

Sent on behalf of the named organisations listed below: (co-ordinated through The Outdoor Alliance Wales)

Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Deputy Minister,

### **Paths and Access closures in Wales**

In these extraordinary times we all understand the need to take unprecedented measures to tackle the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As membership organisations and outdoor activity providers, we have quickly moved to advise our members, volunteers, and clients to stop their group and social activities, and to follow at all times the guidance on social distancing and avoiding non-essential travel.

We have also been keen to amplify the government's messages that daily exercise is important and should be undertaken close to home, not requiring any non-essential travel.

On Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March, the Health Protection (Coronavirus: Closure of Leisure Businesses, Footpaths and Access Land) (Wales) Regulations 2020, instructed local authorities, National Parks, Natural Resources Wales and the National Trust to undertake immediate closures of paths and open spaces where they believed there was a risk of people congregating and spreading COVID-19. There was evidently a need for action, following the very worrying disregard of government advice witnessed across Wales last weekend as thousands flocked to our beaches and mountains, putting themselves and local people at risk.

The closure of many 'honeypot' sites, and the carparking infrastructure which facilitated this behaviour was necessary and understandable, but as outdoor-focused organisations, we are concerned at the often ad-hoc, inconsistent and sometimes wholesale, closure of open spaces and footpaths which the regulations prompted. Many of the open spaces and paths that have been closed were those which offered the best 'from your doorstep' exercise opportunities for local people, and some have been on a scale which seems draconian. This could force people to use fewer, more confined places, for their daily exercise, thereby increasing the risk of virus transmission.

As a matter of urgency, Welsh Government must issue clear advice on what is meant by daily exercise and how to interpret the advice on maintaining health and staying local. The legitimate and safe use of local green spaces and paths is increasingly being stigmatised with local vigilantism and shaming a real possibility. This will not help community cohesion and responsible behaviours at this crucial time.

The wider impact on people's wellbeing, and the unintended consequences for local communities must be monitored, as must the availability of accessible, understandable information. Lists of footpath numbers or locations are not easily interpreted – online/onsite maps which clearly illustrate closures and restrictions are needed and all authorities should be required to provide these immediately.

Welsh Government should be prepared to instruct authorities to reopen paths and green spaces where limited alternatives are available, or where closures are creating crowding issues elsewhere. The 28-day review period set out in the regulations should allow for input from stakeholders and should not be a 'rubber stamping' exercise in extending closures indefinitely.

At the end of this period of social distancing, paths and green spaces must be reopened without delay, and any necessary steps taken to rectify the inevitable maintenance issues which will have arisen during closure.

Welsh Government must also guard against the risk of landowners seeking to use these regulations to call for a shutdown of all access. There is no evidence that this is needed, and if following good hygiene and distancing advice, people should be allowed to continue to use paths and open land for daily exercise purposes.

As a sector, we will continue to play our part in tackling the spread of this virus, and we will be ready to support the people of Wales to get outdoors when we emerge from this challenging period. We are ready also to support the government in promoting responsible messaging, and developing practical advice, so please call on the knowledge and skills at our disposal to strengthen your activities over the coming weeks and months.

Yours Sincerely,

British Mountaineering Council  
Cambrian Caving Council  
Canoe Wales  
Institute of Outdoor Learning  
Mountain Training Board  
OEAP Cymru  
Open MTB  
Open Spaces Society  
Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum  
Ramblers Cymru  
RYA Cymru Wales  
Snowdonia Active  
South Wales Outdoor Activity Providers Group  
The Outdoor Partnership  
WATO – Wales Activity Tourism Organisation  
Welsh Cycling