



# EXITING LOCKDOWN FOR CAVING IN WALES

ISSUE 1 – 3rd June 2020

---

## UNLOCKING OUR SOCIETY AND ECONOMY<sup>1</sup>

The Welsh Government (WG) issued its own Coronavirus Lockdown exit strategy document on 15th May 2020. This introduced a Traffic Light System as part of a roadmap back to normality. Essentially there are three steps in the transitional phase (red, amber, green) to take society from the former extreme situation of a tight lockdown (black) back to normality (white).

The WG announced the start of the Red phase from 1st June 2020 by issuing guidance on its website part of which concerns sport and exercise. This is what the government envisaged in mid-May:

### 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.

The 1st June start for the Red Phase means that any kind of exercise or sport can be carried out subject to social distancing and some other rules and official guidance, not just activities that are done on sports courts like tennis that were imagined in May. Earlier policy of micro-managing the return of sports one by one was abandoned in May. This may be a political response to the regimes that have emerged in England and Northern Ireland, and the public generally is tiring of lockdown fuelled by some high-profile figures who were found bending the lockdown rules to suit themselves. Whatever the reasons, it now means that some limited caving is possible from June, and more later.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://gov.wales/unlocking-our-society-and-economy-continuing-conversation>

A further question is how to travel to the exercise area if it cannot be accessed on foot from home. The government travel relaxation plan, as it was conceived in mid-May, is in the box below:

### Getting around

- Lockdown** Leave the house for essential travel only.
- Red** Local travel, including for click-and-collect retail. Promote active travel and adapt public transport for physical distancing. Allow outdoor leisure and recreation.
- Amber** Travel for leisure, access non-essential retail and services, and more people travelling to work.
- Green** Unrestricted travel subject to ongoing precautions.

The commencement of the Red Phase from 1st June has emerged as it was planned in mid-May with some clarification about to what “allow outdoor leisure and recreation” means. But the clarification does not go as far as to define what “outdoor” means. For caving, we will take this to mean taking place in a natural environment, i.e. done not in a building such as a leisure centre or a house.

WG and NRW will not wish to argue that caves are anywhere other than in the outdoors since they are currently involved in High Court Judicial Review concerning the meaning of “open air recreation” and “land” after they claimed that caving is not an open air recreation and that caves are not part of the land. Surely no normal person would seriously be suggesting that caving is done indoors?

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) clearly places caving outdoors in England when it said on 1st June: “With regard to caving, all outdoor sports and physical activities are now permitted, without time limit, with the exception of swimming in an open-air swimming pool”. In Wales it would seem that open-air swimming is permitted. In England swimming in lakes and rivers or indeed caves would appear to be the currently acceptable forms of outdoor swimming. The Welsh Government goes on to point out the obvious – which is that you cannot swim indoors when all indoor public pools have been closed.

DCMS added: “It is essential that social distancing measures remain in place at this time. The Department is looking forward to life returning to normal as soon as possible and to that end the government is constantly reviewing the situation and the guidance”.

So are we all.



## MOVING OUT OF LOCKDOWN - GOING CAVING IN THE RED PHASE

The Welsh Government has issued sports and exercise guidance<sup>2</sup> dated 1st June 2020. The new regulations do not block any particular type of exercise provided it is carried out safely in accordance with social distancing rules and hygiene precautions. This refers to keeping 2m away from other people and washing hands and using sanitizer gel. You also have to “stay local”, and avoid taking unnecessary risks that might result in you needing assistance or increasing the NHS workload.

### WHO CAN GO CAVING?

You must exercise alone, or with members of your own household, or with members of just one other household. Exercising with arbitrary groups of friends is not yet allowed. It remains illegal to get closer than 2 metres from people who are from outside your own household.

### WHERE CAN YOU GO CAVING?

The Regulations state that that you must stay in your ‘local’ area. But ‘local’ has not been defined. This is because ‘local’ in a remote rural context is not the same thing as ‘local’ in an urban area. The guidance and FAQs issued by Welsh Government state that for most people **anything within about five miles of home is local**. Elsewhere in the guidance, it suggests that any travel beyond ten miles would be considered unreasonable. So if you live on a hill farm then 5-10 miles is quite reasonable.

It is accepted that some forms of exercise imply going further afield such as longer distance bike rides, say 40 miles (which in the extreme case would take you 20 miles from home) or long-distance running or walking. It is not acceptable to drive to an exercise venue outside your local area, for instance to beauty spots or caves many miles from home. Neither is it acceptable to drive to edge of the 5 mile limit and then walk out another 5 miles to end up 10 miles from home before returning.

Some caves are gated and the keys are held by caving clubs or management committees or certain individuals. Access Control Bodies (ACBs) are currently considering mechanisms to provide access and more will be said in a future version of this guide. Most caves are not gated and there is *de facto* access where you can simply walk into the cave. But in all cases the cave must be on open land, i.e. land that has not been closed legally for reasons of protecting public health.

For example, DYOCAP, the local ACB for Dan-yr-Ogof, is “keen to see the resumption of caving access”. They will continue to monitor the situation, including the points being raised by the landowner and the position of the Welsh Government, but currently the cave remains closed.

Some caves are on private land such as farms and extreme care must be used for such cases. Do not simply turn up at a farmer’s door and ask for permission as your visit might be unwelcome there in the present circumstances. Check first with Cambrian Caving Council and other cavers if anything is known about local access arrangements and if not then how they could be set up centrally and the information then shared, if that seems possible, so as to avoid people troubling landowners for permission for each and every visit. Using email or telephone is better than asking in person.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://gov.wales/coronavirus-regulations-guidance#section-39253>

## GETTING TO THE CAVE

The possibilities are to walk there, drive in a vehicle, use a bicycle or some other form of transport. Note that the 5 mile radius limit applies unless you begin the exercise itself from your home. You can cycle to work which implies the exercise ends at a place other than home and in the absence of return transport is repeated at the end of the day in the opposite direction. Trying to define special cases exhaustively generally leads to unexpected outcomes, as with the swimming pool cases above, and so people should use their common sense and reasonableness, and “stay alert” as in England.

Some car parks are officially closed because they have over-crowding potential. You can still park in laybys etc that are not officially closed. There is no legal right to close public roads for public health reasons. Note that section 34(3) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 normally permits you to drive a mechanically propelled vehicle on any land within fifteen yards of a road, being a road on which a motor vehicle may lawfully be driven, for the purpose only of parking the vehicle on that land.

## LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND RURAL FACILITIES

Covid-19 is the most serious global pandemic for almost a century with 380,000 reported deaths worldwide and over 6 million confirmed cases. Over 39,000 deaths have occurred in the UK on the official statistics which makes the UK by far the worst European country and the second worst in the world behind the USA. It is no wonder many people are fearful and being extremely cautious.

Local and rural communities will not be welcoming visitors whom they might regard as vectors for Coronavirus. At the moment you cannot take recreation outside your own home area but thought needs to be given now about the implications of permitted travel within it, and later beyond it, so as to avoid local people sensing your presence, and that of the other visitors, as a threat.

Generally cave entrances are not in the middle of villages nor near to properties, so as a countryside user you should be able to avoid making your presence felt in villages or close to houses. Pubs and caving club huts will be closed, as will bunkhouses and hotels and other hospitality. Local shops and petrol stations may have limitations on their use like one-in-one-out or click-and-collect systems. So you need to plan ahead for your travel both in terms of self-sufficiency and limiting your impact.

## IN THE CAVE

What is your experience and capability? Have you assessed the risks? Are you suitably equipped? Has everything been clearly communicated to everyone taking part? If you have any doubts then stop and re-assess the situation. Are you up to date on official guidance and have you factored it? If going alone, are you used to doing this and familiar with the precautions and suitably equipped? Do others know where you have gone and will you stick to your route plan and time schedule?

It is not possible to provide guidance for any particular cave as there are so many variables. A few points to consider:

- move well apart from each other, then later re-group in large passages with plenty of space
- eliminate touch, wear tough gloves, avoid routes that may need shared equipment
- select familiar easy routes without objective dangers like rock climbs or deep water
- ensure everyone knows the route as they may not be able to see the person ahead.

The British Caving Association<sup>3</sup> points out that the effectiveness of social distancing within a cave or mine in respect of airborne or surface transmission between persons is an open question. There is a lack of research and thus concern exists that the 2m rule may be insufficient to provide protection. In general terms, the BCA urges cavers to be responsible and, if you do decide to go underground, to minimise the risk of accidents underground by choosing less demanding caves and mines.

#### AFTER THE CAVE VISIT

Tell the person who knew of your route plan that you are safely back out. Wash your equipment when back at home and hang it outdoors to dry in the sun.

Identify what you learned about socially distanced (or solo) caving, the venues which have been successful to use, and share this with others in your club or via a caving forum. Send feedback to Cambrian Caving Council about the wider experience of your visit as well as the suitability of the cave you chose as a venue for lifting caving gradually out of lockdown.

#### CAVE RESCUE

Mountain Rescue<sup>4</sup> and Cave Rescue<sup>5</sup> warn that their service is much reduced and that the response to incidents will be much slower. Medical and helicopter support that is normally available to help with serious accidents is also at best considerably reduced now and may not be available at all.

Cavers are asked to consider the additional risks and threats to the health of the rescue personnel who are often volunteers. Everyone, no matter how competent or experienced, needs to consider that now is not the time for doing anything extreme but rather that it is the time to stay well within your own limits and to be AdventureSmart<sup>6</sup> and to plan ahead.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) is now commonly seen as the most trusted source of data. A detailed BBC article<sup>7</sup> dated 2nd June presents detailed statistics from ONS. Cardiff and Rhondda Cynon Taff are the current hot-spots, each with around a dozen virus deaths in the previous week. Fourteen of the 22 Welsh counties had 5 or fewer deaths that week. Powys, which covers most of the Brecon Beacons, had only 1 death. Only Blaenau Gwent, a previous hot-spot, had none.

All Welsh schools will re-open on 29th June and term has been extended to 29th July. The next review by Welsh Government of the Regulations<sup>8</sup> is due on or before June 18th. It is expected that this will re-open some non-essential retail shops and possibly allow restricted opening of some cafes and hospitality providers. It is also expected that the official closures of many countryside areas will also come to an end at about that time. The Amber phase may be started. How will you make sure that you and any companions remain up to date on either new rules or potential relaxations?

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://british-caving.org.uk/wiki3/doku.php>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mountain.rescue.org.uk/stay-safe-be-adventure-smart/coronavirus-covid-19>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.caverescue.org.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.adventuresmart.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52380643>

<sup>8</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/the-health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-wales-regulations-2020-as-amended-30-may-2020.pdf>