



Covid-19: Recovery plan for climbing & hill walking

Introduction

The British Mountaineering Council (BMC) is the representative body for climbers and hill walkers in England & Wales, with over 85,000 members (both recreational users and professional instructors) and a communication reach far beyond into the wider walking and climbing community. We also work closely with all UK Mountain Training bodies who represent instructors in the sector and are supportive of this plan.

The Covid-19 (C-19) crisis has underscored the huge demand for access to the outdoors and never has it been clearer how important spending time outdoors is for our physical and mental wellbeing. 8.9 million people are active outdoors in the UK ¹ with 3.3 million people in England alone going climbing or hill walking twice a month or more ² - to give this some context, 73% more people go climbing and hill walking than play football.

Our activities also contribute significantly to the rural economy with BMC members spending on average £60 per day on a weekend visit to an outdoor destination ³. Indeed, a Welsh Government commissioned report found that the annual contribution to economic activity in Wales from outdoor activity tourism was £481m⁴ per year. Businesses benefitting from climber and hill walker spending are numerous, from accommodation, shops and restaurants to specialist retailers, walking leaders, climbing instructors and guides (volunteer and professional leaders enable more than 1.5m days of young people and adults climbing and walking per year⁵). Once businesses are allowed to re-open in rural areas, they will need customers. Climbers and hill walkers will form a good proportion of these and in some cases these businesses are wholly reliant on them.

Since the onset of C-19 in the UK, the BMC and our partners have been very successful in communicating messages to our networks, starting on the 23rd March with advice that climbing and hill walking should be put on hold for the time being, and continually updating and reinforcing our messaging since. Reports from around the UK suggest there has been widespread adoption of our advice, with recognition from local authorities and large landowners (e.g. National Trust) that it has been working.

Many climbers and hill walkers rely upon their activities as much for the sense of clarity, calmness and mental release they provide as the physicality of the activity itself. However, we, and our partners in the outdoor sector along with many other sporting and recreation bodies are starting to see increasing frustration from those we represent, wanting confirmation that they will be able to re-commence some form of these activities in a safe way as lockdown eases. At the same time, currently ambiguous regulations are causing confusion. In particular, as local walking is already permitted, and many people live near hills and moors a considerable grey area exists as to what is acceptable.

A plan of action for how lockdown will phase out is crucial. This will help the BMC, other representative bodies, landowners, National Parks and local authorities (amongst others), formulate plans and guidance for each phase of easing, and communicate this ahead of any changes. Having a clear way forward will help manage the rush to the hills and gain buy in from the public in general and rural communities in particular.

¹ Source: Sport England and OIA "Getting Active Outdoors", June 2015

² Source: Sport England "Active Lives Survey"

³ Source: BMC "Outdoor Survey 2015-16"

⁴ Source: 2014 Miller Report

⁵ Source: Mountain Training England Impact Study 2019

Activity risk (safety) and risk of transmission

Public perception of climbing and hill walking is often that they are high risk activities. However, the reality is very different, with participants skilled in carrying out continuous, dynamic risk assessments and adjusting behaviour and actions as needed. This is borne out through UK accident data, of which we have included some headline numbers for context:

Sport ⁶	Injuries / million hours
All mountaineering activities	40
Cycling	43
Jogging	50
Horse riding	100
Football	1300

The latest annual data from Mountain Rescue England and Wales (2017) shows that, the number of rock climbing incidents was 52 and hill walking incidents was 559. The total number of participant days for these activities is unknown, but bearing in mind the participation levels stated in the introduction and the much higher levels on a less frequent basis, they are likely to account for tens of millions of participant days per year. The inherent risk to the individual of these activities has not changed, and there are measures which could be used to reduce the small risk further whilst allowing activities to commence.

The key aspect during the current crisis is the risk of transmission to others, however there is currently no evidence that rock climbing or hill walking carry a greater risk of transmission of C-19 than walking or cycling. Areas where there is a potential (but unproven) increased risk of infection include carparks (where there is the possibility of a greater density of individuals at any one time) and gates and stiles, where there is the possibility of the virus remaining on surfaces. Neither of these risks is particular to rock climbing or hill walking and the risk of transmission through participation in those activities is potentially less than for walking or cycling due to the wide distribution of locations where climbing and hill walking take place.

Not all climbing and hill walking activities are the same in terms of risk of the activity itself and more importantly, the risk of transmission of the virus. These factors will be key in establishing which forms of climbing and hill walking can begin to take place safely again as the situation develops.

Basic principles

The points set out below are our proposal for a set of essential basic principles that should apply across all subsets of our activities as they begin to be phased back in with the easing of lockdown:

- Stay at home if you are showing symptoms of C-19 or should be self-isolating from contact with someone suspected to be infected with C-19.
- If you fall within a high-risk group consider carefully if you wish to risk infection through joining others, even though it is outdoors and with special measures in place.
- Bear in mind that you may be asymptomatic and act accordingly, maintaining social distancing and be vigilant with hand hygiene when touching surfaces.

⁶ Source: Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group, Non-fatal accident rates per activity

- Scale back your ambitions - undertake any activity at a level well within your ability to reduce the small risk of accident, which could put rescue services at risk of transmission.
- Until better data is available, assume the virus is resilient outdoors and take measures to avoid transmission. In particular, use gloves or alcohol gel/wipes after contacting any surfaces (e.g. gates, stiles or between climbs).
- Some areas or specific sites may require special measures when re-opening compared to others – please bear this in mind and follow site specific requirements.

Key considerations

Below are what we consider key areas which need addressing to allow recommencement of climbing and hill walking in England and Wales as a recreational activity and for outdoor sector businesses, with specific suggestions for how each could be dealt with:

1. Maintenance of social distancing

- All forms of climbing and hill walking could take place within a household group who maintain 2m social distancing from other individuals and groups.
- For small groups outside of a single household, social distancing is easier with certain sub-activities within mountaineering compared to others:
 - Hill walking and scrambling would be easy for participants to maintain 2m social distancing throughout the activity.
 - Bouldering (a non-ropped form of low level climbing above crash mats) and top roping could also restart with measures in place to ensure social distancing.
 - Other roped forms of climbing would require additional measures and the BMC is ideally placed to develop these and communicate to members.

2. Hygiene

- Hygiene considerations for climbing and hill walking are no different to current advice for those going on low-level walks on public rights of way from their houses.
- Our advice would recommend use of hand sanitising gel before and after contacting any surfaces whilst outdoors.
- Upon arrival back at home, decontamination should take place by washing hands and quarantining any equipment that has contacted other people or surfaces, for as long as possible outside or in a dedicated area inside.

3. Travel

- Travel should be avoided outside of anyone's local area initially government guidance as lockdown eases should be followed.
- Short journeys for urban residents to reach nearby countryside would allow those who are used to being able to easily access these places with a short drive to do so once again, (e.g. residents on the fringes of national parks and other green spaces).
- If joining small groups outside of a household group, travel to the access point for the activity should be in separate vehicles until government advice changes to allow sharing, or if public transport is the only option, ensuring all government advice is followed.
- Respect for rural communities and landowners by visitors is crucial as lockdown is phased out and helping to keep the communities visited safe would be a key part of any BMC advice and messaging.

4. Pinch points

- The areas of highest risk of transmission are likely to be pinch points where visitors are forced together such as gates, stiles, narrow sections of paths, car parks etc. (See hygiene section for advice on mitigating risk of transmission in these places through contact with surfaces.)
- For narrow sections of path, respect for other users and taking turns to move through these when others are around is key.
- Hill walking routes should be planned with an awareness of pinch points (which should be avoided wherever possible).
- These issues exist now for anyone taking their daily exercise on public rights of way so continuing to use current advice on managing this risk is appropriate whilst acknowledging that it shouldn't prevent resumption of other activities that also use these pinch points. Such pinch points are fewer on the mountains, hills and Open Access land.

5. Accommodation and other local services

- Day trip access to the countryside is not reliant upon accommodation, cafes, pubs, shops etc but overnight trips will require it.
- Initially, to provide some access back into the outdoors and allow improvements to physical and mental wellbeing, day trips only (within stated travel restrictions) would be manageable to avoid issues with reopening accommodation.
- As and when local services are allowed to open for business, visiting climbers and walkers (amongst others), will provide crucial economic input into these areas, and without visitors, recovery of the rural economy will stall.

6. Honeypots

- It is anticipated that the increase in risk of transmission caused by climbers and hill walkers visiting more popular venues can be mitigated through advice to avoid such places for the foreseeable future, although it is noted that no such restrictions exist for walking or cycling.
- Key messages will be to:
 - Stay local initially, don't travel beyond government travel limits as lockdown eases.
 - Take the opportunity to visit new and less frequented areas.
 - Avoid visiting popular venues and have several backup plans so that if you arrive at a busy venue you can go elsewhere.
 - Be aware that closures of certain honeypot areas (e.g. Snowdon in Wales) will likely continue even as other parts of the countryside are opened.

7. Consistent messaging across the UK

- With many walkers and climbers travelling across country borders to carry out their activities (some even when only travelling locally), different approaches to easing lockdown in the four countries of the UK will lead to confusion.
- A united approach across all four home nations is essential to ensure that as people are allowed to travel once again, there is a clear and unambiguous set of measures in place that applies across the UK. (We acknowledge that although outside of our geographical area, activities in Northern Ireland will also need to be mindful of the Irish Government's requirements.)

Potential road map for re-introduction of hill, mountain and cliff-based recreation and associated work

Levels of easing approach

- Acknowledging that the inherent personal risk from the activities have not changed as a result of C-19, this approach allows any type of activity to take place across the spectrum of hill walking and climbing, instead focussing any phasing on those you participate with.
- A strong recommendation would be made to participants alongside this to scale down ambitions and encourage all participants to operate well within their personal abilities.
- In the case of any instructed or led activity, competent leaders, instructors and guides are well equipped to scale down the level of the chosen activities.

First: limit activities to people in own household



Next: if the social bubble concept is developed, only go with people in your bubble



Then: group to comprise people who are known to be non-infectious or have immunity when suitable testing procedures are available and in widespread use



Finally: everyone/anyone except those clearly ill

Activity-based approach

- This approach considers risk of transmission for each of the main sub-activities within climbing and hill walking with the idea being to allow recommencement of each activity as appropriate when we begin to move away from full lockdown.
- For those who are able to climb or walk with others within their household or social bubble (if this concept is adopted), any activity would be possible following the basic principles laid out earlier in this document as social distancing will not be required within your group.
- Most social distancing issues with climbing can be resolved by choosing a single regular partner, a measure which is often the norm anyway but which could be included as a strong recommendation in BMC C-19 advice.

Phase 1

a. Hill walking and scrambling

Description: walking and non-technical rocky terrain which does not require rock climbing equipment on hills and mountains

- Small groups can easily maintain social distance whilst carrying out these activities
- Participants should stay well within their physical and technical limits, being sure of their ability to be self-reliant, navigate and travel across all terrain on their chosen route, manage forecast weather conditions, deal with likely incidents and be appropriately equipped.

- Honey-pot areas with high desirability (e.g. Snowdon/Scafell/Pen y Fan etc) may need significant supervision to manage crowding or even to remain restricted.

b. Bouldering

Description: climbing 'problems' on boulders and low rock faces, no ropes required as it is carried out low to the ground above crash mats.

- Low risk of injury which can be mitigated by avoiding anything other than low problems with good landings that don't require a spotter (a person standing at the bottom who helps direct a falling climber onto the mats).
- Can be carried out solo or in pairs/small groups.

Phase 2

a. 'Sport climbing'

Description: roped climbing using fixed bolt anchors in the rock to clip the rope to as progress is made up the rock face. Once the route is complete the climber lowers back to the ground from a fixed anchor and the climber and belayer swap roles.

- Greater hazard than the forms of activity above due to the potential for short falls, however this should be contextualised by the injury stats listed earlier in the document showing that overall risk of injury is extremely low per participant hour.
- Social distancing could be maintained by adoption of adapted techniques to prevent climber and belayer having to be close together at the start and end of a climb.
- There will be mutual contact with ropes and other climbing equipment but this can be mitigated with use of hand sanitising gel.
- Risk of transmission could be further reduced by each climber bringing a full set of their own equipment, with each individual only using their own equipment.

b. Top rope climbing

Description: climbing using a rope above the climber to protect against any falls, connected to an anchor at the top of the cliff which can be reached by walking to the top.

- Very low risk of injury as the climber always has a tight rope above them to prevent a fall.
- Social distancing can be maintained between both climber and belayer on the ground and whilst climbing/belaying.
- There will be mutual contact with ropes and other climbing equipment (e.g. top anchors) but this can be mitigated with use of hand sanitising gel.

Phase 3

'Traditional climbing'

Description: roped climbing using removable rock anchors placed by the lead climber to clip the rope to as progress is made up the rock face and removed by the second climber as they follow.

- Increased hazard compared to sport climbing, but again in reality a very small number of injuries compared to the number of participants (52 incidents across all forms of rock climbing in England and Wales in 2017), so still low risk of injury.
- The normal techniques used for traditional climbing make social distancing slightly more difficult to achieve; however, there is certainly plenty of scope for exploring new methods which could allow this alongside our partner Mountain Training bodies.

Dave Turnbull (CEO)
Lynn Robinson (President)
Gareth Pierce (Chair)