

BMC Cymru Wales – 2021 Access & Conservation Report

Key issues for 2021:

- The effects of Covid again dominated activities in 2021, with the year starting out yet again with government-imposed lockdowns and travel restrictions. While most of the countryside this time remained open to those fortunate enough to be able to exercise directly from their homes, it was disappointing that Brecon Beacons National Park decided to close the Central Beacons area to all people, even to local residents. BMC did provide robust response to this process, including issuing a Freedom of Information request to ask for the reasons and consultations behind this decision. The response from BBNPA was insipid to say the least!
- A number of local access issues developed, partially as consequence of climbing walls remaining closed and due to people unused to climbing outdoors, seeking out available climbing areas. These tended to be at low level sports climbing venues and issues were around parking, crowding, overnight parking/camping and noise. This attracted the attention of landowners to issues that have previously been low-level or insignificant, and in some cases led to the closures of some climbing areas, such as Dimbath, Cwm Ely, etc.
- In the hills, the impact was even more significant, with many more people accessing honey pot areas such as Pen y Pass and Ogwen in Snowdonia and at Pont ar Daf in the Beacons, leading to parking issues and eventually some draconian parking restrictions and even tow away zones and 24 hours security, complete with stab-vests and body cams at the Pen y Pass car par! Dyffryn Ogwen has now been renamed as “Dyffryn of the Traffic Cones” due to the hundreds of traffic cones placed by the local authorities to deter roadside parking!
- The BMC Access officers produced a number of articles and a series of videos, in particular the Respect the Rock series, aiming at demonstrating best practice to climbers and hill-walkers, especially the newer, younger and harder to access new climbers and hill-walkers, many of whom have never even heard of the BMC. A number of these did not get completed as planned (including one for North Wales limestone) due to the financial cut backs and budget constraints at the BMC.
- While BMC Officers tried to respond to these issues in a timely manner, the financial impact of Covid also affected the BMC, with projected financial losses approaching £250,000 at one time for this financial year, a loss of over 12,000 members and a total loss of income from the travel insurance scheme (which is a major source of income for the BMC). This resulted in all staff having to be partially furloughed, which in practice for myself, meant my work-time was restricted to between 14 and 21 hours a week. The furlough rules legally prohibited any staff from working any additional or “out of hours” time for their employer, even in a voluntary capacity and this was very frustrating as it prevented us from responding to many issues that we would normally be involved with, and even affected attendance at area meetings and similar events. I’d like to thank the amazing work carried out by volunteers who stepped in and supported the work at this difficult time.
- In a similar way, the Covid regulations also impacted heavily on events and activities, leading to the cancellation of Gower Climbing Festival, Tremfest and Pembroke Climbing Festival. Let’s hope that activities like these can regain some momentum in 2022.
- In other issues, a number of new seasonal restrictions had to be applied for nesting birds, as the lack of people resulted in birds nesting in many new locations. It’s great to report that

I've had no reports of climbers breaking any of these agreed restrictions and overall the responses I've had from the major landowning bodies, such as National Trust on Gower, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, RSPB and Conwy Council (The Ormes) has been very complimentary of climbers at a time when the countryside has faced unprecedented pressures and popularity.

- On a more strategic level, my role changed in mid-2021, partially due to lack of finances at the BMC and partially due to the employment of a Policy and Campaigns Officer (Eben Muse) based at Cardiff and my hours were reduced to three days a week. Of that time, only 1.5 days a week are paid for by the BMC, focussing on Wales access issues, the remainder of my time being paid for from the BMC's Land and Property Trust, which is focussed on BMC owned land. While many of us were under the impression that the creation of the new role in Cardiff (which is very welcome and long overdue) was to be funded by new money, and would not affect the existing funds used to pay for access staff in Wales, this has not turned out that way, and the BMC had only budgeted for continuing to pay for an access officer for Wales for one day a week for 2021.
- The Wales Access Reform Programme continues to slowly move forward, with Welsh Government looking to add the changes to rights of way and access legislation to their 2022 legislative programme. At this time, most of the changes seem to be positive for climbers and hill-walkers, with access to cliffs and coast of Wales looking to be made a public right from 2022 onwards (essentially extending CROW Access to the coast and cliffs of Wales). This is a significant milestone for the BMC, as no other body was campaigning for this (many landowning bodies and some conservation bodies were against this) and if it were not for a long-term concentrated effort by the BMC (a campaign going back nearly 10 years), this would not even be on the white paper.
- Finally, a very big thanks you to all the committed and invaluable volunteer local access reps, across the whole of Wales, without whom, especially this year, access to many locations would have been lost and without whom, I just could not do this role in any sort of an effective way, Diolch!

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