

From Peter Hobley Rights of Way Department Somerset County Council

As current chair for the south west group of Rights of Way Managers, I thought it would be useful to provide you with a summary position of current guidance and how Authorities' public access teams are in general responding to the pandemic.

GUIDANCE

The national guidance from Natural England for public rights of way and green space is as follows:

Public right of way use:

Please use the following guidance in order to stay safe:

Stay local and use open spaces near to your home where possible – do not travel unnecessarily.

You should only go outside alone or with members of your own household.

Keep at least 2 metres apart from anyone outside your household at all times.

Take hygiene precautions when you are outside, and wash your hands as soon as you are back indoors. Frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are touched regularly.

Follow the Countryside Code. Leave no trace of your visit and take your litter home. Keep dogs under effective control and leave gates as you find them or follow instructions on signs.

Respect other people and protect the natural environment. Remember your actions can affect people's lives and livelihoods.

Access to green spaces

Guidance on using green spaces and protecting yourself and others.

The government's priority is to save lives and the best way to protect yourself and others from illness is to stay at home.

However, exercise is still important for people's physical and mental wellbeing, so the government has said people can leave their homes for exercise once a day.

- *Please use the following guidance in order to stay safe:*
- *stay local and use open spaces near to your home where possible – do not travel unnecessarily*
- *you should only go outside alone or with members of your own household*
- *keep at least 2 metres apart from anyone outside your household at all times*

- *gatherings of more than two in parks or other public spaces have been banned and the police will enforce this*
- *if you have a garden, make use of the space for exercise and fresh air*
- *take hygiene precautions when you are outside, and wash your hands as soon as you are back indoors*

LOCAL/ NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY RESPONSE

Many Authorities have already issued guidance on their websites and are responding to specific enquiries, and will continue to support and share the above guidance.

The focus for Authorities will be dealing with the critical need of the pandemic, and in general only matters of emergency or public safety are being investigated with other non-urgent works being suspended or postponed until other non-critical work can resume.

Here in Somerset, and across the region, we are receiving reports and enquiries from both landowners and the public about temporarily closing of routes, locked gates, providing alternative routes, etc.. Highway Authorities in England currently have no mechanism to temporarily close Public Rights of Way (PRoW) to address concerns regarding the transmission of Covid19. However, we are acutely aware what a busy time of year this is for the farming community and why there is such sensitivity around an increase in recent public access. DEFRA have not followed the Welsh example of publishing regulations allowing for the temporary closure of certain rights of way or open access land. I understand they are continuing to review their position, and should it change then the Local/National Park Authorities will respond accordingly.

Any signage, (e.g.: to avoid a farmyard) that landowners have, or are considering putting up, should be advisory only and not act as a deterrent to legitimate usage of the path network. The legal right of way must not be closed off or obstructed. Where capacity allows, Authorities are working with landowners on specific cases to provide suitable guidance and potential solutions. For guidance on this in their area, landowners are advised to keep abreast of authority website updates, or contact their local Highway Authority/ National Park Authority.

If you could please signpost your members to the above advice, and we'd welcome being sent/ consulted on any advice you have provided, or are considering providing to your membership.

Should you have any general queries please do not hesitate to contact me, and for specifics please contact the relevant Highway Authority/ **National Park Authority**.

Regards

Pete Hobley

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