

Let's (socially) dist again, like we did last Summer

When the first coronavirus lockdown ended in the east of England in August 2020, and the "Rule of Six" came into effect, organised orienteering events were possible again, but quite a few changes were needed to comply with these new rules.

WAOOC were fortunate in obtaining permission for four events during September and October, a period which proved all too brief, curtailed by the rise in Covid19 case rates and re-introduction of more stringent limits on gatherings.

This article is in part a description of how the club was able to adapt their event organisation in line with British Orienteering's guidelines, to allow the 4 events to proceed safely and meet the legal social distancing regulations then in place. But in addition to these technical aspects, the organisers needed to consider questions which don't normally arise, around who gets to come to the event, given demand was likely to greatly exceed capacity.

Who should the events be for?

With relatively few events on the calendar, and after several months with no events at all, we realised there would potentially be far more people wanting to enter than could be accommodated. Regular orienteers would be interested in entering any event at all, and willing to travel further for a low-key event than would normally be the case. So there were three inter-related questions to be asked for each event:

- ◆ How many entrants should we plan for?
- ◆ How can we accommodate that level of entries in a Covid-safe way?
- ◆ What will the policy be on who can enter: Should we have a policy on reserving capacity for newcomers/club members/juniors? Should entry be limited to just club members, just orienteers from clubs in the region, or to BO members?

These considerations were different depending on the type of event. Two of the events were part of a "Park-O" series aimed at newcomers and in particular families with school-aged children. The remaining 2 were colour-coded Sunday events.

Park-O

Prior to Covid, we knew to expect over 100 entries at a Park-O, all entry-on-the-day, all living locally, about half being regular Park-O attendees, with most of the rest being first timers, and just a few regular orienteers. Attendee numbers were boosted by advertising on social media and in local schools. For the post lockdown events, we imagined that entry numbers might be affected by many imponderable factors including:

- ◆ Regular Park-O people "out of the habit" no longer interested *versus* possible very high level of interest due to lack of anything else going on!
- ◆ The need to pre-register might be off-putting, especially if needing to pay in advance
- ◆ Concern over safety (even if we were fully complying with guidelines)
- ◆ Lack of the usual event promotion, e.g. social media ads

- ◆ Inundation of entries from event-starved regular orienteers filling up the entries before regular Park-O attendees get the chance
- ◆ High level of interest from complete newcomers looking for something to do (we knew that we would have a much more limited capacity than normal to brief newcomers on what to do and the basics of the sport, due to social distancing requirements, so we ought not to be encouraging a high turnout of newcomers).

We decided to plan for around the same level of entries as pre-lockdown: around 100, to encourage as many as possible regular Park-O people to attend, and to expect a higher level of interest than normal from local club members. One important factor limiting entries for Park-O is the number of hire dibbers available, since almost all entrants would need one, and recycling dibbers on the day was not going to be allowed.

For these events we set up our own on-line pre-registration system (more on this later) which allocated a start time block to each entrant and allowed us to control entry numbers, but not taking payment in advance. We thought this would be more attractive to Park-O regulars than any of the existing pre-entry systems aimed at orienteers. This also meant that we would not be advertising the existence of the event via the pre-entry system to the wider orienteering community.

Colour Coded

Our Ampthill Park event was able to go ahead on the same September date, and as the same scale of event, as we would have expected in normal circumstances. The second was provisionally to have been a re-arranged relatively high profile urban event, originally scheduled for the previous April, but we decided that it would be unwise to commit to laying on a national level event before we had a chance to prove our new arrangements, and with a high degree of uncertainty still remaining in regard to how the coronavirus situation, and social distancing rules, might change before the date of the event. We therefore decided to keep our North Cambridge terrain for another day, and instead arranged our October event in Cambourne, which up until then had only been used for evening club activities and low-key summer series events.

For both of these, we decided to try to accommodate as many entrants as practicable. At Ampthill, capacity would be limited by car park capacity and we ended up setting a limit of 120 entries. This was a success and so we applied a similar formula to the Cambourne event. Both these events were intended for regular orienteers and so it was appropriate to use Fabian4 for on-line pre-entries. We did not impose any restrictions on who could enter, but we did email our club members to remind them about the events and the need to pre-enter. As it turned out, entries were just about 100% BO members.

Allocating start times

We were grateful to British Orienteering for producing national guidelines quite promptly in response to the changing advice and regulations from government, and in particular it was useful to have a clear policy on the density of starts.

Park-O start time allocations

For the Park-Os, it would be impractical to try to impose exact start times and we did not want to have to set up multiple starts. Our normal arrangement of a single start operating for 2 hours would provide enough capacity for 80 starters, with 10 starters per 15-minutes in accordance with BO guidelines. That seemed a sensible basis to work on, and gave us the option, if we reached capacity at that level, to operate the start over a longer period to accommodate up to 100 entries.

Stephen Borrill of WAOC crafted an on-line registration tool, and registered a new domain name, oentries.uk. Entrants simply visited that site, and for each starter entered their name and age, course (Short, Medium or Long), and chose a start window. The application kept track of available start slots within each 15-minute window, and sent an email back confirming the reservation. It also kept count of hire dibbers allocated, so we did not run out. We expect to use this system in future for events of this type, even if, one day, pre-entry is no longer mandatory.

Colour coded start time allocations

The situation here was more complicated. There would be 7 courses, some of which (Green and Blue) we expected to be much more heavily booked than the other courses. We were confident that entries would reach the capacity limit, so we needed to make sure the start system could cope with the expected number and unexpected eventualities.

At Amptill, which was our first post-lockdown event, we adopted a belt and braces approach. We extended the start operation to be 150 minutes, long enough to accommodate 100 starters with a single start lane, with 10 starters per 15 minutes. Fabian4 set up entries so that entrants could select their own start window subject to the limit of 10 starters per block. When it was clear that we would easily exceed 100 entries, we decided to allow for a second start lane and increased the entry capacity to 120 overall (our car park limit).

Once the full capacity was reached, we closed entries, and decided to allocate a specific start minute to each entrant, to help avoid queueing and congregating near the start. We implemented two separate parallel starts, one for the Blue course (which catered for nearly half of all entries) with the remaining courses starting from the second start.

In theory this would have allowed us to cater for around twice as many entries, but in practice it meant the start officials had plenty of time to make sure the system was working as intended and made keeping our 2m distance from each other very easy. The two start lanes also helped in being able to allocate similar start times to all members of a family (even though we were not intending to enforce these exact start times).

An alternative approach would have been to set up exact start minutes in the entry system, in which case we could have allowed 15 starters per 15 minutes, or even 30 if we committed in advance to two start lanes and to which courses used what start. This may be a good approach in future for larger events if there is still a degree of social distancing to be enforced, but we found the start block approach gave us a great deal of flexibility in how we organised the start lanes on the day.

Other pre-event preparation

Hire dibbers were pre-assigned and bagged in advance for collection on the day.

We wanted to minimise the need for start officials to speak and especially not to have to shout, as this had been identified as a possible way of transmitting the virus. For the colour-coded events we published the start lane notices on the website in advance, and sent a link to all entrants. For Park-O, we created a “How-to” guide and published this on the website and encouraged all entrants to take a look before the event. And we produced a set of laminated signs used at all 4 events which included reminders to Clear and Check dibbers before starting, to explain the start procedure, and to remind everyone of the 2m distancing rule.

We obtained extension cables so that download boxes, and splits printer could be more than 2m from the associated download laptop and its operator.

We also produced notes for registration team, start officials, and download team, in advance of the event, explaining how we aimed to meet the “rule of 6” at these locations in particular.

On the day provisions

Starts

We were able to set up the start grid at each start as a single line of taped boxes, 2m in size, together with the laminated signage that had been prepared in advance displayed on stakes. The start system proved itself at the first event so was kept much the same for the remaining 3 events. Only one aspect did not work as imagined, where we had 2 starts: At Cambourne the two starts were quite close (not much more than 2m) but either side of a hedge; at Ampthill they were on open land about 4-5 m apart. The club has only one “beeping” start clock, and so the question arises as to how do starters on the second start know when to start? One answer is to program the start box itself at the “other” start to emit the start beeps. The two starts can then operate independently. Since everyone has a punching start the actual time is not important, just the 1 minute spacing between starts. We even anticipated setting up the beeping clock to be 30 seconds ahead of the SI box time, so that starters on one start would be staggered by 30 seconds relative to those on the other start to further ensure social distancing. In reality, the starts were laid out close enough to each other that the one “beeping” clock could be heard at both starts, and having a conflicting beep was unhelpful, so both starts ran in sync from a common set of beeps. In future, this might need to be done differently depending on space available for setting out the starts.

Download

Download worked very well – a label on the splits printer told people how to tear off their splits without touching anything except their own piece of splits printout. Because all entrants had pre-entered, there were no surprises when downloading, and practically nothing for the download official to do.

We had debated whether to issue splits printouts or not, but the majority view was that the risk of contact transmission from touching the splits printer was tiny compared to other unavoidable touch points at the event, and not having a printout would lead to queues building up at download as

finishers stopped to ask questions of the officials, especially as we were not posting up any results at the event itself.

Because download operated so smoothly, there was time for the download team to upload intermediate results to the club website about every 15 minutes or so whilst the event was in progress.

Registration

At the colour coded events, the only function of registration was for collection of hire dibbers, of which there were only a handful. Consequently there was very little traffic around registration and no need for any extra measures for social distancing management.

At the Park-O events, all entrants needed to go to registration to pay, and to collect hire dibbers. We used our non-contact card reader to take payment (no cash was accepted or handled). This generally worked, since the system of start slots to space people out at the start meant that arrivals at the registration were similarly spread out, and entrants were used to queueing e.g. outside shops, with the 2m spacing.

However, the first Park-O came close to a catastrophe just as people started to arrive, when we switched on the card reader to find that it would not operate without a password, which no-one had to hand. Normally no password was required, so this was probably due to it not having been used for several months, but it caught us out. Fortunately someone was able to drive a short distance home to retrieve the necessary information, but the lesson is to try everything out before the day!

At the time of writing (February 2021) England is still in lockdown, but the expectation is that there will be a gradual relaxation of regulations through Spring and Summer, which at some point will allow organised events to resume, but with some regulation of social distancing still in force. We look forward to this, hopeful that what we trialled in 2020 will be useful again this year. No doubt some of the changes we have made to how we operate events and deal with pre-entries will be kept as normal procedure in future, even when Covid19 is no longer a concern.

