

COVID-19 RECOVERY PLAN FOR PADDLESPOUT IN WALES

Published 3 June 2020

Introduction

The past few months have unquestionably been the most challenging time in the history of paddlesport. After nearly two months away from the water, recent changes in Welsh Government advice mean we are able to advise a limited return to paddling for experienced paddlers who live close to an open waterway. However, in practice, many paddlers are still cut off from the sport they love, with COVID-19 restrictions forcing the closure of many waterways and restricting our activities and movements. Our clubs are closed. Our events are cancelled. Outdoor centres remain closed and many professional coaches and providers are out of work.

Throughout this crisis, we have rightly put public health and the safety of our communities first. As a paddling community, we have done our part to stop the spread of the virus and reduce the impact on our emergency services here in Wales. But we know this has come at a cost. Many paddlers rely on paddlesport for their mental and physical well-being or for their livelihood, and it has been an enormous sacrifice to spend so much time off the water.

While we have now passed the peak in many areas, it is clear that the threat from COVID-19 will be with us for months and possibly years to come – and we must find a safe way to get back on the water. This document summarises our plan for a safe, phased return to paddlesport in Wales, and provides advice for Welsh Government, local councils, site managers, waterway authorities, outdoor centres and paddlers on the path ahead.

Paddlesport as a COVID-19 safe activity

The most important question to answer before we move forward is whether or not it is safe to return to the water. To answer this question, we have considered the following three facts:

- Current evidence suggests that the virus which spreads COVID-19 does not survive well outdoors in direct sunlight.
- Social distancing measures are very effective at stopping the spread of the virus.
- Our emergency services will continue to be under enormous pressure for a long time to come. Any return to activity must not put undue pressure on emergency services.

In the current risk environment, paddlesport is the ideal recreational activity. It is generally done outdoors, in small groups, and the boat itself creates a natural form of social distancing. Most participants wear buoyancy aids and carry safety equipment with them and with guidance in place about minimising risk, the chance of an incident is very low. Canoeing and kayaking are often incorrectly perceived as dangerous; In fact, the rate of

fatal incidents per hour of activity is lower than many other activities normally considered 'safe', including cycling and even angling.¹

Therefore, we believe that it is safe and appropriate to reopen our waterways across Wales and we are ready to issue the detailed guidance needed at each phase of our return to the water – based on up-to-date risk assessments and specific control measures appropriate to each phase.

The Welsh Government's traffic light system

Our plan follows the Welsh Government's traffic light system as detailed in their guidance [*Unlocking our society and economy: continuing the conversation*](#):

Exercise, playing sport and games

Lockdown

Exercise once a day outside of house on own or with household.

Red

Exercise more than once a day and incidental activity locally.

Outdoor sports courts to open. Elite athletes resume some activity.

Amber

Team and individual sports, non-contact sport and games in small groups indoors and outdoors. Some outdoor events with limited capacity and events behind closed doors for broadcast.

Green

All sports, leisure and cultural activities open, with physical distancing. All events resume with limited capacity.

We have carefully considered which paddlesport activities will be appropriate at each phase of return to activity. Much like the Welsh Government plans, we do not anticipate a wholesale movement from one phase to the next – instead, we will regularly issue new guidance as Welsh Government advice and our risk assessment/control measures change, and we expect that within each phase we will see a gradual increase in safe activity.

We have also considered the following seven questions which Welsh Government have advised should be answered before any return to activity:

1. To what extent would easing a restriction have a negative effect on containing the virus?

Given that we can easily implement social distancing protocols for most paddlesport activities, and that most activities take place outdoors, we anticipate that the effect of a return to outdoor paddlesport on containing the virus would be very low. As part of our risk assessment (detailed below) we have also developed a set of control measures which are easy to implement and form our official guidance to paddlers to keep the risk of spread low.

¹ <https://www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/events/past-events/national-water-safety-conference-2017/dave-walker.pdf>

2. Is the measure at the low end of risk of further infection?

Paddlesport is an outdoor activity which is easily done with social distancing – and therefore at the low end of risk for further infection.

3. How can it be monitored and enforced?

We will work closely with clubs and outdoor centres and with our members to ensure that everyone involved in paddlesport has access to up-to-date guidance on how to operate safely. Local authorities or police forces would still have the ability to manage access to any launch points in busy areas, though we do not anticipate this to be necessary in more than a handful of popular locations, if at all.

4. Is it capable of being rapidly reversed if it has unintended consequences?

It would be easy to restrict paddling again if necessary by simply returning to an earlier phase of our plan.

5. Is it a measure of relatively high positive economic benefit?

There are over 1,500 professional canoe and kayak coaches across Wales who are currently out of work. The outdoor tourism sector is also an important and growing part of the Welsh economy and the longer it remains closed, the more likely it is that outdoor centres and tourist facilities will close down permanently.

6. Does it have a high impact on social and psychological well-being?

For most paddlers, getting out on the water and paddling in nature is essential to their mental and physical well-being. We have heard from many of our members that their mental health has suffered enormously during lockdown.

7. Does the measure have a high positive equality impact?

Paddlesport is a diverse sport which can be easily adapted to a range of different users and interests. Many older people find it to be a low-impact, gentle way to enjoy the outdoors and for many disabled people it is the only way they can access scenic areas in Wales where there are very few wheelchair accessible walking paths.

COVID-19 risk assessment

Underpinning all of our guidance is a detailed risk assessment, based on managing six primary COVID-19 hazards:

- Spread of the virus through:
 - Close contact between participants, coaches, leaders and volunteers;
 - Contact with other water users or members of the public;
 - Travel outside of the local area;
 - Contact with contaminated surfaces;
- Pressure on local emergency services caused by paddlesport incidents or accidents;
- Conflict with other water users or members of the public who may be anxious about the spread of the virus in their community.

At each phase, we have assigned a risk value for each hazard (likelihood x severity) and then identified suitable control measures to bring those risks down to an acceptable level. These control measures form the basis for the guidance summarised later in this plan.

Proposed activities at each phase

Type of activity	Lockdown	Red	Amber	Green
Individual recreational paddling	No paddling	Individual recreational paddling in household groups	Individual recreational paddling in small groups	Most individual recreational paddling
Outdoor club activities		No club activity	Some outdoor club activities in small groups	Most outdoor club activities
Outdoor coached, guided or led activities, including outdoor centres and commercial providers		Some outdoor coached, guided or led activities in household groups	Some outdoor coached, guided or led activities in small groups	Most outdoor coached, guided or led activities
Coaching and leadership courses		Some courses in household groups and/or through webinar or videoconferencing	Some courses which can be done in small groups with social distancing, i.e. no safety and rescue courses	Most courses
Boat hire		No boat hire	Some boat hire	Most boat hire
Rafting, canoe polo and double canoes/kayaks		No rafting or canoe polo. Double canoes/kayaks in household groups.	Some rafting and double canoes/kayaks in household groups. Some canoe polo.	Most rafting and double canoes/kayaks. Some canoe polo.
Indoor pool sessions		No indoor pool sessions	No indoor pool sessions	Some indoor pool sessions with social distancing protocols
Competitions and events		No competitions or events	No competitions or events	Some competitions and events with social distancing protocols

General guidance

At each phase – and each time there is a change in Welsh Government advice or regulations – we will issue new guidance. However, based on our risk assessment and control measures there are some key elements of our guidance that will likely stay consistent throughout:

To control the spread of the virus:

- You should not paddle (or leave your house) if you or any member of your household are displaying any of the signs or symptoms of COVID-19 now or in the previous 14 days;
- You should generally paddle in household or small groups in line with current government guidance on group size;
- Stay at least 2m from other people outside of your household — the only exception to this rule is possibly in a rescue or first aid situation;
- Avoid areas that you know will be busy;
- Launch and land as quickly as possible;
- Avoid sharing equipment outside of your household where possible and follow our equipment cleaning guidance for any shared equipment;
- Wash your hands before and after each activity and after touching any gates or other surfaces;
- Avoid public toilets where possible;
- Follow all Welsh Government advice on travel and driving for exercise.

To reduce pressure on local emergency services:

- Stay within your capabilities;
- Follow our guidance about how to ensure your chosen activity and water environment is appropriate for you.

To avoid conflict with other water users or members of the public:

- Respect rural communities and other water users;
- Respect access points and local restrictions – check for closures before you leave home, and do not paddle if a waterway or access point is closed or if the Coastguard or RNLI advise against paddling in the sea;
- Be sensitive to the environment – after weeks without paddling, wildlife may have moved into certain areas and you should avoid disturbing nesting birds and other wildlife;
- Follow [Check Clean Dry](#) protocols;
- Ensure that your Canoe Wales membership is current so that your insurance cover and waterways licence are valid;
- If you are challenged by another water user or a member of the public, do your best to diffuse the conflict and then report the incident to Canoe Wales.

Keeping risk to a minimum

We will advise paddlers to restrict their paddlesport activities to environments where they and their fellow paddlers are within their capabilities – and in the red and amber phases, we will ask paddlers to stay well within those capabilities. This is to reduce the chance of any accidents or incidents which might require the emergency services, which will continue to be under enormous pressure for an extended period of time.

Our guidance, based on the AdventureSmart principles, asks paddlers to consider the following:

- Are we competent to paddle at this location, bearing in mind that we may not have paddled for more than eight weeks?
- Have I checked the current conditions for the location I want to paddle?
- Have I checked the weather forecast?
- Do we have the correct clothing, safety equipment and a means of communication, and do we know how to use it?
- How will we deal with an incident which requires a rescue, i.e. do we know who to contact and how?
- How far will we be journeying?
- Are the access or egress points open to the public?
- Have I told someone else where we are going and when we will return?

As there are changes to Welsh Government guidance and we progress through the stages of the traffic light system, we will issue updated guidance on our website.

We will adjust our guidance based on the following considerations:

- Safe group size – larger group sizes will allow more activity to return, particularly club and commercial activities;
- Government advice about travel and driving;
- Whether the risk from contact within 2m has returned to an acceptable level, allowing activities such as rescue training, pool sessions, and canoe polo to resume;
- Whether it is safe for individuals from different households to travel in a vehicle together – this would allow for river shuttles;
- Whether any waterways have been closed or if the RNLI or Coastguard have issued any specific guidance;
- The volume of users in specific areas – i.e. if a large number of visitors to some locations affects social distancing when launching or landing.

To support paddlers and activity providers, our guidance will include:

- A simple, easy-to-read, downloadable guidance document which summarises any changes to Welsh Government guidance and details our current guidance;
- Up-to-date FAQs on our website to answer the most common questions we're receiving about the guidance;
- Specific guidance for activity organisers;
- Guidance on cleaning boats and equipment;
- A COVID-19 sample risk assessment template for clubs, centres, coaches and providers.

We also have a list of known waterway closures on our website, but this list is not exhaustive and we always advise that paddlers check for closures before launching.

We will share all of our guidance on our dedicated COVID-19 webpage at:

<https://www.canoewales.com/covid-19-guidance-for-members>

Where there is a change in guidance, we will post a message on our social media channels and email all of our registered Canoe Wales members who have opted in to communication to direct them to the new guidance.

How you can help

We won't be able to deliver this plan on our own. We need insight and feedback from the whole paddlesport community. If you are a paddler, we will need your help to advocate for a phased return to paddlesport – by being good ambassadors for our sport when you paddle and helping others in our community to understand how we are keeping the risks to ourselves and others low during the COVID-19 crisis.

Finally, we are asking you to keep in touch and share the challenges you're facing and your ideas for how we can better support you. Our team is ready to provide support and we believe that by working together, we will be able to continue to help thousands of people across Wales to safely enjoy our beautiful lakes, rivers and coastline.