

NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM – JUNE 2020

ACCESS DURING CORONAVIRUS EMERGENCY AND PHASED EXIT

Purpose of discussion during 5 June “virtual” meeting

1. To seek views from NAF members on the access implications of COVID-19, including during the phased exit from lock-down.

Background

2. Access rights have continued to apply during lockdown, although there have been some local restrictions on access, and managed visitor facilities such as car parks and toilets have been closed. NAF members are all aware of the 9 April Ministerial Statement on access¹, the SNH guidance² and the slight relaxation in SG guidance on 11 May to allow more frequent outdoor exercise³. In addition, on 21 May, the SG published its Framework for Decision Making (*Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis*)⁴.

3. NAF members have also been sent a summary of SNH's campaign activity aimed at promoting responsible behaviour during lockdown. This has included news releases, social media posts, posters and provision of information on the SOAC website.

4. SNH has conducted an online survey to gather information from local access authorities about the nature and extent of access issues arising during the current lockdown, and a summary of the results will be circulated in the near future. SNH has also commissioned qualitative research to better understand what impacts COVID restrictions have had on outdoor recreation behaviour and engagement, and the results of this survey will be shared in due course.

5. From the perspective of outdoor access, key stages identified in the SG route map will be:

- The move from Lockdown to Phase 1 on 28 May, when unrestricted outdoors exercise in local areas (including non-contact activities such as golf, hiking, canoeing, outdoor swimming and angling) will be allowed in local areas. People will also be able to use their cars to travel up to about 5 miles for access to outdoor exercise.
- The move from Phase 2 to Phase 3, when the virus has been suppressed). At that stage people will be able to drive “beyond their local area” for leisure and exercise, and restrictions on accommodation providers will be relaxed. Timing of this change may be subject to geographical differences, depending on circumstances.

6. In an email (13 May), NAF members were invited to send any general comments about managing the process of progressive release from lockdown in Scotland to NAFSec by 22 May. Those comments that were received are attached in the Annex to this paper.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/ministerial-statement-on-access-rights-during-covid-19/>

² <https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/access-outdoors-during-current-coronavirus-outbreak-guidance-public-and-land-managers>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/changes-to-advice-on-going-outdoors/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis/>

Suggested points for discussion

7. At the virtual meeting of 5 June, NAF members may wish to comment further on the following topics, and on the potential roles of Forum member bodies in helping to address them (for example through messaging to their members)

Clear and consistent messaging to the public and land/site managers to reflect the different phases of exit from lock-down, including:

- Importance of complying with SOAC – including need to communicate with those who are unfamiliar with Code messages.
- Changing Covid advice – including practicalities, such as how to enable social distancing in car parks (at popular visitor destinations), avoiding gates, position on informal camping, temporary COVID-related requests to avoid particular areas etc.
- Need to manage expectations and ask for people to be flexible – e.g. where there are local pressures (e.g. on car parks and other hot spots)
- Coordination with other important advice (e.g. on mountain safety/rescue, emergency services etc.)
- Style of messaging – e.g. with simple key messages

Priorities for local access management to reflect changes in Government guidance, including:

- resolving access issues
- reopening of sites with e.g. need for social distancing measures and possible staffing issues
- improving public access, e.g. by cutting back vegetation on popular routes to facilitate social distancing
- accurate and fair assessment and communication of potential infection risks (and accident risks) in outdoor settings.

- **Strategic co-ordination** to manage:

- Messaging
- potential surges in demand in hotspots

- **Potential opportunity** to translate the current increase in local outdoor exercise to a legacy of increased responsible outdoor recreation and active travel.

- Expanding access networks and low key facilities
- Resourcing the management of increased recreation
- Increasing education (formal and informal) on SOAC
- Sustained messaging on responsible access

ANNEX: INPUT FROM NAF MEMBERS

1. SCOTTISH LAND AND ESTATES

- We recently conducted a survey of our membership, where 45% reported an increase in access issues since the beginning of the pandemic. Associated commentary showed that the key issues were around a general disregard for responsible access with gates not being left as they are found, dogs being let off leads near livestock and a huge increase in the amount of litter (including used tissues and dog faeces).
- There has also been concern in rural areas about people bringing the virus to these communities and we are aware there might be an increase in this concern as lockdown begins to be lifted and as people will begin to venture further afield.
- Therefore, as restrictions are lifted, social distancing guidance and the need for people to avoid touching gates/sanitising hands must be communicated very clearly to reduce the risk of spreading the virus and to ease some of these concerns in rural communities.
- In terms of rural tourism businesses reopening, these should of course be subject to government guidance and risk assessed on an individual basis.
- The Scottish Government needs to set out clear re-opening milestones, so that all venues of the same type are clear they can re-open, and avoid any venue/organisation opening first and being overwhelmed by visitor numbers.
- It is essential that businesses and other organisations are given sufficient notice of any reopening: they will need to organise their staffing, systems, physical infrastructure and communications.
- Government help will be needed to manage the public's expectations – what people can and can't do, encouragement to pre-book and not to travel on speculation, and what they can expect to be open etc when they arrive at venues.
- The "Check Before You Go" strapline should be clear in terms of what is meant by this (e.g. will people be advised to check what facilities/car parks will be open prior to travel, and will they be asked to check the Scottish Outdoor Access Code/SNH guidance to ensure promotion of responsible access is as wide as possible).

2. MOUNTAINEERING SCOTLAND

Mountaineering Scotland has been working with partners and stakeholders on the Mountain Safety Group to develop a phased introduction of hill and mountain activities, with the support of Scottish Mountain Rescue. These proposals have been submitted alongside those of other outdoor and adventure sports through sportscotland to the Active Scotland Division of the Scottish Government for consideration by Public Health officials leading on the response to Covid-19.

We would like to convey the high levels of compliance that our members have adhered to over the lockdown and their ability to judge risk and act responsibly as the lockdown restrictions are gradually eased.

We propose hillwalking and low-level outdoor bouldering as easy activities for reintroduction at an early stage as the lockdown is eased, as participants can maintain both physical distancing measures whilst enjoying the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors. They are both low-risk activities when properly planned and following the guidance which is being produced by Mountaineering Scotland. The public health and hygiene implications for these two activities are similar to those currently experienced for low-level walking from home.

As the restrictions are eased and travel is allowed, we would like to see people return as a staged approach to single pitch climbing and then to multi pitch climbing and scrambling at later stages. Once activities are extended beyond the current guidance for exercise, we would also like to see a return to multiday trips and wild camping in accordance with SOAC given other accommodation may remain closed for some time.

We are in the process of developing more detailed advice and guidance covering good practice in relation to the suggested activities, with more detail on general considerations and behaviour including the following points:

- Access is undertaken in compliance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and encouraging everyone to address the risk of transmitting the virus as another responsibility which must be considered in planning activity.
- Adhering to Scottish Government Public Health Regulations and Guidance advice on physical distancing at all times, encouraging personal hygiene and other recommended protective measures, including advice on travel.
- Giving consideration to travel and use of car parks which are likely to be a more significant issue than the activities themselves in recognition that an increase in traffic is likely as car sharing is more difficult in early stages.
- Continuing to 'Stay Local' in early stages, and discouraging people from visiting rural communities and remote environments with limited vehicle access until later in the process.
- Avoiding popular areas and car parks wherever possible particularly in the National Parks and the more popular Munros, and encouraging exploration of alternative areas bearing in mind the advice about remote environments.
- Reminding everyone that facilities such as toilets, cafes, and other amenities will not be available in the early stages and to plan accordingly.
- Discouraging informal roadside camping.
- Communicating core mountain safety messages around planning, checking weather, sticking to terrain that is well within individuals' comfort zone and level of competence and ensuring risk management is a priority when undertaking any activity in the mountains.
- Ensuring that everyone is aware they will need to be self-reliant in the mountain environment and that Mountain Rescue assistance will continue to be very limited. Considering the risk of visiting remote areas with limited or no vehicular access will need to be a key consideration in planning walking and climbing activities.
- Ensuring everyone is aware of the potential impact on wildlife and particularly nesting birds as due to the lockdown we have limited information on sensitive locations.

3. RAMBLERS SCOTLAND

Our feedback, mostly focuses on the communication of the guidance, rather than formulation of the guidance itself, especially since the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Routemap has been published today.

1. **Keep the message blunt**, for example:
Key message - *Stay local*
Secondary messages - *Plan ahead, be responsible, maintain social distance, take it easy*
2. **Change the message only when absolutely vital**
There is great potential for all of us to overestimate both the public's attention span and ability to understand regularly-changing, nuanced messaging. While there is a phased return to a new normal, the key messages don't necessarily need to change each time the phases do. For example, we're likely to still be saying *stay local* for outdoor recreation until at least Phase Three.
3. **Message consistency**
We hope partners can be strongly encouraged to push *exactly* the same wording. In England and Wales, we have already seen different LAs and NPs developing their own separate COVID19 messaging eg [Lakes NP](#) and [North York Moors NP](#). While these messages are well-meaning and often compelling, the divergence is unhelpful.
4. **Hot spots**
It would be wise for all partners' public statements to manage expectations – there will be some pinch points at popular outdoor sites as the lockdown is gently eased – likely starting with the up to ~5mile advice on 28 May. We can encourage people to try to avoid the most popular spots if possible. This will be an easier task when engaging knowledgeable outdoors audiences (including on details of SOAC), but tougher when speaking with beginners.
3. **Engage Mountain Rescue Teams and emergency services**
The messaging from MRTs in England and Wales has been quite different to that of the official agencies. Many rural teams are warning that they don't know how they'll manage to respond to some incidents. This is a mid- to long-term issue, which will last as long as social distancing remains, and shouldn't be ignored in Scotland.

Regarding the practicalities, such as how to enable social distancing in car parks, this will take a while to work out for each location, café, road network etc. Likewise when managing relaxation on overnight stays. Hopefully there'll be a long lead in time for this preparation to happen.

4. SCOTWAYS

Scotland has seen a massive expansion in local outdoor exercise, something that has been strived for for decades, and the vital importance of this has been recognised in the Ministerial Statement and associated guidance from Scottish Natural Heritage. ScotWays suggests the following in relation to Scotland carefully emerging from lockdown:

- Messaging needs to be brief, clear, and under-pinned by guidance. It will need tailored to the relevant phase of the easing of lockdown, targeted by activity, and appropriate to its audience. There may be a need for locally distinct messaging as well as national messaging. Co-ordination is required to avoid mixed messages and people ignoring the message.
- Messaging needs to be grounded in SOAC for both access takers and land managers, but linked to the Covid-19 guidance.
- SOAC promotion needs to be increased in order that it reaches the larger numbers of people using their access rights, and assists them with understanding their responsibilities. If people aren't given information, how can they make informed decisions? The more people understand SOAC, the more the remainder will be likely to follow such social norms.

- There is a risk that tourist hotspots and local honeypot locations will be overwhelmed by visitors, social distancing thus becoming impossible. Advice to stay within a relatively short distance of home and using active travel where possible may help suppress numbers at earlier stages of the phased easing of lockdown, but may quickly be ignored by some groups of the population.
- Manage the expectations of people leaving home as to what they will find, i.e. possibly no or limited facilities at beauty spots and in towns and villages. Messaging such as be prepared or plan ahead is required.
- Ensure the law as it stands is enforced, i.e. no closures of public access (statutory or rights of way) without going through the correct formal procedures.
- Increased support to local and national park authorities in order that they can effectively facilitate public access rights. Anecdotally, we hear many local authorities are over-stretched by the sheer number of access queries they are receiving. Many of these queries are specifically Covid-19 related access complaints, but they are also a measure of the number of additional people exercising their access rights and this needs matched by better resourcing of access teams, particularly in light of existing concerns about the reductions in the number of access staff.
- Despite the limitations they are working under during lockdown, Scotland's access officers are working hard to resolve access issues, provide advice, and are also managing to improve public access. For example, we have heard of ranger services cutting back vegetation on popular routes to facilitate social distancing. In addition to the SNH signage, councils have developed their own successful messaging regarding Covid-19 and public access tailored for their local circumstances; such examples should be pooled and shared.
- During lockdown, many golf courses provided invaluable areas of open space in which to safely exercise. We thank the Golf Clubs who understood and enabled this for their contribution to local collective well-being. As lockdown eases, playing of golf will resume, so these spaces will become less available to the general public. There may be golf courses or other partially excluded areas of open space which could be used on a temporary basis to facilitate more socially distanced outdoor recreation by the general public. We suggest that support be given to such local initiatives.
- Reallocation of public space to better facilitate social distancing, for example the narrowing of carriageways to provide more room for walking, wheeling and cycling.

5. NATIONAL FARMERS UNION SCOTLAND

- We welcome the ongoing commitment from SNH in relation to continuing to promote responsible access during the current issues
 - However, we would reiterate again, the need for a campaign to highlight key access principles outwith the COVID-19 spectrum
- Concern about using online survey-many land managers have been contacting organisations such as NFUS for help-so there is likely to be an issue with under reporting to Local Authorities
 - In addition, some members have reported that they have been unable to contact their Local Authority for assistance/not had calls returned etc
- It is important that any SNH research allows both access takers and providers to participate
- If it is an aim of SNH to 'translate the current increase in local outdoor exercise into a legacy of increased outdoor recreation' there needs to be more to support land managers who are experiencing practical issues-this will likely require some investment in some cases so funding should be considered first of all
 - Perhaps there is a job for NAF in working on practical guidance to underpin this

