

Covid-19 – toilets and the likely impact of holidays at home on visitor infrastructure in the countryside

Description

Toilets, or rather the risk of Covid-19 being transmitted in toilets, appear to be a major factor why the Scottish Government's advice to people has been to stay local ([see here](#)):

"Because of the high chance of the virus living on hard surfaces, we don't want people using public toilets or going into someone's home to use their toilet, so staying local avoids that problem."

The continued closure of public toilets, however, is having predictable consequences as people spend longer periods outdoors for recreation and have nowhere to go ([see here](#)). The problems that are being created affect urban areas as well as the countryside. Whether people go out for a physically distanced picnic or a long bike ride, eventually they will need to go to the toilet. The Scottish Government advice seems based on the assumption that people will turn and head for home long before that point. That is unrealistic and discriminates against people who need to go to the toilet often ([see here](#)). Having praised Glasgow City Council for having kept the last remaining toilets in Pollok Park open for the first couple of months of the corona crisis ([see here](#)), at the weekend I found they too had been locked. This post takes a look at what needs to be done.

The risks of viral transmission in toilets

The risks are determined partly by levels of Covid-19 in the population and observance of social isolation by people who have symptoms. With the number of people infected now low and most people with symptoms isolating, the chances of asymptomatic virus carriers infecting any particular toilet is probably also low. The busier the toilet, the higher the risks of an infected person having visited.

Early research, however, clearly showed that Covid-19 lingers in toilets which are not cleaned ([see here](#)). Regular cleaning with disinfectants therefore clearly reduces the risks of large-scale transmission considerably. The question is how to mitigate the risks between cleans.

The answers to that question lie in a mix of reducing the contact people have with hard surfaces and good hygiene. There will be similar considerations for any toilet used by a number of people who are not in the same household, whether this is in a workplace like a hospital or school, or a public convenience. It is perfectly possible for a man to use a urinal and then wash his hands under an automated tap and soap dispenser without touching any surfaces at all. For interesting coverage of some of the way "washrooms" are being re-designed in one part of the USA to reduce risks [see here](#).

Thankfully, Greenspace Scotland last week circulated some excellent advice about safe management of toilets in the countryside from the Visitor Safety Management Group ([see here](#)):

HYGIENE

4. A key aim should be to minimise the number of visitors touching benches, interpretation materials / objects that need to be handled
5. Consider how visitors will flow through the building and remove touch points. Then identify the key areas for particular attention with:
 - areas such as toilets and hand washing facilities
 - surfaces likely to be touched by multiple visitors such as
6. Your hygiene regime needs to reflect the number of visitors and it is worth remembering that a high and visible level of hygiene and cleanliness can be a significant influence on how they rate your attraction
7. Where regular, unavoidable and multiple visitor 'touching points' are available for visitors at regular points around the building
8. Hand sanitiser dispensers for visitors should be made available
9. Toilets should be maintained through an enhanced cleaning regime and dedicated cleaning staff. For busy toilets, consider closing them before cleaning. Staff assigned to cleaning duties must have suitable PPE determined
10. Toilets should be provided with soap and hand sanitiser dispensers and not use fabric towels

Credit Visitor Safety Group – I received the guidance as a large PDF and it does not yet seem to be

There are some people, of course, who will be concerned about every possible risk, however small. With care, though, it should be possible for most people to use public toilets with very little risk so long as they wash their hands properly (and potentially use hand sanitiser too if touching a tap is unavoidable).

The main problems our public authorities face – and I would not underestimate these – is how to pay for modification to toilet facilities that would help reduce risks (like hands free soap dispensers), how to pay for the additional cleaning and what management measures might be needed to maintain physical distancing in larger facilities.

Availability of toilet facilities v demand

Parkswatch has long campaigned, with only limited success it has to be said, for more toilet facilities in our National Parks. The problem of human waste is one that was used to justify the introduction of the camping byelaws in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. The human waste problem has still not been solved, indeed in some ways has got worse, despite the obvious solution ([see here](#)): temporary mobile toilets are used in the summer months across National Parks in England and Wales. Recently, Mary Jack drew attention to how the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority seem to be treating their toilet upgrade programme as a source of future income rather than as a service to the public ([see here](#)). Meantime, many popular areas, including beauty spots, still lack any toilet facilities with public authorities shying away from tackling the issues due to the costs. The LLTNPA ditched its (excellent) plans to increase toilet provision four years ago ([see here](#)).

These problems are not unique to National Parks. They affect rural areas across Scotland and have received significant publicity in areas like Skye and the North Coast 500.

With holidays abroad out of the question or at best made difficult, it is now predictable that the number of people visiting the countryside in Scotland is likely to increase significantly as lockdown is relaxed. In the medium term, as long as accommodation remains shut down, people will be forced into day visits. This will increase the pressure further in the areas reasonably accessible from towns. Crudely, in our National Parks, one might anticipate visitor influxes along the following lines: Deeside from Aberdeen; Speyside from Inverness and Perth; the Angus Glens from Dundee; Loch Lomond and the Trossachs from the Glasgow conurbation; the Trossachs from Edinburgh, Stirling and the central belt. An educated guess is that existing toilet facilities are likely to face higher demand than ever before – raising the chances of accidental Covid transmission – while the problem of human waste in areas without facilities will reach record levels.

The choice available to government is either to avoid the issues, as they have done in Phase 1 of the release of lockdown, and keep facilities closed or provide solutions.

The obvious solution to the lack of toilets issue remains the one that parkswatch has long advocated, temporary mobile toilets. An excellent article in the Herald on Sunday ten days ago ([see here](#)) highlighted how existing mobile toilet businesses are now idle, due to the cancellation of outdoor

events. There is therefore a resource waiting and ready to be used. Interestingly, the featured business was based in Gartocharn, in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. This happens to be the village where the Chief Executive of the LLTNPA, Gordon Watson, lives. The solutions to one of the most likely problems to be associated with relaxing the lockdown lie right under his nose!

It's well past time that our National Parks started to show a lead on this. All that the LLTNPA would need to sort out with the contractor is what additional cleaning they required, informed if necessary by advice from public health, and then hey presto...ready to go!

What needs to happen

In just over two weeks the school holidays start and it is quite predictable that families with children, no longer home schooling, are then likely to flock to the countryside (unless the rain intervenes). By that date, therefore, our public authorities need to have prepared for the influx, re-opened all existing car parks and toilets, put in place arrangements to manage these and re-started litter collections.

But our public authorities also need to have made arrangements by then for additional provision. In this post I have suggested that mobile toilets have a key role in meeting increased public demand.

The immediate challenge is cost and spare resources, which few of our public authorities have. We need, therefore, the Scottish Government to recognise the opportunity and the challenge and to start taking a proactive lead on opening up the countryside. Instead of saying no, the Scottish Government should be enabling and empowering public authorities to assist visitors to enjoy the countryside as never before. People in Scotland deserve safe days out while on holiday and the Scottish Government needs to pay for additional infrastructure to help make that happen. Until it does that, it is hard to see the rest of rural tourism, which is on its knees, being able to re-start.

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