

National Access Forum Written Contributions

NAFW 68: 16 March 2021

Introduction

This note is collated and edited by NRW from submissions from Forum members and NRW staff prior to National Access Forum Meetings to facilitate the sharing of information.

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CSS Wales (WROWMWG)

CSS Wales – Wales Rights of Way Managers Working Group
adrian.walls@denbighshire.gov.uk

CSS Wales Authorities and National Parks access teams' comments

Comments made in response to a circular email to the 22 Unitary Authority rights of way teams and the 3 National Parks included the following experiences and thoughts.

General interest

There have always been issues of minimal resources to manage and maintain the PRoW network and undertake the various statutory duties and COVID has just highlighted the strains Local Authorities are under. This isn't anything new but with the increased number of path users and reported issues on the network it is becoming more difficult to manage.

The importance of good quality access in the Green Recovery agenda; sometimes feels like access gets lip service in these matters. If we are serious about reconnecting people and nature, then we need to focus on how we get people to green/blue space and invest accordingly.

Many authorities have also had to deal with damage to paths, especially connected to water courses such as bankside paths and bridges following the storms in February 2020 and February 2021.

Other concerns are recently being made aware of Avian Flu outbreak in parts of Wales and the potential impact on our work; PROW closures etc.

Sites are also under pressure and we have had to install lots of additional signage and gates to car parks. Has anyone thought about, or have examples of, controlling numbers on sites by using a pre booking system or electronic controls! I believe the Lake District was using a book and check before you go last summer. But have we any Welsh examples? Proposals are in hand to introduce more significant traffic management for those participating in access to the mountains in Snowdonia NP following their experiences in 2020.

Motorised Outdoor Recreation

No great increase in off-roading due to the issue of un-necessary travel although there is a core of users unwilling to accept this, either because they do not believe in Covid or feel that it is valid exercise and needed for mental health. Authorities are reliant on the police taking appropriate action where complaints are coming in; Where there are reports of increased use levels, principally along the east side of Wales, could be that these users are now confined to a smaller locality who traditionally travel to other areas to follow this recreation. It may be due to higher levels of activity, or just that it has become more noticeable with a general reduction in other traffic levels due to restrictions albeit most

complaints come from landowners. In more urban areas, however, antisocial behaviour and motorbikes have been a big issue and areas previously without problems, issues have increased with communities asking for more barriers to be put in place to prevent illegal access, this is being resisted as often it can disadvantage some legal users and will increase level of maintenance in the longer term. It is possible the limited number of private sites that many of these users have in the past been able to use and events to enter thereby staying legal has diminished as COVID control and planning / environmental health issues has closed many this year when they were possibly most needed

There is a need for Wales wide communication strategy targeted at new audiences coming across borders ignoring or ignorant of welsh legislation, but this applies to many types of recreational users not just vehicles. Police have been supportive. Also as the vehicles are not going to be un-invented or vanish, realisation is needed that sites, particularly self-funding private managed ones, are probably a necessary facility to distract this use from what is otherwise an easy option free to access open countryside and footpaths and bridleways creating considerable costs for enforcement and management.

There have also been reports of increasing complaints about electric scramblers on commons and open mountain. Some of those that when challenged have tried to claim that the bikes are just trail versions of assisted e-bikes, though that's seemed a stretch and at the moment doesn't make a lot of difference anyway as non-motorised cycling also isn't allowed where they've been. It's not a big problem at the moment though perhaps one to watch as technology moves on and the line between e-bike and electric motor bike becomes ever more blurred.

Policy and Legislation

An increase in Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO) applications; historically these have been quite low a number of councils reports but COVID has definitely had an effect with people walking locally; particularly where landowners may have acquiesced to a certain amount of walkers using their land historically but subsequently becoming less amenable with the increase in use/dogs etc.

We are also receiving increasing numbers of enquiries about the 2026 cut-off date. Despite assurances that this has not been brought into force in Wales at all, this is leading to increased potential DMMO applications on pre-emptive basis. It would assist if greater certainty could be given to the public that the repeal of the 2026 cut-off date is being progressed. every rambler and their dog is working on finding these "lost routes" it seems some publicity is needed to explain the current situation in Wales to help de-escalate things.

The outbreak has also highlighted the capacity of virtual and digital communication to replace more traditional ways to communicate with stakeholders of Order-making. If email notification could now permanently replace letters (unless a consultee does not have email access) and web publication replace newspaper adverts, that would greatly reduce the time and cost to local authorities and allow staff to focus on other aspects of countryside access work. Principle organisations who are statutory consultees have requested all order notification is to be submitted by email

Funding & Resources

AIG (Access Improvement Grant – Welsh Government)

Officer capacity to arrange and oversee works has been our biggest challenge with the AIG grant, but the funds to address long-standing issues and mobilise our local contractors have been hugely appreciated. Most should meet their WG AIG spend however it has been difficult this year due to the high volume of reports / queries we've received since the start of the pandemic last March.

COVID just made it even more challenging in a situation where we already have limited resources with a concern for submitting a costed bid by 19 March.

Clearly the public sector has been hit by significant costs in dealing with the critical measures needed to save lives and businesses during the pandemic. This may well in the future feed into reduced resources in local authorities so many Councils are taking full advantage of the funds presently available while they last. Some Councils have reported a surprising amount of capital and other external money from numerous different sources has also become available. However, for nearly everybody the ongoing lack of revenue funding to help develop and deliver capital projects; many don't see this coming internally with so many competing priorities. The AIG is very welcome and long may this continue; and for some access to the Green Recovery capital funding (in once case £100k to spend in 3 weeks). Unfortunately lack of capacity means that very few have a shelf full of shovel ready schemes when this capital money become available.

COVID

Path and Map Orders during CoVID

A brief delay in the beginning of COVID as Planning Committee meetings were cancelled ending the process new DMMO applications. The necessary committee meetings for councillor approval for orders are now held online and our processes haven't been impacted since.

The DMMO legal requirements for advertising in the paper is the most expensive part of the process. This really needs to be considered by Welsh Government to consider alternatives to reduce costs. Another reported a problem with local papers closing and remaining ones have substantially increased costs for advertising.

With many council offices closed other than by appointment, few if any offices ever had visitors coming to see copies of orders, many ring or write for a copy to be posted or emailed to them. So posting notices on site and orders online and in the locality as it is the most effective way for path users to be informed of a modification that may affect them but there really needs to be a more cost effective alternative to newspaper adverts. The use of web based advertisements or hosting on our council websites would be much cheaper. With the demise of post offices and local shops the number of local places to post notices locally has diminished in rural areas and are getting harder to find, in one case when trying to post an order in a village notice board the key holder had vanished.

I think it worth noting that in terms of COVID 19 impacts, some have not been able to progress DMMO casework at all since last March. That is due to a combination of needing to focus on business-critical work and because archives have been closed, site visits being kept to a minimum and user witness interviews not realistically being possible. We could try to use Teams for some user witness interviews but that is unlikely to be possible for all witnesses, not least as internet connections in a rural area cannot always accommodate that.

Operating during COVID

Some councils report a lot of COVID related obstructions to deal with; some can't even consider these at present and suspect they'll be long term issues – many of them are landowners or residents alongside paths, claiming to be concerned about virus spread and vulnerability, who are possibly taking advantage of COVID to block PROW that they've always had issue with. There seems to be an increase in the amount of aggressive behaviour towards users too; death threats, unpleasant things sent in the post and general foul and abusive language are among the things we've had reports of.

Local travel now appears to be as big a buzz in communities as Active travel. There has been a general increase in footfall on networks close to communities but not an increase in higher rights trespass in some areas whilst others have seen more horse and cyclists resorting to local footpaths that they can access. The wet winter has together with this increase rendered some paths out of repair where before there has never been a problem. Plus side is the value of the network to daily exercise but down side is stretched resources more so with Covid compliant working procedures which have been in place since last May.

The outbreak has certainly increased the awareness – and number of reports of problems – focussed on paths close to settlements. That is a great opportunity in the longer term for mental and physical wellbeing and reducing carbon emissions, but a challenge in the short term. It requires officer time, as probably our most pressured and precious resource, to liaise with landowners to resolve issues and arrange works.



Sustrans Cymru – Paula Renzel

paula.renzel@sustrans.org.uk

About

Sustrans is the charity making it easier for people to walk and cycle. We connect people and places, create liveable neighbourhoods, transform the school run and deliver a happier, healthier commute.

Impact / Issues

Summary of 3 key points about the impact COVID-19 in relation to access and recreation from the perspective of the organisation:

1. With the huge uptake in walking and cycling during the multiple lockdowns in 2020, we have come to realise the infrastructure dedicated to walking and cycling is currently not fit for purpose. We need to reallocate more road space for walking and cycling, and provide suitable, safe and accessible infrastructure for it.
2. Green space and access to green space is essential to people's health and wellbeing and this has never been more apparent than during the Covid-19 crisis. Having quality green space within walking distance should be essential to a community, and there should be greater support in linking people to networks like the National Cycle Network that is often on their doorstep without them being aware of it.
3. Access to greenspace as well as access to suitable infrastructure is not equal. Only 57% of adults in Great Britain live within 5 minutes' walk of a green space, and this drops even lower for people on lower incomes of black and ethnic minority people. Furthermore, access barriers on paths like the NCN pose a serious threat to the equality, inclusion and diversity of access to nature.

Solutions and Interventions

1. Interventions by local authorities to widen the roads and provide greater space for walking and cycling:

[Supporting local authorities to re-allocate road space, during the pandemic and beyond](#)

[Streets for Everyone, a case study on the changes in Cardiff](#)

2. 20-minute neighbourhoods & genuine funding for the National Cycle Network

In our manifesto we call on the next Welsh Government to create a separate capital fund of £20m each year for the development and improvement of the NCN to ensure it is fully accessible for everyone. This would enable this network of shared use paths to be used to its full potential, as well as maintained adequately.

We also highlight the importance of building our towns and cities around the principle of 20-minute neighbourhoods ([definition available here](#)). This principle includes public open space, such as parks and recreation grounds. The next Welsh Government needs to help local authorities create towns and cities that put people first by making 20-minute neighbourhoods a central principle in local planning, transport, health and economic policy.

3. Barriers need to be removed from the NCN where possible.

More restrictive controls may discriminate against people with different abilities and should only be considered if there is a demonstrable severe problem which cannot be controlled by other means, such as path management. The design of restrictive controls should be such that they can be easily relaxed or removed in the future. We call for a barrier free Wales by 2025. [Read Amanda's story.](#)

Lessons learnt

1. We can make people and their health a priority
2. We can change our behaviours collectively and political will is essential for this
3. Decision-makers and change-makers need to be even more mindful of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the recovery from this crisis.

Evidence and studies

Life after lockdown briefing papers, Sustrans, June 2020. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/policy/life-after-lockdown/?location=null>

Why removing restrictive barriers must be part of our response to Covid-19, Sustrans, June 2020. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/opinion/2020/june/why-removing-restrictive-barriers-must-be-part-of-our-response-to-covid-19>

Why urban green spaces are essential for mental health, Sustrans, May 2020. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/opinion/2020/may/why-urban-green-spaces-are-essential-for-mental-health/>

The grass isn't greener for everyone, Ramblers, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/news/latest-news/2020/september/the-grass-isnt-greener-for-everyone.aspx>

General interest

Active Travel Network Map (ATNM) work (ATNM has replaced ERM and INM in the draft Active Travel design guidance)

As part of the Active Travel Act, local authorities need to update their existing route maps (ERM's) and their Integrated Network Maps or future maps (INM) every three years. The consultation process for this is currently going on and these maps have to be presented to Welsh Government by the end of 2021. Sustrans is working with many local authorities (Bridgend, Ceredigion, Caerphilly, Vale of Glamorgan, Neath Port Talbot, etc.) around Wales to produce these maps. You can have your say on these maps via the commonplace which [can be found via this link](#).

Please note that some consultations have already closed, but as there are two rounds, there will be a second chance to have your say.

School Streets

Our School Streets programme tackles the congestion, poor air quality and road safety concerns that many schools experience. We do this by restricting motor traffic at the school gates for a short period of time, generally at drop-off and pick-up times.

The 'School Streets' approach is being trialled by a growing number of UK towns and cities, including here in Wales.

Sometimes called 'Healthy School Streets', 'School Exclusion Zones' or 'Car-Free School Streets', they lead to more children walking and cycling to school.

The result is a happier, safer and healthier street environment for everyone.

Our role at Sustrans Cymru is in engaging in meaningful consultation with the children, parents and local residents to raise questions about how to create healthier spaces for our children. [Read about our recent community consultation and engagement work with Fairfield Primary in Penarth.](#)

Active Journeys

Our Active Journeys programme in Wales is helping children across the country to safely, easily and confidently travel to school by foot, bike and scooter.

We support school champions and collaborate with Local Authority contacts to help improve routes and develop whole-school approaches to active travel.

A range of engaging activities helps to build the confidence, enthusiasm and skills needed to help form new active travel habits.

These activities and lessons support schools' efforts in achieving Eco-Schools and Healthy Schools awards as well as working towards Sustrans School Mark award which recognises excellence in sustainable travel.

[Find out more about the programme and how to join it here.](#)

Policy and Legislation

Our Manifesto for the Senedd elections 2021 – Tomorrow’s Wales, for Everyone

Imagine a society in which everyone is able to walk or cycle in their neighbourhoods.

Schools, shops and workplaces are within easy reach, and our towns are accessible, green and vibrant.

We've set out Sustrans Cymru's asks of the next Welsh Government which, if implemented, would make a profound difference for the future generations of Wales.

In the next Senedd term we expect Welsh Government to deliver success by investing in safe and healthy travel, inspiring future generations to walk and cycle, creating a Wales of 20-minute neighbourhoods where everyone has access to what they need easily without needing a car, including good quality greenspace.

[Read our Manifesto here](#) and [watch the recording of our launch](#) where the candidates from four parties came to talk about their own commitments to this agenda.

20- Minute neighbourhoods

We define a 20-minute neighbourhood as one that allows residents to meet most of their needs within a 20 minute round trip by foot.

Neighbourhoods are defined by the communities who live there and each will have unique expectations of the services and facilities they need.

An important objective of the 20-minute neighbourhood concept is to better align spatial planning (i.e. what is in an area) with transport planning (transport infrastructure), to make it easier for people to walk, cycle and use public transport.

We believe 20-minute neighbourhoods have an important role to play in a green recovery from Covid-19 and in creating resilient communities for the future. [Find out more here.](#)

Twenty is Plenty - 20 miles per hour in urban areas

We have campaigned for years now about the introduction of 20mph speed limits in urban areas in Wales. This is finally looking as though it will become a reality in the near future. The Welsh Government have announced they would trial the 20mph speed limit from this summer in pilot areas aimed to be a representative sample of locations found across Wales. We are asking for 20mph speed limits to be implemented by 2023 as the default speed limit in all built up areas.

Llwybr Newydd – A new Wales Transport Strategy

The key points of our response to the recent consultation on the new Wales Transport Strategy are:

1. This 20 year strategy must provide a framework that allows us to take action against the multiple crises that we face – climate change, health, and social justice.
2. It must reverse the trend of car dominance through the effective implementation of the sustainable transport hierarchy and commitment to a shift in transport investment priorities.
3. It must be inclusive and prioritise the needs of people who are disadvantaged or marginalised to reduce wider societal inequality.

[Read the draft strategy here](#)

Funding & Resources

Funding for active travel

On the 5th February, Welsh Government announced a further £55 million to support councils in the implementation of active travel. We welcome the continued financial support the government has committed to make it easier for people to make everyday journeys in ways that benefits their health and the environment. If we want to see a real shift in the way people travel for shorter journeys, we need this investment to be continuous, but also increased. In our Manifesto we call for 10% of the total transport budget to be allocated to active travel. On top of this investment in infrastructure, we need a clearer commitment by the government to a dedicated behaviour change funding stream to get more people walking and cycling. [Read our manifesto here.](#)

Active Travel Fund(ATF)

Sustrans has been assisting Transport for Wales (TfW) in holding a number of meetings with all local authorities to help them with their ATF bids to Welsh Government. All submissions by local authorities were completed by the deadline of the 29th of January and we are now helping TfW to review them. TfW will report to Welsh Government in the first week of March which should mean that local authorities will know the outcome of their submissions before the end of March and before the elections. It is hoped that we will continue to work with TfW and local authorities throughout the year on their active travel schemes, as well as developing new scheme for funding submissions in 2022/23.

Campaigns and Events

The Big Pedal

Sustrans Big Pedal will run for 10 days from 19 – 30 April and is open to all primary and secondary schools in the UK, including SEN schools.

Sustrans Big Pedal inspires pupils, staff and parents to be amazing and take active journeys to school.

On each day of the challenge, schools compete to see who can get the highest percentage of their pupils, staff and parents cycling, walking, wheeling or scooting to school. Your school's best five days will determine your final position, but you can log journeys on all ten days if you wish.

How many active journeys will your pupils and their parents and guardians make?

[Find out more](#)

Sustrans Outside in

Get weekly inspiration and resources for kids' activities, games and challenges. These are available in Welsh and English.

[Sign up here](#)

A Barrier-free Wales by 2025

What we mean by barriers are those gates and structures found at the entrance of paths or the National Cycle Network that physically stop people who need the mental and physical benefits of public green space the most.

They prevent young families and people who are older or disabled from getting to their local green spaces and from moving actively and sustainably around their neighbourhoods.

It would be a relatively small, low-cost measure that all local authorities and private landowners can carry out to remove restrictive barriers and access controls.

This will have a big impact on making walking, cycling and wheeling more inclusive, but they may have been overlooked in the current climate.

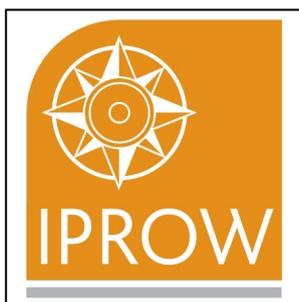
[Read Amanda's story to understand the difference this work can make.](#)

Staffing

We currently have two vacancies in the Sustrans Cymru team. See below:

Senior Business Development Officer - <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/job-vacancies/senior-business-development-officer-wales/>

Senior Engineer - <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/job-vacancies/senior-engineer-uwch-beiriannydd/>



IPROW

Richardgarner@monmouthshire.gov.uk

The Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management is the professional body which represents individuals employed in the management of public rights of way and other access in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, principally as local government officers.

Impact / Issues

Summary of 3 key points about the impact COVID-19 in relation to access and recreation from the perspective of the organisation:

1. Issue/Impact: **Increased use of the public path network and on countryside sites**

Detail:

- a) Increased reports of issues to local authorities (LAs) due to the network in many areas being in poor or unusable condition due to weather / level of rainfall, as surfaces may well have coped better if dryer (as they did in the spring / summer first 2 lockdowns).
- b) Increased frustration from the public where paths are out of repair
- c) Increased conflict of use, for example:
 - Damage to land as people seek to avoid poached/muddy areas.
 - Increased use through working farm yards/rural properties with potential and perceived risks both in terms of Covid-19 transmission and working farm accidents.
 - Increased wild-swimming, in conflict with fishing and use of land (parked cars in gateways for example).
 - Increase in blocking of paths by landowners.
- d) Increased wear and tear on local routes, especially in terms of surfaces with additional fencing-in of widening paths taking place.
- e) Greater gathering of groups of people at honeypot sites; beauty spots, visitor attractions, beaches, historical sites and their car parks for example.
- f) Issues around full car parks even at sites which are quite remote and previously under used. Closures caused strain on local communities as people parked down roads blocking access to emergency vehicles and residents.

2. Issue/Impact:

Ability of Local authorities and other bodies to undertake their work

Detail:

- a) Reduction in processing legal orders, including public path orders (PPOs), modification orders (MODs) temporary closure orders (TTROs), due to difficulty with both; advertising notices in local papers, and having documents available for inspection, with many public buildings closed.
- b) Difficulties in making sure full public consultation has been/can be undertaken For example; to inspect advertised proposals, opportunity to see local notices on

site, both for local people in the area who may be shielding or for organisations who have correspondents who live outside the local area.

- c) Loss of staff due to shielding, self-isolating measures, Covid-19 positive, and/or redeployment.
- d) Change to working practices, increase in lone-working, home-working, childcare and safe practices such as not car sharing etc., meaning less officer time available. Lots of on-going Risk Assessments and changes to procedures.
- e) & f) Reduction in number of rangers in Wales has meant no one to enforce messages about responsible use and help police control crowds.

Solutions and Interventions

Section to share any

- interventions used to address or avert the issues/impacts or
- possible solutions to addressing issues

1a/b/c.

- Communications (social media, website and via direct queries from the public) to the public on pressures on LAs and staffing availability, so as to manage expectations.
- Better information about countryside access management required by new audience.
- Scaling-back and concentration of limited resources on local route maintenance and signs, so as to keep as many available as possible to spread use, help users with navigation and landowners with users walking off the path alignment etc.
- Communications to landowners on applying for closures where there is high risk to those shielding for example, use of a set risk assessment criteria that needs to be met.
- Guidance to landowners on offering alternative permissive routes, asking the public to use these instead, but making sure the legal line remains open.
- Increase in cutting and width of cuts on local paths has also benefited some disabled people.

1d/e.

- To control excessive visitor numbers, closure of car parks and roads where necessary with support from police on enforcement. Communications to the same effect.
- Identify pinch points and seek to maintain or reopen alternative existing public paths to spread use / pressure across the path network.
- On local routes where no alternative exists and use is causing deterioration of the surface, look to put in place temporary or permanent surfaces to make routes safer and more accessible to use. Increasing the width where possible to help with distancing, funding potentially from active travel where a route is an existing or Integrated Network route for example.
- Where alternatives exist to heavily used paths, communicate alternatives well.

2a/b

- For PPOs and MODs legal notices, use alternative papers (with potential for increased cost), for temporary closures use online newspapers or council websites as set out in The Traffic Orders Procedure (Amendment) (Wales) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020.
 - **Ultimately removal of the need to advertise in newspapers for all legal notices would be beneficial.**
- Making documents available for inspection by taping of orders to external windows in closed public buildings, use of local community council buildings, notice boards or similar.
 - NB, this may need changes to the PPO & MOD Order Regulations and Commons Regulations for example
- During a lockdown of alert level 4, unless no members of the public need to inspect the site (PPO confirmation notice for example), or there are exceptional circumstances, consider limiting Public Path Orders or Modification Orders, either by postponing them or extending consultations until alert level 3 or less, having regard to neighbouring regional and/or national lockdowns and their potential effect.
- Due to potential of persons shielding, take additional steps to communicate orders, for example; letters, leaflets, local social media groups

2c/d

- Support and recognition from employers, both in terms of Health and safety responsibilities and staff wellbeing.
- Management of public expectations locally and nationally, which in turn takes pressure off staff to balance different working practices and prioritise work-loads.
- Use of technology to bridge gaps, such as lone working;
 - Supporting homeworking with software and equipment,
 - Availability of communication software (such as MS Teams) to effectively communicate with colleagues,
 - Smart phones location and GPS in vehicles, with effective communication to protect lone workers.

Lessons learnt

Summary of 3 lessons learnt during the pandemic in relation to access and recreation

1. That effective communication between organisations and governments is needed in order to overcome common problems, understand new legislation, its effects, and how best to utilise this to protect the public, Officers, and the Public Rights of Way network. This needs to be cross border and also targeted at a new audience who do not use traditional methods of obtaining information from Council websites. Also needs to be control of mis-information on social media.
2. Due to the large increase in the public exploring locally, issues both minor and major, new and long-standing, across a large proportion of the public path network, have and are being highlighted, with raised profiles locally and nationally. As a result there has been new and renewed interest in public access by individuals, communities and groups. Directing this energy with additional support could result in additional volunteering, local knowledge sharing, and better and more understood local public access networks.

3. That technology is playing a much larger role in public access, especially in terms of public access to information and services, effectively being forced, due to the pandemic, to use technology (websites, apps, social media) rather than more traditional sources of information (letters, leaflets, newspapers), recognising though that this is not by everyone, and we still need to make sure that those unable to use these sources are supported.

Evidence and studies

Section to share any studies or evidence relevant to access and recreation during the pandemic.

- Increased use evidenced on local authority and other organisations sites and rights of way counters, website hits on promoted local walks, Strava data, increased reports of issues, and anecdotally during lockdown due to limited other activities a concentration on local outdoor recreation (for example Hertfordshire County Council RoW Googlemap hits now at over 850,000, Monmouthshire reporting + 61.48% increase in downloads of healthy walking routes and short walks, 196% increase in usage on Wales Coast Path)
- ADEPT in conjunction with IPROW surveys aiming to collect and share information on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the use and management of public rights of way across England in April and including Wales in May 2020 (an additional survey is currently being undertaken):
<https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/news-events/covid-19-updates/covid-19-rights-way-survey-results>

Wales Adventure Tourism Organisation: Steve Rayner OBE

coordinator@swoapg.com

WATO is a collaboration between the three 'Outdoor Charter' organisations representing providers of outdoor activities in Wales (South Wales Outdoor Activity Providers Group - SWOAPG; Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter Group - POCG; and Snowdonia-Active – SA) supported by 'Observer Members' from The Outdoor Partnership (TOP), NRW, Sport Wales and Visit Wales.

Impact / Issues

Summary of 3 key points about the impact COVID-19 in relation to access and recreation from the perspective of the organisation:

1. **Restrictions on Outdoor Activity:** the restrictions imposed throughout the various UK lockdowns has had an enormous impact on the outdoor activity provider sector in Wales, which has been largely 'closed' since March 2020 apart from a flurry of activity for some businesses which were able to provide activities for family groups during late summer 2020. The ban on school residential visits has, in particular, hit many businesses and outdoor centres hard. Some businesses will have closed as a result of the pandemic; most will have suffered financial difficulties; and many may struggle to find staff for the 2021 season, since many outdoor instructors are believed to have sought other employment; and the training 'pipeline' for both new and existing staff has, in effect, been shut-down for the last year. This could leave a significant gap in provision for 'guided' outdoor activity when restrictions begin to ease once more.
2. **Social distancing in the outdoors:** during the brief period when outdoor activity providers were able to operate last summer, many observed that their clients seemed reluctant to take social distancing precautions seriously, making it difficult for providers to comply with the requirements.
3. **Land and path closures:** Closures of access land and rights of way – designed to prevent 'hordes of visitors' – have prevented local activity providers from undertaking legitimate exercise and work-related training which would otherwise have been permitted by the lockdown restrictions. Also, a negative response to access during lockdown by some local communities meant that providers legally accessing the countryside were at times challenged by landowners or residents who didn't want to see anyone 'out-and-about'. Further, the re-opening of some honeypot areas occurred quickly and without adequate organisation or communication, fuelling these negative feelings in some local communities.

Solutions and Interventions

Section to share any

- interventions used to address or avert the issues/impacts or
- possible solutions to addressing issues

WATO worked closely with National Governing Bodies, through the Outdoor Alliance Wales, in developing and disseminating guidance for outdoor providers to operate safely with Covid (and in lobbying Governments to support the sector).

WATO's constituent organisations (South Wales Outdoor Activity Providers Group, Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter Group; and Snowdonia Active) have held several workshops with their members to identify and disseminate issues and 'best practice' for applying Covid precautions when undertaking activities with groups, which enabled providers to operate with more confidence and provide 'controlled' access to the outdoors for a wide range of clients.

These actions were crucial in reassuring some landowners and maintaining access for activities by groups.

Lessons learnt

Summary of 3 lessons learnt during the pandemic in relation to access and recreation

1. Existing networks such as WATO, its constituent organisations (and their local networks) and the Outdoor Alliance Wales were invaluable in developing the outdoor activity sector's response to the crisis and persuading external stakeholders to take the sector's concerns into account.
2. The surge in public demand for 'outdoor experiences' last summer suggests there may be opportunities for outdoor providers to offer a wider range of 'controlled' public access to the outdoors and thereby to help the public understand and take seriously their responsibilities in regard to outdoor access and recreation.
3. However, despite best efforts by all concerned, we have learned that it may be even more difficult than we thought to 'control' the public's behaviour and ensure responsible recreation.
4. Also, public sector decisions and communications around outdoor activities and access could be more measured and planned; with more local consultation and positive promotion of how people can take their exercise in a responsible manner.

Evidence and studies

Section to share any studies or evidence relevant to access and recreation during the pandemic.

WATO has conducted two 'barometer surveys' to identify the impact of Covid on outdoor activity providers in Wales, the full results of which can be shared with NAFW members on request. Highlights from these surveys showed that:

- 89% of outdoor provider businesses opened at some point in 2020 and delivered activities; but only at an average of 28% of normal capacity.
- In August, open businesses were employing 57% of their normal staffing levels – this dropped to 49% by November.
- 10% of the sector had been forced to make redundancies by August; this jumped to 49% by November.

- A wide variety of revenue losses were reported, from a few thousand for a sole trader to several hundred thousand for large centres – but only 68% of businesses had been eligible and received financial support.
- By November, 33% of respondents had low confidence in surviving (50% or less); 38% had moderate confidence in surviving (between 51% and 89%); and only 29% had good confidence in surviving (90% or More).



Natural Resources Wales: Alison Roberts

alison.roberts@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Policy and Legislation

Revised Countryside Code 2021

Background:

As you'll be aware during 2020 NRW and Natural England (NE) collaborated to develop the revised short version of the Countryside Code in response to Covid-19. In December 2020 Natural England further consulted with their key stakeholders, including NRW, on the existing short and long versions of the Countryside Code seeking views on current wording of the core messages and the look of the code. Given recent experiences of significant spikes in visits to outdoor spaces during Covid-19 lockdowns and resultant lifting of restrictions it is felt that now is the opportunity for a refresh of the code. It was felt that the code needs the right balance between encouraging access and making sure people understand their rights and responsibilities when spending time in the outdoors. This review and refresh of the code was brought about by NE although NRW recognise the benefit of continuing to align in the issuing and promoting of the Countryside Code as there is potential here to include the reviewed messages within our own code work.

Although led by NE, NRW's Outdoor Access and Recreation team consulted with National Access Forum Wales (NAFW) members, in December 2020, in order to obtain a wider Wales view which we felt was important due to the shared nature of the code messages across England and Wales. Since then, we have been in close contact with NE as co-owners of the code, to discuss results and observations from the consultation and virtual discussions, and eventually to assist with drafting changes. NRW have also tried to work as closely as possible with the timelines set by Natural England.

Both NRW and NE are now in the process of sharing final draft wording, based on stakeholder input, and have submitted the proposed changes for sign off (NRW internally and NE on behalf of the Secretary of State). A definitive final version will be confirmed and shared with you in due course. It is also expected that this will be followed up with a refreshed version of the advice to landowners/ managers in the new financial year. Policy and Legislation

Timing:

- Sign off of wording – ASAP / ongoing
- Both long and short versions of the code anticipated launch date of Natural England - 22nd March 2021.
- NRW will make updates to our Countryside Code website resource and associated communications ensuring it is ready for issue as close to 22nd March or ASAP and in step with the lifting of Covid restrictions in Wales. This must allow time for bilingual version updates.
- The final revised code will be circulated to NAFW members after sign off.

In line with Welsh Government guidance and lifting of restrictions, NRW are also taking steps to ensure communication of messaging for the Code complements any Covid related guidance and associated campaign work undertaken by the Welsh Government and Visit Wales. The intention is to incorporate the core code messages where possible into responsible recreation campaign work being developed.

Alison Roberts

Ymgynghorydd Arbenigol: Hamdden Gyfrifol
Specialist Advisor: Responsible Recreation

END.