either paper towels or hand driers) are available
- setting clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets, with increased frequency of cleaning in line with usage. Use normal cleaning products, paying attention to frequently hand touched surfaces, and consider use of disposable cloths or paper roll to clean all hard surfaces
- keep the facilities well ventilated, for example by fixing doors open where appropriate
- special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets and larger toilet blocks
- putting up a visible cleaning schedule can keep it up to date and visible
- providing more waste facilities and more frequent rubbish collection

Face coverings

The government has produced guidance on *Staying safe outside your home* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>) that includes rules and recommendations on the use of face coverings. Face coverings must be worn at all times on public transport (except if an individual meets one of a range of disability, health, equality and age exemptions (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators#exemptions-from-mandatory-face-coverings>)) or when attending a hospital as a visitor or outpatient.

If possible, a face covering should also be worn in other enclosed public spaces where social distancing isn't possible and where the public may come into contact with people they do not normally meet. This is most relevant for periods indoors in crowded areas. Face coverings are optional for all those with disabilities or health conditions for whom it is problematic, on public transport and elsewhere.

Current government guidance states that face coverings should not be used by children under the age of 3 or those who may find it difficult to manage them correctly. Parents should be aware that wearing a face covering in a playground setting could pose an additional safety risk and should use their judgement on whether their children wear a face covering.

It is important to use face coverings properly and that signs promote their use appropriately and make it clear users should wash their hands before putting them on and taking them off.

Additional measures and communicating with parents

Additional measures that can minimise the risk COVID-19 transmission in playgrounds and outdoor gyms focus on promoting responsible behaviour by children, parents, carers and guardians.

For example, owners and operators should consider putting up signs to make clear to users, parents, guardians and carers that:

- consumption of food or drink on play equipment or in the playground area is banned
 - parents, guardians or carers should dispose of all litter including any used protective wear such as face coverings or gloves properly in litter bins, taking it home where a bin is not provided.
- Disposable face coverings and gloves cannot be recycled

Owners and operators should provide clear information to parents to set clear expectations about how children should behave when using playgrounds during COVID-19. This may be through one or more of: signs adjacent to the playground, online (e.g. operator websites or community message boards), or through leafletting.

Owners and operators may wish to consider reminding parents of the owner/operator's legal obligations towards the playground users such as signs stating that allowing children to use playground equipment is done at their own risk where appropriate.

Considering children with additional needs

Owners/operators must take into account the requirements of children with additional needs.

Issues that are likely to be specific to this group include:

- an understanding that many need frequent reminders about rules of behaviour in playground settings
- changes to familiar environments are likely to require longer periods of adjustment
- children with physical and sensory disabilities may need assistance with moving from one place to the next

- some children with additional needs such as autism find it difficult to adjust to particular clothing requirements, and therefore may be less willing to use face coverings or similar if requested
- some additional needs are not evident, such as hearing loss, and may therefore account for non-responsiveness to verbal instruction
- queuing for apparatus or toilets can be a source of frustration, and the cause of agitation
- at higher risk of being involved in bullying incidents

5. Keeping staff safe

On conducting the risk assessment owners/operators must consider their staff and the risks they may be exposed to and how these can be mitigated. In the context of managing outdoor playgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic, staff roles may include:

- cleaning playground equipment/surrounding areas
- managing queues of those waiting to use equipment
- stewarding equipment to ensure users comply with rules made by the owner/operator

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has produced guidance on working safely (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/construction-and-other-outdoor-work>) and should be consulted alongside this document.

6. Protective equipment for staff

When managing the risk of COVID-19, additional PPE beyond what is usually worn is not beneficial.

Unless staff are in a situation where the risk of COVID-19 transmission is very high, risk assessments should reflect the fact that the role of PPE in providing additional protection is extremely limited.

However, if the risk assessment does show that PPE is required, the owners/operators should provide this PPE free of charge to workers who need it. Any PPE provided must fit properly.

Owners/operators should not encourage the precautionary use of extra PPE to protect against COVID-19 except in clinical or care settings (including first aid rooms) or when responding to a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19.

Where protective equipment is already used at facilities to protect against non-COVID-19 risks, this should continue.

Face coverings for staff

Wearing a face covering is optional except when using public transport (except if an individual meets one of a range of disability, health, equality and age exemptions

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators#exemptions-from-mandatory-face-coverings>)) or when attending hospital as a visitor or an outpatient.

If employees choose to wear a face covering, it is important they use face coverings properly and wash their hands before putting them on and before and after taking them off.

Employers should support their workers in using face coverings safely if they choose to wear one. This means telling workers:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on, and before and after removing it
- when wearing a face covering, avoid touching your face or face covering, as you could contaminate them with germs from your hands
- change your face covering if it becomes damp or if you've touched it
- continue to wash your hands regularly
- change and wash your face covering daily
- if the material is washable, wash in line with manufacturer's instructions. If it's not washable, dispose of it carefully in your residual 'black bag' waste. Do not put it in the recycling bin
- practice social distancing wherever possible

7. Where to obtain further guidance

The government has produced a range of guidance to help people stay safe and reduce the transmission risk of COVID-19. This can be found on the coronavirus support and guidance page (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>).