

Covid-19 – the Scottish Government’s incoherent approach to outdoor recreation

Description

There is a strong case for bringing back self-catering at the end of this month

KEITH Smith (Letters, June 13) is right, it would be stupid to re-open self-catering accommodation, which is normally let Saturday to Saturday, on Wednesday July 15. But instead of moving the date to the start or end of that week, as he suggests, it would be far better to move it forward to the start of the school holidays, June 27. Re-opening self-catering accommodation, or allowing people to go to their second homes for that matter, is not like re-opening serviced accommodation like hotels which crowds different households together indoors. In self-catering accommodation, including mobile homes and caravans, people can stay self-contained in their own households, just like at home. And, as long as they keep two metres apart when going outdoors, they pose no risk to anyone, just like at home.

Where local communities are concerned about self-caterers patronising local food shops, they could tell people to bring their own provisions for the week. As for cleaning, ask self-caterers to leave the windows open on departure, give time for any



Should the return of self-catering be expedited?

aerobic droplets to settle and then follow the good cleaning practice that needs to be followed throughout the tourism sector.

Re-opening other types of tourist facilities is far more difficult given current physical distancing rules. It makes no sense for the Scottish Government to treat self-catering and hotels the same, and aim to reopen both on the same day (“Scots tourism sector open for business ‘next month’”, The

Herald, June 11). This will just create further unnecessary economic hardship, particularly in rural communities.

The school holidays are an important factor here. Many families with children will not get a holiday abroad this year and demand for accommodation in Scotland will be immense. If families are only allowed to book halfway through the holidays, demand will double, prices will rise and only the richest part of

Herald letters Tuesday 16th June, another failed attempt to influence the Scottish Government before the details of Phase 2 of their route map out of lockdown yesterday. I had not been thinking about self-catering accommodation in the photo, but it would be even safer to open houses with large curtains.

From an Outdoor Recreation and tourism standpoint, the one good thing about the Scottish Government’s latest announcements about how to manage the on-going risks from Covid-19 is that:

“Evidence now shows the risk of outdoor infection is very low if people stay two metres apart”.

The “now” is misleading. SAGE, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, advised this some weeks ago. While it is welcome that the Scottish Government has now acknowledged an important aspect of the science, unfortunately it has still not acted on it. This post takes a look at the latest contradictions in the Scottish Government’s position, how the mixed messages relate to the law and the way that scientific advice on Covid-19 and the outdoors is being ignored.

The contradictions in the Scottish Government’s position

The heart of the problems remains the Scottish Government’s advice to stay local for outdoor leisure and recreation:

“Unless visiting friends or family, people should continue to stay in their local area as much as possible and should not travel more than around five miles for leisure or recreation”.

This has never been justified. But the contradictions have grown in the 2nd phase of the Scottish Government’s route out of lockdown ([see here](#)) as it has relaxed its advisory restrictions on travel for other purposes, on people going indoors and on other activities in outdoor places.

Travel for other purposes

Advice: you can now *“travel outside your local area to meet members of another household in an outdoor space such as a private garden, but you should use your judgement about how far to travel”.*

Comment: This is similar to the Phase 1 Guidance except that the advice to “stay local” because you shouldn’t go to the toilet when away from home has been removed. The new wording implies that travel by car for any distance, with visits to petrol stations, toilets etc, is safe, so why not for outdoor recreation?

Advice: *“From 29 June, you will be allowed to leave home in order to undertake certain activities in connection with the purchase, sale, letting or rental of a residential property which include visiting estate or letting agents, developer sales offices or show homes; viewing residential properties to look for a property to buy or rent; preparing a residential property to move in; moving home; or visiting a residential property to undertake any activities required for the rental or sale of that property.”*

Comment: Someone from Gretna Green can travel to Skye to view a house, where they will almost certainly mix with strangers indoors, but not travel 15 miles to the Lockerbie area to go for a walk.

Going indoors outside your own home

Advice: you can now *“form an extended household. This would mean the people in the extended household can spend time together inside each other’s homes and not need to stay two metres apart.”*

Comment: this creates more risk of spreading the virus than driving over 5 miles to go for a walk

Advice: you can now go inside to use the toilet *“If members of another household are going to visit you and need to use your toilet, you should ensure appropriate cleaning materials are available. You should also provide either a hand towel for each visiting household or paper towels and a safe disposal option.”*

Comment: It is judged safe to go inside to use the toilet as long as *“Anyone using your toilet should avoid touching surfaces with their hands as much as possible, wipe any surfaces that they do touch with antibacterial wipes, wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds afterwards, dry their hands with a freshly laundered towel or a paper towel which they should dispose of in a closed bin.”* There would appear to be no justification for keeping public toilets, so important to outdoor recreation and tourism, closed.

Other activities outdoors

Advice *“From 29 June, street-access retail and outdoor markets can reopen with physical distancing, hygiene measures and controls on numbers of people.”*

Comment: If outdoor markets can be safely managed why not beauty spots? But *“To help reduce the risk of places such as beaches and national parks becoming crowded, we would advise against re-opening car parks that are currently closed, other than a phased re-opening in instances of indiscriminate parking and to provide opportunities for local residents to enjoy their area.”*

Advice *“Up to three households can meet in a garden with up to a recommended maximum of eight people at once. Physical distancing should be followed between households at all times. We know that some people will only have access to their back garden through their house, so in this case, if friends or family are coming round to spend time in your garden, they can go through your house but must not touch anything and should go straight to the garden.”*

Comment: Meeting up with others, even outdoors, clearly involves a higher risk of spreading Covid-19 than undertaking outdoor recreation alone with your household 20 miles from home

Advice *“We now consider that the chance of catching the virus outdoors is low enough for individuals in the shielding [i.e very vulnerable] group to meet with one other household in a group of up to 8 people outside from 19 June. Those shielding should still only work from home and should avoid shops, pharmacies and other situations where it would be difficult to stay 2 metres apart from other people.”*

Comment If it safe for people shielding to meet others outdoors, it should be perfectly safe for visitors to travel by car through and to rural settlements as long as they keep 2m apart from people when they when they get out their cars. The latest guidance on shielding also contradicts the guidance on visiting people in care homes (which I have been campaigning on quite separately to parkswatch [see here](#)):

“We understand the importance of visiting loved ones and we have huge sympathy with those dealing with the restrictions in place. Care homes are first and foremost people’s homes, and it is important that we find safe ways for people to reconnect with their families and friends. We already allow families to visit loved ones in their final days and in other exceptional circumstances.

Current advice is that now is not the right time to reintroduce visiting but we have developed a plan for a phased return to visiting. This will begin with outdoor visiting where it is clinically safe to do so.”

So why can people who are shielding safely meet others outdoors except when they stay in a Care Home? It is not just the rights of outdoor enthusiasts which are being infringed.

The Scottish Government’s latest advice and the law

On Thursday reams of new advice about Phase 2 out of lockdown appeared on the Scottish Government website. The volume of this advice, the fact its spread across multiple documents, as well as the fundamental inconsistencies, are making it increasingly hard to follow.

While the Scottish Government has talked about the importance of clear, simple messages, it is increasingly difficult to understand what the message is. In Phase 1 it was “Stay at Home”. The message now appears to be moving towards, “Stay Safe”. This is about as meaningful as the message in England, “Stay Alert”:

PUBLICATION - ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase staying safe and protecting others (physical distancing)

Published: 18 Jun 2020

Directorate: [Communications, Ministerial
Support and Facilities Directorate](#)

Part of: [Coronavirus in Scotland, Public
safety and emergencies](#)

Rules on staying safe and protecting others to
protect the NHS and save lives.



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Immediately following this the new guidance says:

“In Phase 2 – the three main measures are still in place:

- *requiring people to stay at home, except for limited purposes*
- *closing certain business and venues*
- *stopping most gatherings of more than three households”*

The “purposes” haven’t been limited for some time, they grow longer and longer and more and more complex. The “Stay at Home” message has become increasingly ridiculous.

Today, Friday, the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Amendment (No 4) Regulations 2020 ([see here](#)) came into force, yet again without any scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament. The Regulations define what is a criminal offence under the Coronavirus Act, as opposed to what is merely guidance. They too are becoming increasingly complex. For example, from Monday it will be a criminal offence not to wear a face mask on public transport except for eight circumstances/types of people (e.g cruise ships/children aged under 5). The regulations then specify a further eight situations where the Scottish Government says you have a “reasonable excuse” for taking off your facemask (e.g to eat, take medication). The law is increasingly difficult for the police to understand, let alone the public.

At least the guidance and the law for transport and face masks is fairly similar and consistent. For outdoor recreation they are not. The law allows people to leave your home for outdoor recreation without limit, the guidance advises people to stay within five miles of home.

The government muddle and inconsistency when it comes to advice and the law was nicely encapsulated by Scottish Police Federation chairperson, David Hamilton, on the front page of the Herald today:

“there was more condemnation of people going to Loch Lomond than there was of people attending any of the mass protests” (in George Square).

Gatherings of more than 8 persons are illegal, under the Restrictions Regulations, going to Loch Lomond isn't. We have the law, the advice and “the politics”.

Further scientific advice to the Scottish Government on being outdoors

On 10th June the Scottish Government published links to the papers its scientific advisory group had considered in April ([see here](#)). It contains three interesting papers that are relevant to outdoor recreation and tourism in the countryside.

1) The first, on 15th April, was from psychologists on “Facilitating adherence to social distancing” ([see here](#)). It considered the likely success of two different approaches, a directive one, where people are told what to do, and a facilitative one, where they are involved in working out solutions. The report, which makes fascinating reading, recommended a facilitative approach:

“In short, contemporary evidence suggests that the public are not a problem that needs to be managed and controlled by the government. Rather, in coming together and helping each other, the public constitute the best resource available in a crisis and that the role of authorities should be to scaffold and not substitute for their self-organisation”

The Scottish Government, however, appears to have chosen the directive approach and continues with this despite the advice the psychologists gave on managing distancing outdoors:

“Congregating in parks: Concerns about the numbers of people going to parks, sunbathing, failing to keep the statutory two metres apart has led to cautions by the police and threats from the government to ban people from going out to exercise and to close parks³⁶. So how can we help people to go out while maintaining distance? An obvious response is to make more green space available so that densities reduce. A report from 2017, for instance, points to the growing amount of green space in Central London that has been privatised, run by corporations and barred to the general public³⁷. Additionally, there are 48,000 acres of golf courses in London³⁸ and a further large tranche of green open space in school playing fields These could all be opened to the public. In these, and other ways, it would be possible to facilitate being out and yet staying separate.”

That was written in April. With the school holidays about to start next week a facilitative approach would be to open up the countryside and allow people to disperse. The Scottish Government has

made a deliberate political choice to be directive and not allow that. It will end in tears.

2) The second paper on “Options for re-starting outdoor work” is dated 20th April ([see here](#)). It was based on the “*greater risk of transmission in indoor than outdoor spaces*”. It set out options to “promote discussion” and while it avoided recommendations, two of the three options involved return to work. The authors clearly thought a return to work outdoors could be managed safely and in support of this pointed out that:

“The majority of non-essential outdoor workers (e.g. construction workers, gardeners and garden centre employees) are unable to work from home”

and,

“Some such workers are likely to be amongst the most socioeconomically marginalised and may therefore be disproportionately affected by the lockdown”.

At the top of the list of people to be consulted about the paper was the “FM”. It took six weeks for the Scottish Government then to agree that people could return to work outdoors, at considerable cost to the rural economy. It appears the Scottish Government have had a serious mental block about the risks of people being outdoors, whether this is for work or for outdoor recreation.

3) The final document, dated 30th April, is on the “Health Benefits of the Great Outdoors” ([see here](#)). It’s a review of all the literature about the health benefits of greenspace. Much of this is technical, e.g research on specific health conditions, but relevant to the lockdown. That was illustrated this week by the discussion about prescribing people Vitamin D to people as a protection against Covid-19. It was only four weeks ago that the law made it potentially a criminal outside to go into a park to sit in the sun (and there are still signs up in Glasgow saying no sunbathing)!

A section is very relevant to the Scottish Government advice to people not to travel more than five miles:

“As with Bowler’s systematic review and our findings, the evidence suggests that walking in a greenspace or natural area may offer health benefits above walking in an urban environment or on a treadmill (Bowler et al., 2010). Putting aside the health benefits of physical activity, which have been widely documented (Bize et al., 2007; Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010; Lawlor and Hopker, 2001; Penedo and Dahn, 2005; Warburton et al., 2006), the associations between greenspace and health found in this study suggests that “green exercise” may have additional health benefits. In combination with the findings of our systematic review, it can be seen that there is a convincing body of evidence to suggest that greenspace is beneficial for health, and also that greenspace may be currently undervalued as a resource for health.”

It is difficult not to conclude from all of this that the Scottish Government has chosen, for whatever reason, to ignore the advice it has had from scientists for weeks that going out into the countryside during this crisis would be good for people.

The way forward

There are now no longer any justifications for the Scottish Government's travel advice and the impact this has on people to enjoy outdoor recreation in the countryside. It is increasingly clear that the Scottish Government has been ignoring advice from scientists and that its decision to try and continue to restrict travel for outdoor recreation is "political". The explanation for this is unclear, though in my view it could be linked to negative views about visitors being expressed by a vocal minority of people who live in rural areas.

It is time therefore for more people, in both urban and rural areas to speak out against the continued attempts to restrict people from traveling and enjoying the outdoors. I hope that more outdoor recreational organisations will now speak against the restrictions and that more people – many are already doing so – will start lobbying their elected representatives at all levels.

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