

Agenda Item	4
Report No	TC/04/20

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Tourism

Date: 14 October 2020

Report Title: Visitor Management Group and Plan

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report updates Members on recent meetings of officers from various services that have been dealing with issues and complaints regarding the challenges supporting the increase of visitors to the Highland area this summer. It concludes by recommending the production of a Visitor management plan learning from experience this year and in advance of the 2021 summer season.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. note the issues identified by each service in the appendices;
- ii. approve the continuation of the cross-service officer group to identify possible solutions and make recommendations on how to address the issues identified;
- iii. approve the production of a Visitor Management Plan for 2021 to be presented to this committee at the earliest opportunity; and
- iv. approve the modification of the immediate Plan to consider longer term requirements in a 5-year Visitor Management Plan.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource

The resources required for the group to meet and produce a draft plan are met from the relevant Services budgets. Further consultation or the implementation of some solutions will have associated resource requirements from a revenue and capital perspective that will need to be considered within the overall Council budget. Members are fully aware of the challenges facing The Highland Council's financial position, and that the emphasis will have to continue to be on looking for external funding.

3.2 Legal

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. However, existing legislation and Covid-19 requirements are used in resolving many of the issues identified in this report. The cross-service group will also consider any new legislation or national guidance affecting The Highland Council or other public bodies with a role to support tourism and environmental protection.

3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications**

Tourism benefits communities through being a major part of the Highland economy and through helping sustain local facilities and services. Projects designed to address some of the issues described would be expected to produce positive benefits for communities as well as for visitors.

Place-based community engagement is also deemed critical in resolving the issues in this report.

3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever**

There are no Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications arising directly from this report, but a number of the potential projects likely to be proposed, should they be undertaken, would help reduce climate change impacts.

3.5 **Risk**

There is a risk that without a visitor management plan the challenges and issues felt this season will be repeated next year.

3.6 **Gaelic**

There are no Gaelic implications arising directly from this report. However, in keeping with agreed Council policy there would be a Gaelic element to projects subsequently undertaken as a result of being identified in this plan.

4. **Background to Visitor Management**

4.1 Visitor Management in this report refers to the increasing numbers of visitors to Highland. Volume tourism creates pressure on the existing infrastructure at visitor attractions, beauty spots, towns and villages, and increasingly rural roads, remote glens and trail heads where visitor numbers have often not created issues previously.

4.2 This summer, after a quiet spring due to Lockdown, Covid-19 travel restrictions caused large numbers of people to holiday in the UK. Many campsites in particular remained closed or offered restricted capacity which in many cases amplified the volume tourism issue and created widespread problems. It is not clear at this stage what impact Covid-19 will have on visitors in 2021. However, we can expect visitor numbers to the Highlands to remain high as they have been increasing steadily over the past decade and there will likely be an increase in certain types of tourism as a result of the virus, e.g. campervan/motorhomes, informal camping, short breaks and day trippers. The Highlands is also now seen as a safe place to visit and as such numbers are likely to continue to rise. There may also be Brexit impacts which could make 'staycationing' even more popular. These visitors will therefore continue to impact on the services that the Council provides and on our communities.

5. **Summary of Key Issues**

5.1 As the Coronavirus lockdown began easing a number of officers from eight different service teams – Roads and Transport, Parking, Amenity Services, Waste management, Environmental Health, Outdoor Access, Tourism and Public relations formed a short-life cross-service officer Visitor Management Group that identified the main issues arising.

This also helped in providing information and advice for the Council's Business Visitor and Community Guide produced to support the reopening of the tourism sector.

- 5.2 Members of the above group have since provided summaries of the main issues experienced by their service and these are attached as the appendices to this report. To give an indication of the challenges some of the more notable issues encountered were:

Roads, Parking and Transport Services issues

- Insufficient parking provision in tourist hotspots leading to safety issues - parking congestion, obstruction of the carriageway, and inappropriate use of laybys
- Insufficient capacity on some narrow rural and single-track roads to cope with large numbers of vehicles; large motorhomes/campervans causing congestion
- Parking overnight in non-designated areas
- Parking on soft verges causing damage to verge and road edges
- Community tolerance of influx of visitors created inappropriate responses e.g. erection of signage, barriers across some public roads, introduction of roadside hazards such as placement of boulders/rubble/logs on the verge or in lay-bys

Amenity and Waste issues

- Insufficient public convenience provision
- Inappropriate use of public toilets - disposal of chemical waste, increased water consumption due to topping up of motorhome containers
- Lack of awareness of Council operated facilities and Comfort Schemes available
- Some comfort schemes remaining closed after lockdown
- Lack of suitable motorhome waste disposal facilities
- Existing bin numbers in visitor locations not coping with high volumes of waste
- Responding to littering and other unauthorised waste disposal issues directly attributable to the higher numbers of visitors

Outdoor Access issues

- Informal camping and associated anti-social issues; fires, litter, toilet, noise, overuse and congregating
- Landowners and communities trying their own solutions which can disperse the problem to other sites – including non-compliant signs or obstructions
- Lack of awareness of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code by newcomers to the countryside
- HLH Countryside Rangers were on furlough meaning no staff were available to monitor visitor pressure hotspots

Environmental and Public Health issues

- Informal camping leading to public health issues with human waste and possible increase of Covid-19 transmission
- Business need for advice on safe re-opening and Covid-19 compliance
- Wild toileting and risk to private water supplies
- Challenges liaising with existing caravan sites to confirm status and access to mobile home toilet disposal facilities (as many remained closed)
- Investigating fly-tipping and taking enforcement action

Across all the above service areas there were also some issues around unhelpful and sometimes inaccurate information being disseminated – particularly on social media. Pressures were also felt by Council partners, notably Police Scotland.

- 5.3 To try and address some of the issues being experienced during summer 2020 The Highland Council (THC) did take part in a meeting in July convened by the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism with local Members and community bodies in Ward 11. Given the positive experience of the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund THC asked if funding for temporary infrastructure would be available this season. THC was asked to describe and cost the support required and this was submitted and included: funding for additional litter bins and enhanced waste collections; portaloos; over ground cassettes for collecting motor home waste; and resources for 10 Community Wardens/Rangers with education and enforcement roles. Although initially positive feedback was received, no formal response was forthcoming. The waste team arranged for over 120 additional bins to be put in place and for weekend collections to be made, costing the service nearly £60k from the end of July to October. This will add to the Service's budget pressure, reported at Q1 to be £4.84m because of Covid-19 costs and disruption to income and savings.
- 5.4 A multi-agency environmental health group was also established through the Local Resilience Partnership to co-ordinate enforcement and communications on dirty camping issues. The group shared best practice across the three Island Local Authorities and THC.

6. Proposed approach to future visitor management

- 6.1 It is clear that the sheer numbers of visitors seen in certain locations this summer overwhelmed a number of Highland communities and existing services and facilities. Due to a combination of Covid-19 restrictions, reduced staffing and limited budgets services were often unable to respond quickly enough or to the level demanded. In order to prepare better for future years, it is recommended that cross service officer group be continued and that this group work towards the production of a Highland Visitor Management Plan.
- 6.2 **Cross Service Officer Visitor Management Group**
It is recommended that the short life officer group be continued as a cross-service Visitor Management Group. As well as supporting cross-service working this would promote better sharing of data and intelligence specifically around visitors and visitor use of facilities and help co-ordinate service delivery that requires actions from multiple services.
- 6.3 **Visitor Management Plan**
The Visitor Management planning activity undertaken this year was very much focussed on attempting to plan a safe transition out of lockdown and while this specific approach will hopefully not be needed in future THC can benefit from the experience of this summer as well as learning how similar issues were tackled elsewhere. It is therefore recommended that the officer group capture this information in a Visitor management Plan, a draft of which would be brought to a future meeting of this committee. This plan should outline both the key issues to be addressed and possible solutions as well as any resources needed. While some solutions may be possible in the short term, others, particularly where things like consultation, legislative changes or new capital investment might be required, would take longer. As such, it is recommended that a short term plan for 2021 be produced but that this is accompanied by some longer term ambitions as part of a 5 year Visitor Management Plan.

- 6.4 The Issues Reports produced by various services (and attached as appendices to this report) are a useful starting point for a Visitor management Plan. They highlight some solutions that might be priorities for next year including: -
- Increased seasonal comfort schemes
 - Provision of more motorhome waste disposal points
 - Improved communications and signage
 - Completion of fee parking schemes
 - Increased bin capacity and collections
 - Review of regulations & improved enforcement with liaison of enforcement agencies
 - Seasonal Rangers, parking wardens and community/enforcement wardens who can advise / educate as well as carrying out enforcement
- 6.5 In order to produce such a plan, THC would also engage with public sector partners and other interest groups. This approach has been proposed by Nature Scotland and is described more fully in the Motorhome and wild camping report being presented to this committee.
- 6.6 It is worth noting that when the Local Police Plan was approved by the Communities and Place Committee on 19 August, the Local Police Commander agreed to include in the plan local resilience planning with partners, including a continuing response to Covid-19 and, under the priority of anti-social behaviour, violence and disorder, action to deal with irresponsible camping and environmental protection.
- 6.7 Opportunities already exist to support some of the potential developments described – for example the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund which is already being used to support projects in areas facing visitor pressures. It is hoped further rounds of this scheme will be approved shortly allowing further Highland projects to be put forward.
- 6.8 The recently agreed allocations of Crown Estate Funding may also provide opportunities to fund visitor management related projects. Some of this might be done from the strategic fund but there are also opportunities for locally important projects where communities feel these are a priority for their area.
- 6.9 It is however worth stressing that while further investment in infrastructure might address some issues, others will require seasonal enhancements to service delivery, and these will have resource implications. These would have to be considered as part of THC's budget process for 2021 and this will be challenging given the difficult budget position this year and expected for future years. Ability to make best use of external funding will feature in the Visitor Management Plan.
- 6.10 The cross-service group will also consider whether any new regulatory requirements or licensing arrangements may generate new income streams that could support new tourism initiatives.
- 6.11 In producing this plan there will be a need to take on board the views of a variety of stakeholders including tourism businesses and communities affected. A similar approach to addressing some of the challenges described has also been proposed by NatureScot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) in a letter to THC and included in the motorhomes and wild camping report to this Committee. Recognising that time is of the essence if changes are to be in place for 2021, options for this might include liaison

with Area Chairs and asking various groups, on a place-based approach, to make representations to the Committee. Some such work is already under way for example discussion are underway already with NC500 on potential areas of joint working and resourcing particularly around local educational and enforcement activity.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

Date: 23 September 2020

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Visitor Management Plan – Response from Roads & Transport

1. Key Issues;

- Insufficient amount of Parking provision in tourist hot-spots
- Insufficient capacity on some narrow rural and single track roads to cope with large numbers of vehicles
- Parking on soft verges causing damage to edgings
- Sub-standard passing places (not large enough), and too infrequent on some routes
- Inappropriate use of passing places and lay-bys
- Large motorhomes and campervans causing congestion on single track roads
- Driver behaviour on single track roads – in particular NC500 (driving too fast and too slow) with Motorhomes being rented to drivers who aren't used to driving large vehicles on rural roads.
- Parking overnight in non-designated areas – 'no overnight parking' signs are unenforceable and the Council has previously decided they should be removed.
- Community 'tolerance' of influx of visitors created inappropriate responses e.g. erection of signage and closures/barriers across some public roads.
- Lack of enforcement – Road Scotland Act is a blunt instrument to address some of the issues, and there's a lack of Police resource to tackle speeding or other dangerous driving.

2. What actions taken;

a) What worked

- Partnership working e.g. CNPA
- Bealach viewpoints funded by RTIF
- Increased parking provision on Skye (Storr phase 1, funded via Income generation i.e. parking fees)

b) What didn't

- Requests for 'Clearways' were not supported without adequate consultation
- Quick temporary 'no parking' measures (traffic cones) only dispersed problem

3. What do you think is needed for 2021;

a) what can your service provide next year?

- Re-fresh of passing places signage and driver advisory notices on single track roads
- Re-fresh of lining – double, single and junction
- Review of Traffic Management and Regulation in some areas
- Completion of income generating parking schemes on Skye – Storr phase 2, Fairy Glen and Quiraing
- Re – start project re roll-out of parking charges in existing car parks (work stalled due to Covid-19) if political consent given.

b) what are the barriers?

- Limited Roads Maintenance Budget for Verge damage (RTIF funding is not available for roads maintenance)
- Insufficient Capital Funding for increasing and enlarging passing places – Unlikely that RTIF can be bid for again.
- Timescales involved and Statutory Consultation for Traffic Regulation Orders and/or By-laws
- Staff available to manage TRO processes
- Some 'resistance' to roll-out of parking charges to existing car parks.

4. What is needed long term

- Increase in number of lay-bys and passing places
- Road Widening and Improvements – re-instatement of capital projects into the Council's Capital Programme e.g. Strathcarron and Balnacra
- Edging repair works on roads and installation of additional barriers
- Identify more areas for increased car parking provision, funded by Income Generation, at tourist hot-spots.
- Funding to employ more wardens and seasonal rangers
- Increase in provision of overnight parking motorhomes and campervans
- Assess potential of park and ride schemes, or community bus schemes
- Tourism Tax / Levy?

5. Opportunities;

- Income from Roll-out of Parking Charges
- Improved Visitor information
- Well managed tourism clearly benefits and helps to sustain local communities

Visitor Management Plan – Response from Parking September 2020

1. Key Issues;

- Passing Place Parking
- Overnight stays in Car Parks
- Verge Parking
- Free Car parking does not allow us to self-regulate usage through tariffs
- Lack of Traffic Regulation Orders in place to allow enforcement of safety critical issues

2. What actions taken;

c) What worked

- Installation of New Terms and Condition signs in regulated Car Parks prohibiting Vehicles manufactured or converted for the purpose of sleeping between 10pm and 8am
- Officer engagement with users when able to attend sites (we have 230 regulated Car Parks across Highland)
- Investment in new Car Parks based on income generated for Capital investment (Storr partially opened, Bayfield nearly complete, negotiations around Fort Augustus)

d) What didn't

- Resources did not allow us to increase enforcement visits in evenings
- Finite number of officers available to cover large geographical area

3. What do you think is needed for 2021;

c) what can your service provide next year?

- Complete signage rollout to Car Parks
- Increase manpower if more sites charge for use
- Assist with implementation of signing and lining in Car Parks
- Regulate some key roadside locations where needed
- Identify more Car Parks to generate Income for investment in Infrastructure
- Refresh all Passing Place Signage
- Introduce Roadside waiting & Loading restrictions where critical to road safety
- A complete review of all available legislation by legal that pertains to the issues arising to ensure that all existing legislative tools are identified and being utilized.

d) what are the barriers?

- Budget
- Staff available to manage a project
- Resistance to parking charges in Car Parks

4. What is needed long term

- More Car Parks charging for service to generate income to re-invest.
- Increase Manpower
- A cohesive approach with other services.

5. Opportunities;

- Large income generation opportunities to fund Infrastructure improvements and resources available to manage visitor activities

6. Anything else;

- Continue working together on the group looking at the overarching issues that come with attracting tourists to our Area, listening and taking advice of all those involved
- Having realistic timescales and managing expectations on what can be delivered
- Restricting Layby usage is not an answer to these problems beyond stopping people “camping” in them, tents/deck chairs/fires etc. Parking up to sleep is not an issue.

Visitor Management Plan – Response from Amenities September 2020

1. Key Issues;

- Wild toileting
- Inappropriate use of public toilets; disposal of chemical waste, increased water consumption due to topping up of motorhome containers
- Lack of planning ahead by visitors; not accessing the Council website for up to date information on open and available PC's
- Lack of awareness of Council operated facilities (75) and Comfort Schemes available (36), very few facilities and comfort schemes were closed due to Covid-19 restrictions
- Lack of suitable motorhome waste disposal facilities (private, commercial, community)
- False and inaccurate information publicised by websites, some forums/social media pages and Apps for motorhome users

2. What actions taken;

e) What worked

- Having the website up to date with all available provision detailed
- Managing to open (and keep open) 95% of our own facilities quickly and efficiently
- Providing appropriate cleaning and enough consumables to all facilities
- Responding quickly to problems identified
- Supporting some community groups with ward discretionary grant to arrange portaloos provision

f) What didn't

- Managing the communication around PC provision where internet access is difficult
- Some aspects of portaloos provision; this was not straightforward because of costs of provision, emptying, cleaning, stocking with consumables, type of hand cleaning offered, security, capacity, accessibility and planning.

3. What do you think is needed for 2021;

e) what can your service provide next year?

- Increased offering of seasonal comfort schemes at specific locations if budget can be identified
- Review of approach to public convenience provision; previously this was driven by the need to achieve budget savings
- Assistance in identifying where motorhome waste disposal provision could be sited both above ground and plumbed in to sewerage mains
- Enhanced PR strategy and local signage, especially where internet access is difficult

f) what are the barriers?

- Budget
- SEPA/Scottish Water approval for motorhome disposal facilities
- Timescales involved
- Staff available to manage a project

4. What is needed long term

- A new approach to PC provision, to improve/upgrade facilities if resources can be identified
- More facilities with charging in place; including charging for shower provision where appropriate
- More support for community groups to provide, improve and maintain local facilities;
- More strategic approach to Comfort Schemes (seasonal or permanent) if resources can be identified
- A route of strategically placed motorhome waste disposal sites with a charge in order to generate income, estimated cost for installation (depending on numerous variances) is £20k-£50k per install
- A cohesive approach with other parts of the Council, such as Parking and Roads

5. Opportunities;

- Income opportunities by increasing number of PC's charged for and services available (i.e. showers)
- Provide a route map of all available facilities (community and private) linked to the Council website showing PC and motor home waste disposal provision and improved local signage where internet access is difficult
- More targeted support for community groups to consider leasing or owning facilities previously or currently run by the Council

6. Anything else;

- Continue working together on the group looking at the overarching issues that come with attracting tourists to our Area, listening and taking advice of all those involved
- Having realistic timescales and managing expectations on what can be delivered

Visitor Management Plan – Response from Waste Management September 2020

1. Key Issues;

- Existing bin numbers in layby, car park and viewpoints not coping with high volumes of waste.
- Limited waste collection options, especially so in remote areas.
- Responding to littering, fly-tipping and other unauthorised waste disposal issues directly attributable to the higher numbers of people staycationing.
- Dirty camping; tents being used on roadside verges or just off lay-bys resulting in increased wild toileting and associated mess
- Managing significantly increased levels of dissatisfaction from elected representatives, community councils, community groups and members of the public.
- An expectation on the Council to respond to problems on private land and estates.

2. What actions taken;

- Provided additional bins and larger capacity bins in know hot spot areas.
- Arranged increased uplift frequency including weekend working.
- Provided additional and responsive litter collections, in particular, car-parks and roadside verges.
- Supported any community volunteer groups seeking to tidy up their area by providing bags, gloves and litter pickers. Also arranged to uplift collected bagged waste from community clean-ups.

3. What do you think is needed for 2021;

- An improved experience through a clean environment for visitors to Highland:
 - Plan and provide resource for delivering seasonally enhanced waste and other key services to maintain a clean environment.
 - A focus on solutions for campervan waste disposal.
 - Where possible, increased toilet provision at specific known hotspot locations
 - Increased community wardens/rangers for responding to wild camping through education and where appropriate enforcement.
 - Designed signage for beauty spots

g) what can your service provide next year?

- Dependent on the available resource, plan for increased litter bin collections, increased bin capacity and litter collections.

• what are the barriers?

- Budget availability
- Our own alternate weekly waste/recycling collection system; our existing capability is limited to when general waste is being collected, in many remote areas this could be fortnightly.
- Limited vehicle access to known beauty spots

- Exceeding the gross weight of the vehicle when collecting increased bin numbers.
- Staff time taken to clear mess from remote and other areas.

4. What is needed long term

- **improved infrastructure for tourism in particular:**
 - A network of disposal facilities for Motorhomes/Campervans, including waste disposal
 - Improved and consistent design/size of bins and bin housings provided at viewpoint and other known hotspot areas.

5. Opportunities;

- Improved and sustainable method of service delivery
- Reduce costly responsive approach to service delivery
- Enhanced visitor experience

Visitor Management Plan – Response from Outdoor Access September 2020

1. Key Issues;

- Informal camping and associated anti-social issues; fires, litter, toilet, noise, overuse and congregating
- Landowners and communities trying own solutions; some are fine but others not, often dispersing the problem to other sites
- Some popular trailhead car parks being overwhelmed, e.g Munros, beaches
- Non-compliant signs or obstructions placed during lockdown and then slow to remove them
- Huge increase in use of local paths during lockdown, followed by increase in use of remote paths post lockdown
- Lack of awareness of Scottish Outdoor Access Code by newcomers to the countryside
- HLH Countryside Rangers were on furlough, therefore no staff to monitor visitor pressure hotspots.
- Unhelpful, sometimes inaccurate, information being spread on social media.

2. What actions taken;

g) What worked

- Cutting back vegetation to create more passing space reassured path users
- Advising on access rights & responsibilities
- Some communications

h) What didn't

- One way path systems
- Advising to go elsewhere if busy
- Insufficient comms quickly enough to counter problems arising
- Insufficient staff available

3. What do you think is needed for 2021;

h) what can your service provide next year?

- If Countryside Access staff increased, then can monitor hotspots, advise on Access Code on site and prevent many issues arising.
- Identification and knowledge of hotspots of visitor pressure.
- Existing relationships with many communities and landowners
- Provide Access Code leaflets

i) what are the barriers?

- Budget
- Staffing

4. What is needed long term

- A co-ordinated inter-service approach to dealing with visitor facilities and issues arising.
- Increase in staff available to advise, assist and if necessary, enforce during the tourist season.
- Clearer guidance/restrictions on roadside camping

5. Opportunities;

- Income opportunities for charging at a number of popular car parks. If required explore opportunity of Rangers assisting Parking Wardens.
- Motorhome permit scheme?
- Provide better Information Points in some car parks

Explore opportunities for an expanded Ranger/Community Warden service in partnership with others and with the role to have enforcement as well as educational roles, this includes scope for joint resourcing and income potential