

REPORT OF ACCESS & RIGHTS OF WAY MANAGER

SUBJECT: MANAGEMENT OF THE COAST PATH AND PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY NETWORK, POST LOCKDOWN 2020.

Purpose of Report

To update Members on the work of the National Park Authority in managing the Pembrokeshire Coast Path and network of public rights of way, both during lockdown and following the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in June 2020.

Introduction

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA) is responsible for the maintenance of 1,043 km of public rights of way (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 paths which total 783 km to make up the remaining inland network of PROW.

The extensive network of PROW provide a vital infrastructure that underpins access to the National Park for residents and visitors alike and in turn, provides well-being and economic benefits to the wider county.

Lockdown Restrictions

On 24th March the National Park Authority closed large sections of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path under the Welsh Government emergency powers. This was accomplished within 48 hours to meet the Welsh Government deadline to help enforce the lockdown. A total of 80 individual public rights of way on the route of the Coast Path were closed in order to close the main access points to the Coast Path. Approximately 70% of the designated off-road route of the Coast Path was closed equating to approximately 200km in length. Information relating to the closures was posted on the National Park Authority website in accord with the Welsh Government emergency regulations.

The high profile of the Coast Path as a visitor attraction meant that its temporary closure was an important part of a package of closures and restrictions to shut down Pembrokeshire as a visitor destination and deter people from travelling from other regions of Wales and the UK during the national lockdown. In addition, 38 car parks managed by the National Park Authority were also closed. Coast Path closure signage was thereafter checked on a weekly basis. Some were found to be removed, usually at the same locations close to settlements. However, compliance with the closures was generally good with some reports of trespass which in some cases the police investigated.

The Coast Path closure met with some complaints from local residents (over 45 complaints logged) and officers did their best to respond to all with an explanation for the closure. In addition there have been over 80 general enquiries logged for

clarification on the extent of the closures; bringing attention to the fact that closure signs have been removed or that people were accessing closed sections of Coast Path.

Elsewhere, the wider network of public rights of way was kept open and during the lockdown it played an important role in offering opportunities for exercise on the doorstep, especially in close proximity to settlements. Many people either furloughed, working from home or isolating were using the public rights of way on their doorstep on a regular basis, often for the first time. So the increased use of community networks of public rights of way has been a bonus, however, there were some problems of trespass from the public rights of way and incidents of uncontrolled dogs by people presumably not familiar with countryside walking.

Some landowners and householders who host public rights of way contacted the National Park Authority asking for these public rights of way to be closed where they pass close to their dwellings or workplaces (often where an increase in footfall has occurred as noted above). A total of 38 requests were received. The National Park Authority declined the requests with an explanation relating to the closure criteria set out in Welsh Government guidance and legislation. However, the National Park Authority did provide bespoke to allay concerns of such occupiers, which carried information on social distancing, hand hygiene and the need to respect local residents. A total of 24 dwellings/farms were sent such signage (copy in Appendix 1) and as this still has relevance, many of these signs remain in place.

There have been a number of instances where public rights of way were informally closed by landowners with "Path Closed" signs or signage requesting that people did not walk paths. A total of 42 were logged by the National Park Authority and were mainly confined to remote paths with low levels of use. The majority of these were resolved with the easing of restrictions, however, National Park Authority staff have had to contact a minority of owners/occupiers where signs remained in place once the national lockdown was lifted. Again the Coronavirus precautions signage detailed above was offered as a replacement.

Recovery

The lifting of the temporary closure of the Coast Path would be a key component to the economic recovery of the National Park as well as a major factor for the health and well-being of residents. Preparations for this eventuality gathered momentum over the course of the lockdown.

The Coast Path closures remained in place during April and May to conform with the restrictions on travel movements imposed by Welsh Government. When local travel was permitted within a 5 mile zone from 3rd June, the Coast Path remained closed to deter travel from out of the county.

A key part of recovery was to mobilise the workforce responsible for the maintenance of public rights of way. The routine maintenance tasks of warden teams had to be risk assessed in the interests of the safety and welfare of staff. Working procedures were adapted to ensure that each warden has their own vehicle and equipment (wardens usually work in pairs, sharing a vehicle and tools), as well as compliant personal protective equipment (PPE). Visits to depots have been staggered to avoid contact and much of the work is now managed on line using the National Park Authority's own Job Management System, again limiting face-to-face contact.

This new way of working is still in place at the time of writing this report. Warden teams resumed the maintenance of public rights of way from 18th May onwards and the priority was to undertake vegetation control of the Coast Path in readiness to ensure that it would be safe and fit for use in anticipation of the point in time when the temporary closures would be lifted.

The network of public rights of way within 1.5km of the main settlements in the National Park was also prioritised in order to ensure local residents could undertake regular exercise 'on their doorstep' in-line with Welsh Government guidance.

A risk assessment was also prepared to guide the reopening of the Coast Path. It used methodology devised by Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group together with guidance from NRW and Welsh Government. Key scientific research was used to guide the risk assessment and it became evident over the course of lockdown that the transmission of the virus and risk of infection in the open air is relatively low. In outdoor environments the viral load is much less and ultra violet light kills the virus more quickly on outdoor surfaces. Another factor taken into consideration was the patterns of use on the Coast Path. Rather than experiencing crowds, at its busiest, the Coast Path would have a steady stream of walkers and there would only be a brief duration of time therefore where walkers would come into close contact when passing others.

It was not practicable to adapt a Coast Path that is characterised by variable path width or to introduce one way systems. Instead it was decided to place bespoke signage at all the main access points alerting visitors to the need to practice social distancing and hygiene measures and bring attention to the need to take care when passing one another on narrow cliff edge sections of Coast Path. The signage also carried the key message to respect local communities (copy in Appendix 2).

The Coast Path reopened in its entirety on 29th June. By this time the entire route of the Coast Path had been inspected by staff to ensure that there were no hazards such as landslides or unstable, undercut sections. In addition the cutting of surface/verge vegetation had also progressed well to ensure the Coast Path was fit for use. Over two days all closure signage at the main access points was removed and replaced with Covid-19 precautions signage outlined above. This signage was maintained throughout the summer and is still in place at the time of writing this report.

During lockdown the National Trail Officer also resumed work on the annual Coast Path condition survey. The survey is a condition of the National Trail grant, awarded by NRW, and generates a detailed work programme as well as monitoring the stability/safety of the entire route. The National Trail Officer often relies on public transport and sharing transport with colleagues to undertake the survey, however, without these options the survey is taking longer to complete.

The reopening of the Coast Path was timed to coincide with the lifting of travel restrictions within Wales. It was not publicised but the Coast Path was available for use by the time self-contained tourist accommodation became operational thus providing a key resource to explore and enjoy the National Park.

There are seven concealed counters distributed along the Coast Path at fixed locations, which record usage by walkers. This data goes back to 2006 and feeds into National Park Authority performance indicators. The counter results help to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of the Coast Path closure and the high levels of use over the summer season.

For the national lockdown period during April and May 2020 (the 5 mile local travel limit was introduced on 3rd June) the total user count was 2,528, a fall of 94% when compared to the April-May total for 2019 which was 43,062. Bearing in mind that 2019 recorded the highest ever annual total of usage, the impact of the temporary closures is clearly evident. It is notable however that all sites show relatively more use in May than April, suggesting that as time went on there was less compliance with the closures and this borne out by experience and anecdotal evidence. While the Coast Path was not reopened until 29th June, increasing use and less compliance with the restrictions is evident when compared to April and May, this could in part be attributed to the introduction of the 5 mile travel limit in early June. The table below illustrates the levels of use over April, May, June compared to 2019.

	Abereiddi	Angle	Broad Haven	Cwm yr Eglwys	Monkstone	Newgale	St Govans	Total
April 2020	10	156	471	35	111	115	67	965
May 2020	28	285	585	56	261	196	152	1563
June 2020	38	559	1556	290	252	369	158	3222
Total	76	1000	2612	381	624	680	377	5750
<i>April 2019</i>	<i>1278</i>	<i>1354</i>	<i>4924</i>	<i>3447</i>	<i>2494</i>	<i>1806</i>	<i>3886</i>	<i>19189</i>
<i>May 2019</i>	<i>2097</i>	<i>2193</i>	<i>5898</i>	<i>4283</i>	<i>3117</i>	<i>2721</i>	<i>3564</i>	<i>23873</i>
<i>June 2019</i>	<i>1826</i>	<i>2054</i>	<i>5105</i>	<i>3575</i>	<i>2689</i>	<i>2525</i>	<i>2080</i>	<i>19854</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>5201</i>	<i>5601</i>	<i>15927</i>	<i>11305</i>	<i>8300</i>	<i>7052</i>	<i>9530</i>	<i>62916</i>
Change%	-98.54%	-82.15%	-83.60%	-96.63%	-92.48%	-90.36%	-96.04%	-90.86%

The figures for July to September show a dramatic increase in usage following the lifting of travel restrictions and the reopening of the Coast Path, car parks, and other visitor facilities. Over the three months there was an increase of almost 20,000 (23.8%) in the recorded use when compared to 2019. July was the first full month with the Coast Path open but was 15% lower than July 2019 despite the generally fine weather. This suggests that it took time for the public to gain confidence in returning to visit the countryside and take holidays. The availability of tourist accommodation in early July may have also had a bearing on the visitor numbers. The months of August and September, however, show a significant increase on 2019 levels and reflect the very busy summer season experienced by the National Park, with walker totals for September 2020 almost doubling on the previous year.

	Abereiddi	Angle	Broad Haven	Cwm yr Eglwys	Monkstone	Newgale	St Govans	Total
July 2020	1959	2252	6726	4891	2251	3386	2336	23801
Aug 2020	5680	3188	9387	8314	4194	5658	7907	44328
Sept 2020	2929	3081	7593	6704	4669	3979	2399	31354
Total	10568	8521	23706	19909	11114	13023	12642	99483
<i>July 2019</i>	<i>2666</i>	<i>2373</i>	<i>7002</i>	<i>5636</i>	<i>3573</i>	<i>3909</i>	<i>2673</i>	<i>27832</i>
<i>Aug 2019</i>	<i>3791</i>	<i>2522</i>	<i>7843</i>	<i>6320</i>	<i>3902</i>	<i>4604</i>	<i>6872</i>	<i>35854</i>
<i>Sept 2019</i>	<i>1255</i>	<i>1594</i>	<i>4386</i>	<i>3048</i>	<i>2292</i>	<i>1938</i>	<i>2169</i>	<i>16682</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>7712</i>	<i>6489</i>	<i>19231</i>	<i>15004</i>	<i>9767</i>	<i>10451</i>	<i>11714</i>	<i>80368</i>
Change%	37.03%	31.31%	23.27%	32.69%	13.79%	24.61%	7.92%	23.78%

With regard to the “fire break” lock down between 20th October and 9th November the decision was taken not to close the Coast Path. This was based on the fact that lower levels of use would be expected going into the winter season. Taking 2019 as the last “normal” year, the months of October & November represent 7% (13,000) of the total usage recorded in 2019. The low numbers expected, coupled with the closure of tourist accommodation meant the National Park as a destination would be less attractive with diminishing daylight and colder, stormier weather. Therefore its closure would not be deemed necessary as a deterrent for any unnecessary/unlawful leisure travel. In the circumstances, the availability of the Coast Path helped to provide opportunities for daily exercise of local communities and thus contribute to their health and wellbeing.

Financial considerations

The new ways of working adopted by the Warden teams to safeguard against COVID-19 are having minor financial implications. Examples include staff using a single vehicle each rather than sharing vehicles and the hire of additional vehicles. At the time of writing this report all office based staff continue to work effectively from their homes and grant funded improvements will be delivered over the winter.

Risk considerations

The risk assessment for reopening the Coast Path had to balance the economic impact of maintaining the temporary closure against the need to safely provide access to the coast. With little scope to adapt the existing route of the Coast Path, it placed the onus on walkers to take a reasonable degree of responsibility for their health and well-being and exercise appropriate precautions.

Compliance

The Authority worked closely with partner agencies such as the Police, Pembrokeshire County Council and Welsh Government to do everything it could to protect public health during the national lockdown. It met its obligations with regard to the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 not just with regard to the Coast Path but also with regard to the closure of its car parks visitor attractions and establishing new ways of working to safeguard its staff.

Human Rights/Equality issues

While the closure of the Coast Path did inconvenience some communities, keeping the wider public rights of way network open during lockdown was essential in helping local residents to undertake daily exercise ‘on their doorstep’. Most settlements within the National Park including those on the Coast Path have a range of countryside walking routes and these proved vital in providing health and well-being benefits for residents. The concerns of resident communities are very real with regard to the influx of visitors to the countryside and the National Park Authority’s communications strategy sought to address this with a key message of respect for the countryside and its inhabitants.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

The decision by the Authority to focus primarily on public rights of way and Coast Path management meant that we have been unable to progress some conservation and invasive species work that would ordinarily be prioritised from April onwards. The absence of walkers on the Coast Path during the spring had resulted in less

disruption to wildlife, especially in more remote areas, however, no new nesting sites were knowingly disturbed by reopening.

Welsh language statement

All signage, public notices and associated literature connected with the Park Authority's implementation of the Coast Path restrictions and reopening are fully compliant with the Welsh Language Standards.

Conclusion

The reopening of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path made an important contribution to the social and economic recovery of the National Park over the summer months and serves to demonstrate its importance with regard to the access opportunities it affords for the enjoyment and well-being of residents and visitors alike.

RECOMMENDATION:

Members are asked to note the report.

Background Documents


None

(For further information, please contact Anthony Richards, Access & Rights of Way Manager on extension 4939, or by emailing antr@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk)

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Appendix


1. Corona Virus Precautions Sign



CORONAFEIRWS: CYMERWCH OFAL CORONAVIRUS PRECAUTIONS

- **Parchwch breifatrwydd y preswylwyr sy'n hunanynysu ar y tŷ/fferm hon**
- **Cadwch o leiaf 2 fetr o bellter rhyngoch chi a cherddwyr eraill neu breswylwyr/gweithwyr y fferm bob amser**
- **Byddwch yn wiliadwrus ynglyn â golchi dwylo a hylendid**
- **Cofiwch fod gatiau, camfeydd a strwythurau awyr agored eraill yn cael eu cyffwrdd yn rheolaidd**
- **Cadwch at y llwybr dynodedig bob amser**
- **Cadwch eich cŵn ar dennyn i ddiogelu da byw ac i osgoi tresmasu**
- **Please respect the privacy of the residents of this house/farm who are self-isolating**
- **Keep a minimum distance of two metres apart from other walkers and residents/farm workers at all times**
- **Be vigilant with hand washing and hygiene**
- **Be aware that gates, stiles and other outdoor structures are touched regularly**
- **Keep to the signposted path at all times**
- **Keep dogs on leads to protect livestock and prevent trespass**

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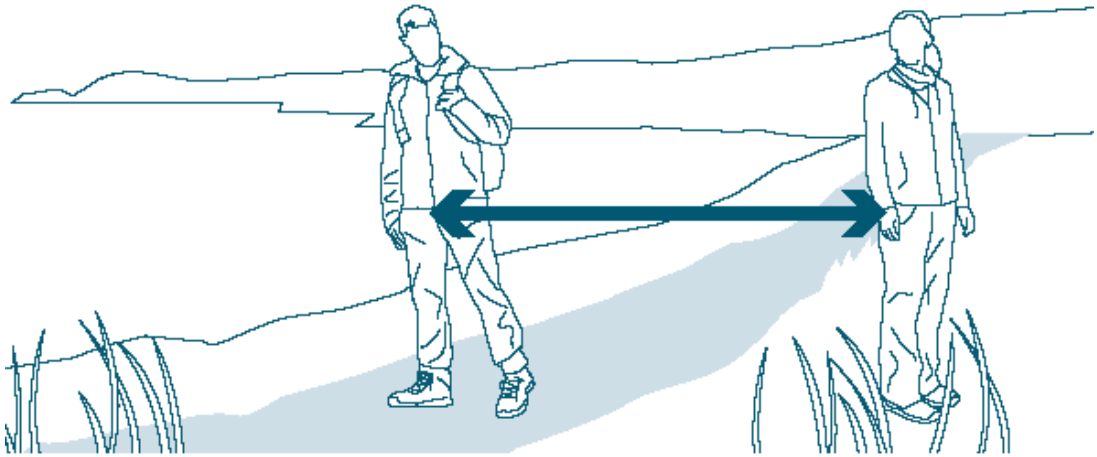


**Pembrokeshire Coast
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2. Coast Path Recovery Sign

PARCHWCH Y TIR
PARCHWCH Y GYMUNED
PARCHWCH EICH GILYDD

RESPECT THE LAND
RESPECT THE COMMUNITY
RESPECT EACH OTHER



**Cadwch yn Ddiogel
a Mwynhewch
Eich Taith Gerdded**

**Stay Safe and
Enjoy Your Walk**

- Mae lled y llwybr yn amrywio - llai na 2 fetr mewn rhai llefydd
- Variable path width - less than 2 metres in places
- Wrth basio cerddwyr eraill neu wrth roi lle iddynt basio, peidiwch â sefyll ar ymyl y clogwyn
- When passing or giving way to other walkers avoid stepping onto the cliff edge
- Defnyddiwch hylif diheintio dwylo'n rheolaidd, yn enwedig wrth gathau a chamfeydd
- Sanitise hands regularly, especially around gates and stiles



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