

P-05-1155 Allow safe, socially-distanced watersports during coronavirus lockdowns, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 11.03.21

Additional information to support Senedd petition 244739: “Allow safe, socially-distanced watersports during coronavirus lockdowns”

This petition was started by kayakers and has been signed by many other watersports participants including wild swimmers, dinghy sailors, surfers etc, both recreational and competitive. Wales is home to a large, thriving community of people whose passion for outdoor recreation is central to their identity and quality of life. This community is composed of individuals from all walks of life, including those born and bred in Wales and those coming to live in the country from other parts of the UK.

Many water sports participants report that engagement in these activities is a central part of their lives, their ‘recreation’ offering physical, emotional and spiritual nourishment. Within this community are many people drawn to the coastline, rivers and lakes of Wales. These rich natural resources provide sources of physical and mental wellbeing, essential adventure, and a sense of location and identity.

Successive lockdowns in Wales have required “swimming or other exercise at sea, or in lakes, rivers or other waterways” to be avoided. We understand the Welsh Government position is that water sports are to be avoided to reduce the pressure on rescue services and NHS. We disagree with this position for the following reasons:

1) The likelihood of accidents or rescues is extremely low, given the available data from the RNLI / Wales’ Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020-26.

Significant factors: Seasonal considerations combined with activity type and intention show that committed water sports participants, accessing local water resources, are highly unlikely to encounter difficulties in their chosen activities.

Welsh Government has stated that ‘one rescue at this time would be one too many’, presumably in terms of pressure on rescue services and health care. We believe that this is a false premise, given the enhanced risk of hospitalisation / health issue / death that water sports enthusiasts are exposed to as a result of the prohibition of their chosen activity. These risks include increased likelihood of injury or death as result of engaging in walking, running and cycling on Wales’ highways. Tragically, there have been numerous examples of such accidents during each lockdown in Wales (see stories below).

2) Mental health issues will be increased among sectors of the population denied life-affirming activities central to their sense of physical and mental wellbeing. Negative behavioural responses are rising in Wales (diet, exercise, alcohol, drugs, social media, sedentary lifestyles), which represent an enormous future challenge to the health of the nation.

We would argue that ‘one life ruined by lockdown is one life too many’ in response to the Welsh Government’s current prohibition of water sports during Alert Level 4.

Who is affected? The Watersports participation survey shows canoeing is the most popular boating activity with around 3% of the population taking part. Canoe Wales has a membership of 3,800 members across all age groups. This number does not include many more paddle sport enthusiasts in Wales who are not members, estimated at over 50,000 regular participants. Surfing tends not to organise into formal clubs and associations; so estimated numbers are less clear. However, research by the surfing industry estimates 25,000 Welsh residents participate in surfing. This total (close to 1% of the population) seems a conservative estimate, given the excellence of the Welsh coastline for surfing, and the proximity of many residents to the coast. The UK Outdoor Swimming Society has 100,000 members - on a pro rata basis, it is likely that at least 5 000 members are Wales residents. Again, open water swimmers tend to organise informally, and it is highly likely that a significantly greater number of people in Wales regularly engage in open water swimming. Other popular watersports include sailing and rowing.

In summary, it is clear that watersports have significant participation levels in Wales. These people are currently denied access to the activities that are vital for their wellbeing.

Personal stories This petition was created in response to personal stories from individual watersports participants in Wales who are facing significant well-being challenges during lockdown. We were overwhelmed by the response, and it has been very challenging to cut this document down to the required 4 pages as there was more than double the content that would fit, thus very few of the stories can be fully reported. Please note some people felt unable to reveal their significant disabilities because this document will become public and they did not want to be identifiable. One noted: “it is common for cold water swimming groups to include many people with both visible and invisible disabilities it is inclusive and can be safely open to many”. These participants include:

- **A disabled watersports athlete** who cannot participate in walking or running, currently unable to participate in her usual exercise on flat water and now left as her only choice exercise on a recumbent

trike. She wrote: "I'm really struggling having my safest outdoor sports option removed from me as someone who has more limited options to exercise... I'm very exposed on the roads ... and with autumn leaves, low sun, slippery roads and gusty winds I lose traction on my drive wheel with hills".

- **Female, 59, self-employed** "I took up sea kayaking about 18 months ago. I have bad arthritis in feet, knees and hands and so it is imperative that I keep moving. I've had to give up walking any distance because of the pain in my feet so kayaking has been a brilliant way to keep my body moving, supple and cardio fit. I'm currently feeling very out of condition and I find it hard to stay motivated too. I run my own business and frankly this recent lockdown has been very tough."

- **Young members of GB teams & Welsh squads** unable to train, who are having to deal mentally with watching their counterparts elsewhere improve, while their own hard-won abilities slip away.

- **Female, Canoe Slalom Athlete, 14, Welsh Talent Squad** "Having not had the same rules in England, Scotland and Wales has meant that the paddlers I compete against have different conditions to train under... All of this has seriously affected me because my dream is to represent my country but with each session that I miss, I fall further behind my peers who are able to take advantage of their home nation opening up facilities. My frustration sometimes causes me to start arguments with those closest to me. I'm aware of it at the time but I just need to release it so I don't internalise it... I have dreams of getting to the Olympics. I have spent 4 years getting to this point. I have given up going out with friends and going on holidays because I am dedicated to my sport and in return, I feel my sacrifices of a normal childhood and teenage years has all been for nothing."

- **Male, 16, GB Freestyle team** I have found going from training 3 or 4 times per week to not even being able to get in a kayak incredibly hard. It is worse seeing the social media posts of all my friends around the rest of the UK and the world out paddling – I just want to be there with them. Kayaking has been the focus of my life for the last 7 years and gives me the energy and motivation for life. I have wanted to be a World Champion since I was 9 and it has been so tough not being able to train for over 6 months of the last year when my competitors are still out on the water, when the planned Worlds this summer is my last chance as a Junior. I have so much extra training to make up for. **Parent:** Outdoor activity is so important and without it my teenage son just becomes an online gaming zombie. I can't wait until he can get back on the water and back to normal. There are so many benefits of kayaking, fitness, fresh air, mental problem solving and many friendships. Kayaking is the perfect socially distanced activity as the boat and paddle naturally makes everyone keep a distance.

- **Male, Intensive Care Consultant, Wales** "Kayaking has always been time-out from working life: to be out on the open sea, engrossed in the elements of wind and wave. Sometimes using every part of my body and brain to control my boat in challenging sea conditions. Other times, a meditation of watching the horizon as I place one more stroke into the water, then another and another until many thousand strokes later I have reached that distant point.

There has been none of that for too long. I work in Intensive Care where I am a Consultant - it has been the hardest and longest year of my medical career. I have been at work in the hospital night and day. I have been at work at home constantly reading, looking for better ways to treat this new disease. I try to think about the patients who survived Covid. I remember those who didn't: I remember reassuring them that they would probably be ok; I remember putting them on a ventilator; I remember phoning their partners when they died. I want time, space and peace to let those memories subside."

- **Female, open-water swimmer, Anglesey** "As an open water Coldwater swimmer and part of a very supportive group of women who swim regularly together in small groups in the sea it seems one of the least risky activities through lockdown. People change on the beach in the fresh air with good distance between each other and are in the water with good distance from each other at least 2 m. It is very good for mental health and well-being, provide some social contact but not close, is outdoors in the fresh air and promotes exercise as well as the scientifically documented benefits of cold-water swimming preventing dementia, high blood pressure and anxiety closed."

- **Female, Nurse, N Wales** "Kayaking is part of my identity; it is what I have lived for on my rare days off for years and I am well able to make safe decisions for myself within this sport. I have never required medical attention or rescue services in 15 years. I miss it dearly and it would have been of great benefit to me to relax and unwind on the sea after work-days spent nursing patients in challenging conditions during this pandemic. Kayaking, particularly on the sea can be achieved with absolute covid-19 appropriate social distancing requirements, paddling within ones own abilities, no car sharing required."

- **Female, Ceredigion, University researcher** "Dwi'n mwy lwcus i byw yng Nghymru, mewn ardal pert iawn. Llynedd, ledled pan oedd na cyfyngiadiau am aros yn lleol, oedd hi'n bosib i nofio yn yr afon ac yn y mor, a chaicio yn r ardal lleol, heb risg a heb gormod o bobl. Dydy hi ddim yn glir i fi os mae na tystiolaeth i cefnogi yr reholau am peidwch i nofio neu gwneud chwaraeon dwr. Mae na cysylltiad crif

rhwng iechydd meddwl ac treulio amser yn y byd natur, ac y polisi erbyn chwaraeon dwr a hyn o bryd yn creu problem i lot o honom ni.”

- **Male, 49, Window cleaner, S Wales** “I’ve been kayaking for about 9 years. I started when we had some really serious family problems. Just an hour on the water kept me sane. Helped me through another week. I find just an hour once a week sea kayaking or surfing helps to lift my spirits. I feel so happy and alive. My wife said the money spent on the kayak was money well spent she could see the positive effect it has on me.”
- **Female, 54, Planning section leader** “I have worked throughout the pandemic in manufacturing, my job is extremely stressful and my escape to reduce my stress is kayaking, as I am not allowed to go on the sea my stress levels have increased, thus increasing my migraine frequency as a result for the duration of lockdown I have had to have extra medication from my doctor to control the migraine, I feel depressed and am unable to understand how if I lived in England during lockdown I would still be allowed to access the sea? Kayaking is a socially distance sport, and it is a sport which helps immensely with mental fatigue. As a result of not kayaking my fitness levels required for kayaking have seriously dropped, mental health has declined, motivation has disappeared, and I feel in a rut.”
- **Male, 54, director of sea kayaking company** "I started my company in 2007 to share my love of sea kayaking with others. Winter is a time for me to up skill, to keep above the game, to relax and enjoy the area I love, which is Anglesey. To have this taken away, a blue space of freedom, has been very challenging to my mental health and something I never could have believed would happen. I've always loved water and It pains me as I cycle past looking out to sea, knowing I'm not allowed to access and engage, despite my knowledge, skills, qualification and experience. I wonder why England and Scotland are allowed, yet those of us that live in Wales are not."
- **Male, 44, Quality control** “I’ve been working from home since March 2020. As a result, my work life balance has suffered, which has affected my mental and physical wellbeing to very significant and negative extent. In the past I would go sea kayaking to relieve stress and reset, but the terms of the most recent Welsh lockdown have prohibited that. I’ve felt the loss greatly, particularly as it is my belief there is no better way to exercise at a safe social distance from the rest of society.”
- **Female, Valleys, 50s** "I’ve become quite reliant on outdoor swimming in recent years to deal with depression and anxiety and maintaining my physical well-being. It benefits me in two ways: firstly, the cold water itself (the benefits of which are widely recorded) and secondly, the action of swimming outdoors in a lake. I get a feeling of freedom that I get nowhere else. In fact, I have recently been prescribed diazepam for severe anxiety as an alternative to outdoor swimming which seems to me to be an odd public health policy. Physically, I have a lot of muscular and joint pain these days which can make walking unpleasant, but all my aches and pains disappear in water which means that I can exercise without pain. I can only do this in water"
- **Male, 65 years, retired customs officer** “I consider the paddling restrictions to be detrimental to my health and well-being and overall, not to be well justified. I suffer from levels of depression. Outdoor exercise is the way I successfully help myself deal with this condition. Not being able to conduct this important physical and mental outdoor activity has sunk me at times and made feel less positive about myself and events. I consider kayaking to be a generally safe outdoor activity and far safer than e.g. cycling which is allowed under Covid restrictions in place. I am an experienced cyclist. However earlier this year carefully cycling I was hit full on by an 88 yr old driver who completely at fault who drove across my path to turn right at speed. Immediate impact sent me over her car. The police and two ambulances attended the scene. My serious injuries now, 9 weeks later, leave me in difficulty and pain walking. I cannot agree or accept that kayaking is more dangerous than the cycling. It’s very obvious I think that the reverse is the case and the restrictions on kayaking should be lifted.”
- **Male, 57 years, Upholsterer** “The lockdown has affected my well being quite a bit...apart from the usual stresses and anxiety that most people have endured this year. Not being able to go out and paddle has reduced my confidence, ability to deal with normally easy occurrences, that happen throughout the day... I have a Work life, a Home life (sort of) but the gel that keeps it all together, which is paddling.. is not there..”
- **Male, 54, Conwy, Information Analyst** “The no paddlesport has affected my mental health during lockdown, it has been made worse by the fact that the other nations have been able to paddle. Kayaking is my passion and my release from day to day stress. We have spent years training to make Paddlesports a low risk sport and it should be recognised as a key exercise like walking and cycling”
- **Male, 53, Architectural technologist** “As a 12 y.o. kid, surfing was my escape from family life which wasn’t the best. Despite living 14 miles from the coast, I would strap my surfboard to my home-

made trailer on my bike and ride to the beach. I used to think of it as “my place to be” not realising the benefits it was bringing me. For the past year I have worked from home, visiting sites to carry out surveys to make them a safer working environment during Covid. These have included buildings with high proportion of persons that have tested positive. This, together with excessive working hours, demanding deadlines to ensure the safety of others in their workplace is extremely stressful, which is affecting my mental health. There are days where I just do not want to speak to people, my work phone will ring or ping with an email notification and I feel my stress levels going through the roof... being on or in the sea or rivers is my release from stress, reorders my mental state of mind, just as it did when I was 12. I feel that the benefits of kayaking and the sea have been completely overlooked.”

- **Male, 55, Self Employed** “It is with full understanding the impact that the Pandemic has had and the need to restrict people’s socialisation. However, I fail to see why experienced Kayakers are prohibited from paddling when the risk factor of injury and/or physical contact, compared to other permitted activities is low! ... I feel strongly that the recent restrictions have had an immeasurable impact on the wellbeing of myself and many people in the paddle sport industry.”

- **Male, 52, Self Employed, Carmarthenshire** “As we all know access to the outdoors brings great benefits to mental and physical wellbeing, keeping people fit and emotionally balanced during an extremely difficult time. I have been working throughout the restrictions and I have witnessed people mountain biking, surfing, horse riding, walking etc which adds to the frustration that watersports are currently banned. The activity of sea kayaking was my release after working all week, a time to recharge and relax that is well suited to social distancing. Everyone involved takes this activity very seriously and spends a great deal of time, money and effort on training to understand this environment, its risks and how to stay safe. I urge you to allow us to enjoy the many benefits to be gained from it.”

- **Male, 67, Semi-retired construction manager** “I started kayaking when I was 14 and still at school. ‘Just add water’ sums up my life. Any spare time has been spent on or in water be that sea, river or lake. I used to enjoy lots of forms of exercise including running and cycling. However, age is now taking its toll and I struggle to cope with these but I can still paddle.

Due to personal circumstances I do not see or speak to anyone in the mornings unless I go to work. Even then I rarely come into contact with likeminded people. Virtually all of my friends are kayakers but I never get to see them. My children have left home and I have not seen my Mother or one of my daughters for over a year. Being completely locked down is certainly taking its toll mentally. I find conversation is drying up and I have become more inward looking. There is nothing to talk about and no one to talk to anyway. I really need to get out, see some friends and have something to look forward to. I can safely do this in a kayak... If Covid does not get me depression will.”

- **Female, Gwynedd** “It’s now close to a year of various restrictions relating to kayaking. I find it difficult to understand why I am able to cycle from home along busy roads ... yet I cannot paddle my sea kayak on the virtually empty sea. I live alone and am desperately suffering from lack of social interaction on top of physical fitness and mental well-being. How often are we being told of the benefits of taking part in activities in the outdoors? I consider kayaking to be one of the best activities to do this while socially distancing in a non-contact sport.”

- **Female, 36, coach & GB Freestyle Team. Llangollen** “As paddlers returned to paddlesports after the first lockdown, I saw the curative effects of being in and on water in action. I felt first-hand and observed the same feeling of knots of anxiety melting away as soon as we launched our boats into the water. Those who’d suffered great mental anguish were almost immediately happier, calmer and more able to deal with life’s challenges. This lockdown has been extremely hard on almost everyone’s mental health. For paddlers, not having access to water has taken away a very effective coping mechanism... I have been in some very low and dark places mentally since December. There is going to be a nationwide mental health crisis to deal with as we come out of this. You should be looking to encourage all free, COVID-safe avenues for people to be able to protect and improve their mental health.”

- **Male, gas engineer** “Well personally, kayaking has always been about escapism, I go to work, which can be quite stressful in the line of work that I do...fixing gas escapes in the highway, getting out away from the masses and traffic is how I deal with this, not being able to so as along with other issues contributed to my high stress levels and bouts of depression...”

We call on the Welsh government to remove the statement that states “for example swimming or other exercise at sea, or in lakes, rivers or other waterways” as activities to be avoided and allow safe, socially-distanced watersports during coronavirus lockdowns.