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CORONAVIRUS

Coronavirus Scotland: Open Edinburgh's privately owned gardens to the public, urges Andy Wightman

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Wednesday April 29 2020,
12.00am BST, The Times

Andy Wightman has called for privately owned gardens in affluent areas of Edinburgh to be opened up to the public to ease crowds in public parks, such as the Meadows

MARK SCATES / SNS GROUP

Privately owned gardens around affluent areas of Edinburgh should be opened up to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure more people can have access to green space, an MSP has said.

There are dozens of exclusive communal green spaces located around the capital's New Town, which are only accessible to residents who live in the surrounding streets.

Andy Wightman, a Green Party MSP and prominent land rights campaigner, has called on committees that operate the gardens to lift restrictions so others can use the gardens for exercise while maintaining social distancing.

Mr Wightman said unlocking the private parks would help to reduce crowds elsewhere in the city.

"The current situation is a difficult time for everyone and access to green space is vital for people's physical and mental health," he said.

"It is frustrating to see large locked private gardens like this in otherwise public spaces during the lockdown, especially when so many people live without access to a private garden and our parks can get busy.

“There is a long-standing debate about whether these gardens should be opened up to the public during the summer, for example, and I would encourage the owners to consider the positive contribution they could make by opening these garden spaces up during lockdown.”

Queen Street Gardens, an almost seven-acre glade opened in 1822, is one of the 30 or so exclusive parks available to residents of Edinburgh's New Town.

The area, which retains much of its Georgian-era architecture, also houses the 12-acre Regent Gardens and the seven-acre Dean Gardens, through which the Water of Leith runs.

Residents typically pay an annual fee for the maintenance of the 18th and 19th-century gardens and have to apply to get a key to access them.

Several of the green spaces have had a small number of visitors over the weekends, while joggers and dog-walkers have taken to public parks across the city for their daily exercise during lockdown.

The government has issued cautions to avoid spending too long in public parks, especially over sunny weekends, in an attempt to ensure that those using public gardens for their daily exercise can maintain social distancing.

The categorisation of these communal areas as gardens means that those with access can use them for sunbathing or picnics, which are not permitted in public parks under coronavirus restrictions, to maintain social distancing.

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