



**PlantNetwork**  
Connecting gardens, sharing skills

## **PlantNetwork COVID-19 Meeting** Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020, 14:00-15:00

### **Summary of Discussion**

This informal, online meeting, part of the PlantNetwork “Lockdown” Webinar Series looking at the developing situation, followed on from the first COVID-19 discussion at the end of March 2020.

A number of topics were addressed in the group discussion from furloughed staff to current horticultural operations taking place in gardens, visitor engagement and issues that will need to be carefully considered to allow gardens to re-open as the lockdown begins to lift.

#### **Furloughed workers**

In the last meeting, the process of furloughing was discussed but a month later, the issues are more concerned with the wellbeing of furloughed staff, their connectivity to the gardens and wider team, and what furloughed workers can/can't do (i.e. what constitutes 'work'). Furloughed horticulturists are still part of the team and need to be kept up to date with what is happening: it was emphasised that the team working ethos could be lost during the lockdown if care is not taken. Gardens are using different approaches, with Microsoft Teams, private Facebook Groups and WhatsApp variously being used to keep horticultural teams connected, whether furloughed or not. Sharing what everyone is doing, whether at home or at work, is important to keep everyone connected and to prevent feelings of isolation and separation. One option: join PlantNetwork on Friday mornings for a virtual coffee chat.

Furloughing might prevent working, but not volunteering or training. It is possible to volunteer for other organisations: Perennial (who were invited to attend today's meeting) are one organisation for whom volunteering/support might be possible. Other small horticultural charities might also benefit from home-based assistance/help at this time too. PlantNetwork would certainly welcome any contributions – of articles, photo montages, garden films etc. - from anyone wanting to try their hand at writing/generating material for the web or for newsletters (any budding garden writers out there?).

Training is permitted and participants mentioned a number of likely events (as well as PlantNetwork!):

- An excellent workshop on tree biology by Dr Andy Hirons at the [Arboricultural Association](#)
- Webinars and Tea Garden Talks (every day, Monday to Friday at 4pm) with [Garden Masterclass](#)

#### **Current activities in gardens**

This is mixed, with gardens across the spectrum from operating on critical care only to those with all the garden team still going in to work (although these tend to be gardens with small teams) as well as every stage in between. Some gardens have started to move from critical to essential/prudent activities including regular grass mowing and other operations provided that social distancing and other protocols are observed.

#### **Visitor engagement**

Almost all gardens are doing something online to engage their visitors with behind the scenes video, images and blogs as well as virtual tours and talks. Selling plants and vegetables to the public is something some gardens are doing – particularly as many garden centres are closed. This needs to be managed to maintain social distancing, with some gardens providing kerbside delivery (for a fee) or 'phone for a collection time' services. For some, this has meant exploring online sales options.

Once gardens re-open, visitors are more likely to be drawn from local communities; many gardens are taking steps to engage with local communities, school groups (with schools distributing information to their home-schooled pupils) and even local tourism representatives. Gardens were urged to speak with local authorities (who oversee tourism) and cultural agencies (e.g. <https://www.culturecentral.co.uk/>) to help promote and to develop a consistent approach/message for visitors on what they might expect when permitted to visit their local cultural destinations again. PlantNetwork might be able to provide a collective approach to promoting local garden visits.

There was discussion on whether there needs to be a management of visitor expectations when they are permitted to visit gardens again. Should areas of the garden be left to demonstrate the amount of work that goes into maintaining gardens that open to the public? Providing interpretation could be useful to show the work involved and could also serve to raise the profile of horticultural skills and training. There is an element of pride here though, with horticulturists wary of showing anything less than perfect. Determining a few key areas for more normalised maintenance, especially near garden entrances and in hotspots/highlights across the garden, could achieve the dual aim of providing a 'wow' factor for visitors whilst also showcasing the 'lockdown effect' of reduced work in the garden.

### Looking towards the end of lockdown

It is not known when lockdown will begin to be phased out and what sectors/areas will be permitted to open first. There is expectation that managed green spaces will be among the first to reopen given they are largely outdoors and the steadily growing awareness of the importance of green space for health and wellbeing. Reopening will need to be carefully planned – too many people arriving at reopening will result in risk to staff (and visitors), immediate closure, and potential reputational damage. There are many issues to be considered including whether or not to allow access to buildings (cafes, shops, glasshouses, even entrance points to the garden and toilets), managing numbers (managed queues, timed tickets, restricted visits (based on research of typical visit lengths), booking and paying in advance), PPE for staff, cleaning protocols, requirements for visitors (size of groups visiting, restrictions on 'at risk' categories?, requests to wear masks/gloves?) and also local restrictions (as it is likely that there will remain COVID-19 hotspots). Also, staff will need to be phased back into work to ensure social distancing remains – what steps are needed to ensure staff safety including additional facilities for breaks, separate tool storage, toilet facilities etc. These factors will vary from garden to garden as each garden is unique with its own particular set of circumstances.

Some consistency in approach would be incredibly useful in ensuring visitors become well-versed in what to expect – too much variation between gardens and other cultural institutions (museums, galleries, heritage sites, theatres etc.) would simply cause confusion and sow discord. It is easier for gardens given they are outside (unlike most other cultural offers) but a consistent approach between all gardens and with other cultural bodies would be helpful even at the local level – rather as the supermarkets have done. It was suggested that a good practice outline be developed by PlantNetwork members which can then be adapted for local situations.

It was interesting to hear that some gardens are redeveloping their planting plans to reflect the current situation in a positive way. Rainbow colour schemes and more extensive vegetable planting were two examples.

Finally, it was acknowledged that the costs of the lockdown to gardens will be huge and the impacts far-reaching. Reduced travel, even at the national level, will reduce visitor numbers and so income well into next year and possibly beyond.