



The Scottish Government's route out of lockdown – the FACTS about Covid-19 and Outdoor Recreation


Description


The infographic features the word 'FACTS' in large, bold, blue letters on the left. To the right of each letter is a corresponding fact in blue text, followed by a blue icon in a rounded square. The facts are: 'F' for 'Face coverings' with a person wearing a mask; 'A' for 'Avoid crowded places' with a group of people crossed out by a red 'X'; 'C' for 'Clean your hands regularly' with hands being washed under a faucet; 'T' for 'Two metre distance' with the text '2M' and a dashed line indicating distance; and 'S' for 'Self isolate and book a test if you have symptoms' with a person's head and a thermometer.

F Face coverings 

A Avoid crowded places 

C Clean your hands regularly 

T Two metre distance 

S Self isolate and book a test if you have symptoms 

The Scottish Government has been promoting the FACTS message about how to stay safe during Covid since last July. Nicola Sturgeon repeats them on an almost daily basis at the end of her Covid briefings. The advice is perfectly reasonable, even if the differences in the risks of catching Covid-19 indoors from outdoors is only implicit. This post considers how the Scottish Government's current restrictions and plans to relax them fits with their own advice on FACTS.

Risks of Covid transmission outdoors

Parkswatch has long argued that [the Scottish Government's approach to outdoor recreation is not justifiable](#) but I recently came across another scientific paper on Covid transmission that is worth quoting ([see here](#)):

Environment

Evidence continues to suggest that the vast majority of transmission happens in indoor spaces; recent reviews considering data from several countries found very little evidence of outdoor transmission for SARS-CoV-2, influenza or other respiratory viruses [9, 10]. The small number of cases where outdoor transmission may have occurred are associated with gatherings that facilitate close interactions, particularly extended duration, or settings where people mixed in indoor venues alongside an outdoor setting. It is therefore important that messaging recognising that close interactions outdoors can still pose a risk.

Extract from paper considered by the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies in December 2020

A good summary of why the celebration of Rangers football fans two weeks ago, which involved close contact on the streets with shouting and singing (which spreads aerosols) was not a good idea. And an explanation of why all those who went to parties afterwards were far even more foolhardy.

It remains to be seen, however, whether we will ever know for the indoor as opposed to outdoor gatherings were responsible for the increase in Covid cases in Scotland over the last week, or how much that can be attributed to other factors, like the return of primary schools which involves thousands of people mixing indoors. Unfortunately as the SAGE paper states, Test and Trace was *“Not designed to understand where transmission occurs. Designed to inform public health action and surveillance”*.

Still, the extent to which there was a risk that weekend, other citizens of Glasgow would arguably have been far safer leaving the city than staying in it. The point is that anyone who would like to drive more than five miles out of their local authority area for outdoor recreation can quite easily do so while observing all the FACTS: there's a lot more space to observe the two metre rule; you are therefore unlikely to need a mask but its easy enough to stuff one on your pocket in case you do; even the places that are perceived as crowded are far less so than in the cities; and hand hygiene is much easier than it is in places like supermarkets.

A similar argument applies to the risks of spreading Covid-19 through people who want to travel ([see here](#)) to second homes or in self-catering accommodation. The tourist industry worked out last summer what cleaning was needed to deal with changeovers and the risks of Covid-19 being spread by people touching surfaces. At the same time shops and fuel stations have long adapted the way they operate to make it easy for people, whether locals or visitors, to observe the FACTS.

The latest plans for the release of lockdown

Last week Nicola Sturgeon announced that *“I can confirm, firstly, that we expect to lift the current ‘stay at home’ rule on 2 April.”* Good news, one might have thought for people who want to get out for outdoor recreation, even if the Scottish Government cannot bring itself to say this would be a good thing:

“Initially, though we hope for no more than three weeks, ‘stay at home’ will be replaced by guidance to stay local – in other words, not to travel outside your own local authority area unless for an essential purpose.”

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government has long muddled the law, rules, guidance and advice and it's far from clear exactly what changes to the law are proposed. Later in her speech Nicola Sturgeon said:

“We expect that from 26 April, restrictions on journeys within mainland Scotland will be lifted entirely.”

Comment: so what legal restrictions will remain in place between 2nd and 26th April? It's also unclear if the Scottish Government intend to retain their system of “tiers” which was used to introduce legal travel restrictions between areas.

“We hope that restrictions on journeys between Scotland and other parts of the UK and the wider common travel area can also be lifted, if not on 26 April, then as soon as possible thereafter.”

Comment: people travelling over the border for a walk, in either direction, pose far less risk of transmitting the virus than the hundred of commercial vehicles (whose drivers, through no fault of their own, pick up and deliver goods to Covid hotspots like Amazon warehouses) crossing between the two countries every day.

And unlike last summer, where self-catering was allowed to open before hotels, B&Bs etc where it's very hard to avoid contact with others indoors, the current plan in Scotland is for ALL tourist accommodation to open on the same date:

“I want to turn now to the other changes we hope to make from 26 April.

On that date, we expect all remaining retail premises to re-open.

All tourist accommodation will be able to re-open from that date too, subject to any wider restrictions that remain in place, for example, on hospitality.”

This makes no sense and does not follow the science. Self-catering should be opening before other accommodation and before businesses like hairdressing, which requires close personal contact and which is being allowed to open on 2nd April.

Just how informal camping and campervanning fits with the Scottish Government's plan is also unclear, although Mountaineering Scotland ([see here](#)) does not think “wild camping” will be allowed until the 26th, the same day hotels can open. In my view, if legally you don't need to stay at home from 2nd, you should be able to spend the night away in a tent or campervan from that date.

Comparing the timetable for the relaxation of the rules in Scotland and England

For the last three months the legal restrictions in England have been more stringent than in Scotland, with outdoor recreation (as opposed to exercise), for example, banned completely until 8th March. Our government deserves some credit for taking a less draconian approach, even if the restrictions were not justifiable. The position in the two countries, however, is about to change and the differences are being driven by the understanding in England that the risks of transmitting Covid-19 outdoors is much less than indoors ([see here](#)).

Outdoor vs Indoor transmission

- Airborne transmission is a significant route by which COVID-19 passes between people. Particles of the virus can build up and circulate in the air in the form of aerosols in enclosed spaces (even if they are large) especially where air exchange is poor. [\[footnote 54\]](#) This makes indoor settings more risky than outdoors, where the fresh air quickly disperses the virus to safe levels. This is confirmed by observational studies tracing people infected with COVID-19 which shows the majority of transmission occurs in indoor settings and that ‘super spreader’ events (where many people are infected at one time) are more likely indoors than outdoors. [\[footnote 55\]](#)
- Though the airborne risk of COVID-19 transmission is much lower outdoors than inside, the risk of infection via larger droplets remains high if people engage in prolonged, face-to-face close contact with others. [\[footnote 56\]](#) Therefore, maintaining 2m distancing outdoors is still advisable. Outdoor surfaces may also still become contaminated with the virus, so it is also important to be mindful of what shared objects, e.g. playground surfaces and gate handles, are touched, and to maintain regular hand washing.

In England the ‘stay at home’ rule will end on 29 March, three days before Scotland, albeit with similar advice about “minimising” travel. But then on 12th April:

“Self-contained accommodation such as campsites and holiday lets, where indoor facilities are not shared with other households, can also reopen.”

That is two weeks earlier in Scotland (and note, before hotels). Also on that date:

“Hospitality venues will be allowed to serve people outdoors at Step 2 and there will be no need for customers to order a substantial meal with alcoholic drinks and no curfew, although customers must order, eat and drink while seated (‘table service’)”

In other word the outdoors tourist industry is being kick started two weeks earlier in England than Scotland.

Besides being based on the risks of being outdoors, the other rationale behind these changes is worth noting:

- *“Sports, amusement and recreational activities were worth an estimated £12.8 billion in the UK in 2019 (£11 billion in England),[\[footnote 58\]](#) providing around 565,000 jobs (484,000 in England). [\[footnote 59\]](#) The easing of measures could enable some of these activities to return and take advantage of the spring/summer season and recover lost revenues. These businesses are particularly important employers for young people, with 37% of their workforce between 16 to 24 years old (compared to a national average of 11%).[\[footnote 60\]](#)*
- *Opening outdoor sports settings will help to reduce the adverse physical and mental health effects experienced by large parts of the population, in particular children and those living alone. Exercise and outdoor sports are well documented to reduce individuals’ risk of major illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50% and lower risk of early death by up to 30%.[\[footnote 61\]](#) Physical activity is also known to help with improving mental health through better sleep, happier moods, and managing stress, anxiety or intrusive and ‘racing’ thoughts.[\[footnote 62\]](#)”*

Turn that around, by continuing to restrict people’s ability to do things outdoors, the Scottish Government is likely to be harming both the rural economy and people’s mental health more than is necessary. The one area where the Scottish Government’s more cautious approach might be justified – particularly given the number of Covid cases currently – is limiting the numbers who can meet up outdoors: in England, six people will be allowed to meet outdoors from 12th April whereas in Scotland this is not envisaged as happening until 26th April.

Why this matters?

Under human rights law, all restrictions by government on basic human rights, including the freedom of movement, are required to be proportionate to the risks involved. Apart from the start of the first lockdown and the surge in cases over the winter, when everything needed to be done to stop the virus spreading, however remote the risk, the restrictions on outdoor recreation have not in my view been proportionate.

A couple of days ago, friends of mine who stay in Lochaber went to walk in Glen Etive – as they are legally allowed to do. During the day they came across two police cars, who were in the glen to catch and fine people who had dared to break the travel restrictions. I can think of few places in Scotland where people would be less likely to transmit the virus. Glen Etive has also, in the past, been a place where the police have shown little interest in tackling anti-social behaviour by a (minority) of campers. But now they appear to see people whose only crime has been to want to go out for a walk as justification for a visit.

The response of the Scottish Government and the police ([see here](#)) to people wanting to travel to the

countryside for outdoor recreation continues to be totally disproportionate. A year after the crisis started, what is equally striking is the silence of those who should be advocating for outdoor recreation: VisitScotland; NatureScot, the lead body with responsibility for Outdoor Recreation; our two National Park Authorities; the many organisations that promote outdoor activities as being good for mental and physical health; the legal profession; and the Non-Governmental Organisations representing recreational interests.

The explanation for this sad state of affairs and the failure to challenge the abuse of power is that any organisation one who dares to criticise the Scottish Government risks losing all their funding. Another abuse of state power. That makes it even more important for individuals to speak out and to lobby politicians, both national and local. We should take the opportunity of the Scottish Parliament elections to restore outdoor recreation to its rightful place and the role it should have played during the pandemic.

Category

1. Access rights

Tags

1. camping
2. Covid-19
3. Scottish Government

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