

NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM –SEPTEMBER 2020

POST LOCKDOWN ACCESS ISSUES

Purpose of discussion during 16 September “virtual” meeting

1. To update NAF members on the response to COVID-related access challenges and consider future action to help address these issues.

Background

2. The current COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a wide range of well-documented challenges affecting all areas of social and economic activity, including outdoor access. The 5 km restrictions on movement were lifted by the Scottish Government on the 3 July allowing greater travel for those wishing to make use of access rights beyond their local area, and allowing extended groups to meet outdoors. The opening of car parks and facilities (e.g. toilets) was phased to help prepare for physical distancing and the return of staff. Although the Scottish Government lifted restrictions on the tourism sector on 15 July, allowing the opening of campsites and tourist attractions, some major facilities remain closed (and may not open again for the rest of the year). People have been advised to plan ahead to ensure facilities that they intend visiting are open and to avoid busy areas.
3. The broad framework for access management during this period has been provided by the 9 April Ministerial Statement on access¹, and the SNH guidance² on outdoor access during the Coronavirus outbreak. Many people discovered outdoor access during this time and there have been new people coming to the outdoors for recreation. However, lockdown and the subsequent easing of restrictions has brought a significant number of challenges, including those outlined in paragraph 4.

Challenges identified by NAF members

4. NAF members were invited to send comments to the NAFsec by 4 September on local access issues to be included in this discussion paper. The issues highlighted were:
 - Non-compliant signage and obstructions including locked gates

The emergence of non-SOAC compliant signage and obstructions was suggested to have put a particular strain on Access Authorities’ resources. Reported examples included disproportionate requests to avoid particular areas on grounds of COVID-19; signs attempting to exclude access on the grounds of young lambs, after lambing has finished; and some signs on locked gates, preventing anyone unable to climb over the gate from using paths and tracks

- Lack of awareness of SOAC

There was suggested to be a general lack of awareness of the Code amongst many people, who do not fully understand the responsibilities associated with access rights. There are particular difficulties in targeting information at key ‘hard to reach’ groups.

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>

- Severe littering, inappropriate toileting

This has been particularly acute at certain hotspots in the National Parks, National Nature Reserves and local beauty spots exacerbated by the closure of some local facilities.

- Inappropriate parking

Once travel restrictions were lifted pressures on car parking space increased, as numbers of visitors rose, many car-parks remained closed for a period beyond the lifting of travel restrictions and car sharing was not possible. Some popular places were overwhelmed on busy days.

- 'Dirty' camping and campervans

Problems highlighted by NAF in 2019 (such as the lack of local visitor facilities and low key camp sites) have been greatly exacerbated as Coronavirus restrictions have been gradually lifted. Excessive pressure has been put on fragile or limited visitor infrastructure as a result of various factors including increased demand for camping, staycations, closure of many campsites, and limited access to other visitor accommodation.

- Lack of local resources

Resourcing local access management across Scotland was raised in the recent NAF letter to Ministers and is being actively discussed at national level. However this remains a major issue and at the local level access officers and LAFs would welcome more support.

- Guidance on hand sanitising in relation to use of gates

There were conflicting views about whether it is reasonable for farmers to ask or expect members of the public to sanitise their hands before using gates. (The alternative view was that farmers could protect themselves from the risk of contracting Coronavirus by taking measures such as wearing a pair of gloves when opening and closing gates used by the public.)

Action to address these challenges

5. A number of actions are currently underway to help address these issues, for example through awareness raising, promotion of the Code and wider visitor management, and some of this current action was highlighted by NAF members.
6. Strategic co-ordination between key public bodies has been strengthened. NatureScot chairs a national liaison group to facilitate action to address access and visitor management issues (including Scottish Government (access), Scottish Forestry, Forest & Land Scotland and the National Park Authorities). During the current emergency this group has been expanded to include wider SG policy leads (tourism, zero waste and justice), Police Scotland and **sportscotland**, with the group meeting on a weekly basis. There is also increasing collaborative work on visitor management between some organisations locally, particularly on planning around exiting lockdown and restarting activities.
7. NatureScot has conducted online surveys of access officers to monitor access management issues during COVID-19 and to help inform and target current and future action. The results of the first survey were circulated to the Forum on 10 June and the results of a second survey, which incorporates more detail on camping issues, will be available shortly.
8. Research has been undertaken by NatureScot to provide a better understanding of people's use of the outdoors during the initial period of lockdown and their future intentions as restrictions

ease (<https://www.nature.scot/naturescot-research-report-1252-enjoying-outdoors-monitoring-impact-coronavirus-and-social>). This will shortly be repeated to obtain an updated picture, and will help to guide wider strategic planning for visitor provision and management in the coming months.

9. NatureScot is undertaking an ongoing campaign to promote responsible outdoor access using social and traditional media, and supported by guidance and downloadable resources on the SOAC website. Messaging about litter, fires and respect for others was extended to refer directly to responsible camping when the tourism sector 'reopened' in mid-July, with 3.2 million impressions on social media and 11,000 visits to the SOAC website over the last few weeks. This campaign has recently been expanded to include more specific messages about responsible camping, with corresponding social media resources on the SOAC website. A number of partners, including VisitScotland and NatureScot, are pursuing novel approaches to reach the more difficult 'party camper' audience, primarily using online influencers, and there is good co-ordination between these campaigns.
10. As previously discussed at the Forum, NatureScot is working with Young Scot to incorporate COVID messages into new video resources to promote responsible access to young people. These include messaging around camping, littering, fouling and fires, and should be ready for launch in September.
11. Mountaineering Scotland's 'Considerate Camping' campaign was shared with NAF members on 5 August. This aims to counter the negativity associated in the media with wild camping: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/news/considerate-camping-campaign> and is targeted mainly at those people new to camping. It has also been linked with the previous 'Tak It Home' anti-littering campaign: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/conservation/campaigns/tak-it-home>. These campaigns have been well received and shared with other recreational groups such as anglers.
12. Various other relevant campaigns are underway, often aimed at slightly different target audiences – e.g. a Zero Waste Scotland national anti-litter campaign, and local messaging by access authorities and some local businesses in popular areas.
13. NAF members have suggested a number of ideas for possible further action, including:
 - More concerted efforts to tackle litter problems through expansion of local volunteer groups to monitor litter and organise clean ups (rolling out successful examples from National Parks); joint working with other anti-litter campaigns (e.g. Marine Conservation Society's 'Source to sea' litter campaign, 18 – 25 September and campaigns by Keep Scotland Beautiful); and promotion of other novel litter collection initiatives working with (e.g.) dog walking groups and joggers.
 - The possibility of a national online reporting system for access problems, including inappropriate signage. The idea is that members of the public could report access issues they encounter anywhere in Scotland on a single webpage including photos. These would then automatically be passed to the relevant access authority and acknowledged.
 - Improved point of sale Code promotion, for example at retail outlets selling tents and other camping equipment.

- Reinforcing messages for farmers and land managers about what is (and is not) appropriate signage relating to COVID-19, other issues (such as access during lambing), the importance of taking down inappropriate signs and the responsibilities of access takers.
- Recommendations that land managers develop visitor management plans and assess staffing capacity to help monitor hot spots.
- Developing local management solutions involving a range of local stakeholders. Local Access Fora could play an enhanced role in helping to resolve some of the issues identified.

Questions for discussion

14. During discussion, Forum members are invited to consider the following questions:

- Have all the main access issues been identified or are there other important issues that need to be considered by the Forum?
- What is the role of the NAF in providing support for LAFs in tackling local access issues? For example, could LAFs be offered support to develop communications especially social media? Is this something that could be developed for the Joint NAF/LAF meeting next year?
- Can more be done to promote local solutions that could be replicated around Scotland?
- What co-ordinated action will be required to manage access during localised hotspot outbreaks of COVID-19?
- What other actions should NAF consider, and how should this be taken forward?
- Given the current prominence of camping issues, is there a need for further action through the NAF camping sub-group, for example to quickly refresh the Forum's guidance on the range of approaches available to manage these issues, and to promote a wider understanding of these approaches?