

**REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF COUNTRYSIDE, COMMUNITY AND VISITOR
SERVICES**

**SUBJECT: VEGETATION CONTROL ON THE COAST PATH AND INLAND
RIGHTS OF WAY NETWORK DURING LOCKDOWN.**

Purpose of Report

To update Members on the work that is underway to control vegetation growth across the Public Rights of Way (PROW) network during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Introduction

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA) is responsible for the maintenance of 1,043 km of PROW across the National Park. In addition to the 260 km of PROW which make up the Pembrokeshire Coast Path there are 1,239 individual public rights of way which total 783 km to make up the remaining inland network of PROW.

The extensive network of pathways, and particularly the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail, provide vital infrastructure that underpins access to the National Park for residents and visitors alike, in turn, providing well-being and economic benefits to the wider county.

However, the implementation of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions across Wales, in combination with the implementation of Welsh Government legislation to limit access to tourism 'hot-spots' in the National Park, including the Coast Path, has limited the regular maintenance work that the Park Authority would ordinarily be undertaking at this time of year.

This paper updates Members on the gradual process of key staff, particularly Wardens and Rangers, in returning to work specifically to keep on top of vegetation growth. This work is vital in order to maintain the local network of paths that are available for local residents to undertake exercise 'on their doorstep' as well as preparing the Coast Path for visitors once the current COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

Background

COVID-19 is a new disease that spread to the United Kingdom in late January 2020. On the 11th March the outbreak was declared a pandemic. On the 20th March restaurants, schools, pubs, indoor entertainment venues leisure centres etc. were closed nationwide, and on 23rd March a "lockdown" was imposed, banning all "non-essential" travel and contact with people outside the home and shutting many businesses, venues, facilities, amenities and places of worship.

In response to the significant legal restrictions introduced and the developing outbreak, much of the Park Authority's regular functions were stopped with all

PCNPA buildings closed and staff supported to work from home wherever possible. This included the Warden and Ranger teams who have been predominantly based at home with only limited work undertaken within the National Park to implement activities associated with upholding Welsh Government restrictions as detailed below.

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020

These regulations came in to force on the 26th March and impose a duty on Local Authorities, National Park Authorities, National Resources Wales and the National Trust to close certain public footpaths and land in order to protect against the risks to public health arising from coronavirus.

The duty extends to public rights of way or open access land that the authorities consider:

- to be liable to large numbers of people congregating or being in close proximity to each other, or
- the use of which otherwise poses a high risk to the incidence or spread of infection in its area with the coronavirus.

To support these closures, the regulations include duties to:

- Erect and maintain signage informing the public of the closures.
- Introduce a common enforcement regime applicable to all areas covered by the new COVID-19 Regulations which includes a potential fixed penalty notice of £60.
- Keep under review paths and access land which may need closing and amend as necessary.

At the time of writing this paper the closures remain in place and are aimed at limiting overcrowding in specific areas so as to underline the message that people should not be travelling outside their local area to access the countryside.

Prioritising Work

An early meeting of key PCNPA staff was held on the 19th March, just prior to the closure of the Park Authority's buildings, to assess whether regular maintenance of the PROW network would be necessary under COVID-19 restrictions. The overwhelming view was that the health and safety of PCNPA staff and the wider public was of paramount importance and that the network would not require significant maintenance prior to the main growing season (typically from May onwards). As a result, Wardens and Rangers have been predominantly based from home throughout the lockdown period with no regular path maintenance work undertaken since the 23rd March.

However, from mid-April onwards the Authority started to prepare Wardens and Rangers for a return to partial duties in order to focus on vegetation management as a means of keeping the PROW network open. This has been a gradual process of returning staff to work through close consultation with the Warden and Ranger teams as well as a wide range of colleagues from across the Authority.

An internal working group was established to provide ongoing advice and support to the Warden and Ranger teams and the group agreed the following main priorities for vegetation management:

1. **Inland Path Network** – cutting within 1.5km of the main settlements in the National Park in order to facilitate local residents in undertaking regular exercise ‘on their doorstep’ in-line with Welsh Government guidance. Localised evidence suggests that there has been a significant increase in the usage of the inland network during the current lockdown so this maintenance work is clearly important to our local communities.
2. **Coast Path** - cutting key sections whilst the path is closed in readiness for Welsh Government restrictions being lifted. Ensuring that access to the Coast Path remains safe (as long as people follow Welsh Government guidance on social distancing measures) and to help the visitor economy ‘bounce back’ as quickly as possible once restrictions are lifted.

As a result, the Warden and Ranger teams started back at work from the 11th May with work on the ground beginning in earnest from the 18th May onwards. Early reports suggest that the current vegetation growth is ‘manageable’ but without this preparatory work there would certainly be a delay in opening some sections of the Coast Path. To put the scale of the task in perspective, by the end of July each year the Authority would ordinarily have spent 200+ team days on maintaining the Coast Path, cutting a distance equal to Haverfordwest to London.

Safety First

Despite the need to ensure that the PROW network remains open and accessible for both present and anticipated use, the overarching priority remains the protection of PCNPA staff and the wider public from COVID-19.

Supporting PCNPA staff in returning to outdoor work has meant compiling a comprehensive risk assessment. We have also redesigned our work processes to ensure that each member of the team has their own vehicle and equipment (Wardens usually work in pairs and share a single vehicle), as well as compliant personal protective equipment (PPE).

Similarly, we are limiting and staggering visits to depots and all of the work being undertaken by Wardens and Rangers in terms of vegetation control will be managed online, using our job management system, so that we can limit unnecessary face-to-face contact. The Authority’s recent investment in remote control flails, funded by a previous capital grant from Welsh Government, has also proved timely in supporting new ways of working for the team.

As this is a significant change, we anticipate a gradual return to full duties for Wardens and Rangers. The mantra for the time being remains ‘*slow, steady and safe*’. The team is running at roughly 50% capacity compared to a normal summer season and is likely to remain at this level for some time. Aside from absences and a delay with planned recruitment, the changes to work processes have subsequently reduced the normal speed at which work can take place.

Despite these delays the Authority remains confident that the network of pathways throughout the National Park will gradually improve through the vegetation management work that is currently underway but we urge patience amongst users of inland paths as it is obviously taking the teams longer than usual to catch-up on the current backlog of work.

In addition, at the time of writing this report, the Coast Path remains closed to the public and the Authority is working closely with Welsh Government to advise on the preparatory work that we are undertaking to ensure that the millions of people that enjoy walking the Coast Path can do so once again as soon as the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Financial considerations

The new ways of working that the Warden and Ranger teams are having to adopt to safeguard against COVID-19 are having minor financial implications for the Countryside Management team. Examples include staff using a single vehicle each rather than sharing vehicles as well as staff having to travel longer distances than usual to assist each other with work. The increased costs to date are within acceptable budget 'tolerances' but the situation will be closely monitored by the Director and Finance Manager in case additional resources are required.

Risk considerations

The process of assessing and returning Wardens and Rangers to partial duties has been overseen by an internal working group drawing on advice and expertise from across the Authority. A comprehensive risk assessment has been completed, new ways of working adopted and changes made to normal processes and procedures in order to protect both PCNPA staff and the wider public from COVID-19.

Compliance

The overarching priority for the Authority, under the current circumstances, is to ensure that we are meeting our legal obligations under the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020. At the time of writing this report, the current lockdown restrictions remain in place across Wales and PCNPA is working closely with partner agencies such as Pembrokeshire County Council and Welsh Government officials to do everything we can to protect public health.

Human Rights/Equality issues

Keeping the inland path network open is seen by the Authority as being essential in helping local residents to undertake exercise 'on their doorstep' (particularly when the Coast Path is closed). Most settlements within the National Park have an accessible walking route available for regular use and these are proving vital in providing health and well-being benefits for a wide variety of people during these challenging times.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

The decision by the Authority to focus primarily on vegetation management means that we have been unable to progress some conservation and invasive species work that would ordinarily be prioritised at this time of year. However, as the Wardens and Rangers adapt to new ways of working it is hoped that the limited scope of their current work can gradually be increased to include the full range of activities normally undertaken to support the Authority's corporate priorities.

Welsh language statement

All updated signage, public notices and associated literature connected with the Park Authority's implementation of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 are fully compliant with the Welsh Language Standards.

Conclusion

Returning Wardens and Rangers to work to undertake vegetation management has been vital to ensure that walking opportunities remain available 'on the doorstep' of our local communities and in ensuring that the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail is 'ready for business' as soon as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

The work of the Authority to implement the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 and to re-start maintenance of the public rights of way (PROW) network across the National Park at this difficult time highlights the Authority's commitment to delivering our wider 'well-being duties'.

RECOMMENDATION:

Members are asked to note the report.

Background Documents

None

(For further information, please contact Janet Evans, Administration & Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer on extension 4834, or by emailing janete@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk)

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Key Safety Messaging

- Do not travel – exercise outside close to your home.
- Go alone or with members of your household - Keep 2 metres / 6½ feet from others at all times.
- Be vigilant with hand washing and hygiene – be aware that gates, stiles and other outdoor structures are touched regularly
- Do not undertake new or risky activities – stay safe during this time of increased burden on our emergency and health services
- Follow the Countryside Code - consider farmers and others who are working hard to keep our shelves stocked and infrastructure running.