

Agenda Item	4
Report No	TC-02-21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Tourism Committee

Date: 17th March 2021

Report Title: The Highland Council Visitor Management Plan

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Members with a draft version of The Highland Council Visitor Management Plan. This is the culmination of meetings of officers from various services that have dealt with issues and complaints regarding the challenges supporting the increase of visitors to the Highland area last summer.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. Agree the immediate implementation of The Highland Council Visitor Management Plan for 2021 subject to incorporating any proposed further alterations;
 - ii. Agree the ongoing modification of the Plan to consider longer term requirements in a 5-year Visitor Management Plan; and
 - iii. Agree the continuation of the cross-service officer group to monitor progress of the Plan and liaise with other agencies involved in visitor management.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resources** - The resources required for the group to meet and to produce of the draft plan have been met from the relevant Services budgets. The implementation of some solutions have associated resource requirements that have been agreed at The Council budget meeting on 4th March 2021. Some investments in new facilities such as public conveniences or motorhome waste facilities could have ongoing revenue funding requirements, and these will need to be considered by the Service concerned.
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. However, existing legislation and Covid requirements are used in resolving many of the issues identified in this report. The cross-service group has considered 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)** - 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 the Plan.
- 3.4 **Climate Change/Carbon Clever** - There are no Climate Change/Carbon Clever implications arising directly from this report, but several the potential projects likely to be proposed, should they be undertaken, would help reduce climate change impacts. Many of the visitors to the Highlands are vehicle-based and the Plan does attempt to reduce the environmental impact of these visitors by reducing vegetation damage and active travel opportunities
- 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 the Highlands. 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 Last 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 still 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 Highland Council provides and on our communities.

5. **Proposed approach to future visitor management**

- 5.1 It is clear that the sheer numbers of visitors seen in certain locations last 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 this year, following the report to the previous Tourism Committee meeting, the cross-service officer group continued and has produced the draft Highland Visitor Management Plan submitted with this report.

5.2 Visitor Management Plan

This Plan has attempted to recognise the issues that occurred due to the increased numbers of visitors to the Highlands and their activities. The officers involved have been in contact with other areas and learned of their experiences. Each service has put forward several proposals within the Plan which they could implement this year. While

some solutions may be possible in the short term, others, particularly where consultation, legislative changes or new capital investment might be required, would take longer. It is recognised that monitoring and recording this year will be important to further inform a five-year plan. A copy of the draft plan is attached as appendix 1 to this report.

- 5.3 In addition to the above and in order to further improve this plan, The Highland Council has begun to engage with public sector partners and other interest groups. The aim is to establish a wider visitor management group for the Highlands. In producing this and future plans there will be a need to take on board the views of a variety of stakeholders including tourism businesses and communities affected.
- 5.4 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.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

Date: 4 March 2021

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Visitor Management Plan 2021



Visitor Management Plan 2021 Plana Stiùireadh Luchd-tadhail 2021

Tourism Committee Draft
Dreachd Chomataidh na Turasachd

March 2021
Am Màrt 2021

Background

Cùl-raon

Sustainable tourism is one of Scotland's key growth sectors identified in the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy and is the Highlands' most important industry generating significant economic benefits for all areas of Highland. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic tourism had seen a number of years of consistent growth so that by 2019 Highland's 7.5m visitors generated: -

- £1.13Bn of direct spend by those visiting the area.
- a further £265m of indirect expenditure by the tourism industry purchasing local goods and services
- over 25,000 jobs (including the self-employed)

However, in addition to the benefits those visitors brought, a number of challenges were becoming evident in some of the more popular areas. Notable examples of this were the Isle of Skye, Glencoe & Glen Etive, West Lochaber, Loch Ness and the Glenmore corridor. Many other areas, while not seeing the same overall numbers, did see similar impacts as visitor numbers were high in relation to the carrying capacity and infrastructure available in those areas. Notable examples of this included destinations along the North Coast 500 such as Applecross, the Gairloch area, Assynt and Durness.

Following the first lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a sudden rebound in tourism numbers as pent-up demand and barriers to overseas travel saw large numbers of UK residents holidaying in the UK. Concerns about virus transmission led to rural areas which were seen to have plenty of space and a low incidence of the disease seeing far greater demand than cities. The Highlands was no exception, quickly becoming one of the most popular destinations in the UK. At the same time many businesses and some infrastructure were not available or at least not with the same capacity as previously and this meant many of the challenges seen in previous years were even more evident in summer 2020. Some areas also saw new challenges as for example visitors unfamiliar with it and the expected behaviour took up informal camping in tents or visited in motorhomes.

Visitor Management

Stiùireadh Luchd-tadhail

In their guidance on sustainable tourism, UNESCO stresses that managing visitor movements and influencing visitor behaviour are critical aspects of developing sustainable tourism. By managing visitors, a destination can minimize the negative effects on the host community and maximize the opportunities for them to benefit. From the visitor's perspective, it is not about controlling or spoiling the visitor's experiences but rather it is about creating a good experience for them. In successful destinations, this is achieved through planning to ensure the visitors are well informed, efforts are made to influence when they go there, and what they do there, and a suitable range of facilities and services are provided for them.

At a destination level (and this can be anything from Highland to an individual community within Highland) this will require contributions from a range of partners. Influencing the time that a visit

takes place will depend in part on the marketing activities of VisitScotland, destination organisations, local tourism groups and individual businesses. Similarly, the amount and quality of information provided by those organisations as well as by third party providers like travel websites, guidebooks and social media groups can have a significant impact on visitor behaviour. Finally, the range of facilities and services provided will also depend on the actions of a variety of partners. Many services such as accommodation, visitor attractions or travel and transport services and infrastructure such as some car parks are provided by the commercial sector. Paths and other infrastructure used for leisure purposes or to access natural attractions may be provided by NGOs and public or private landowners and other infrastructure or services such as public toilets, parking and waste facilities are commonly provided by local authorities or communities themselves. Effective visitor management in any given location or destination is likely to require partners in all those sectors to contribute.

The Highland Council's role

Dreuchd Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

While the Highland Council may provide some commercial services and may assist others who undertake marketing activity, those are not core Council roles so the Council's activity should be focussed on the provision of some of the underlying infrastructure and associated services as well as on informing and educating visitors on good practice. While some tourism activity and much of the engagement with businesses and business groups is undertaken by tourism officers within the Council's Economy team, most of the services provided directly to tourism and visitors come from a number of teams across different Council services.

In order to address some of the challenges seen in summer 2020 a visitor management group was set up and while initially seen as a short life working group a decision was taken in autumn 2020 to continue with this cross-service working group. In particular this group was tasked with producing a Visitor Management Plan for Highland Council services for 2021 with the expectation that the plan would continue to evolve to support visitor management in the years beyond.

This Visitor Management Plan is the result of that groups efforts. The plan focusses on service delivery rather than tourism infrastructure. While it is recognised that new or improved tourism infrastructure will have an important role to play, this will need capital funds and will require different regulatory processes to be gone through first, so this is considered a longer-term aim. A separate and complementary Tourism Infrastructure Plan is being developed with some longer-term ambitions and in time this may be able to be combined with this Visitor Management Plan to form a single Visitor Management strategy. However, in view of the more pressing need to address some challenges for summer 2021, current activity is concentrated on the production of and subsequent delivery of the services in this Visitor Management Plan.

Particular challenges to be addressed by this plan

Dùbhlain sònraichte ris an cuirear aghaidh sa phlana seo

While the summer of 2020 undoubtedly saw communities across Highland face a number of challenges, many of these were not new, but were an escalation of issues already being

experienced to some degree in other areas or in previous years. Some others were, however exacerbated by the circumstances at the time. Informal camping is one such example with increased numbers due to a variety of factors including some sites being closed or having restricted capacity, “party camping” by people who would typically have holidayed overseas or attended events such as music festivals that didn’t take place in 2020. The particular challenges this plan seeks to mitigate are a mix of those that have become apparent in recent years as well as some of those more specific to 2020 in recognition of the fact that 2021 is still likely to see some of the restrictions seen in 2020 e.g. reduced levels of overseas travel. The key challenges to be addressed are:

Roads, Parking and Transport issues

- Insufficient capacity on some narrow rural and single-track roads to cope with large numbers of vehicles; large motorhomes/campervans causing congestion
- Insufficient parking provision in tourist hotspots leading to safety issues - parking congestion, obstruction of the carriageway, and inappropriate use of laybys
- Parking overnight in non-designated areas
- Parking on soft verges causing damage to verge and road edges
- Community tolerance of large visitor volumes and behaviour leading to 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

- Lack of awareness of Council operated public convenience facilities and Comfort Schemes available
- Inappropriate use of public toilets; disposal of chemical waste, increased water consumption due to topping up of motorhome containers
- Lack of suitable motorhome waste disposal facilities
- Existing bin volume / numbers in key locations not coping with high volumes of waste
- Littering and other unauthorised waste disposal issues

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
- Increased pressure and erosion on some popular paths
- Limited numbers of Countryside Rangers available to provide advice and guidance or monitor visitor hotspot pressures

Environmental and Public Health issues

- Informal camping leading to public health issues with human waste
- Outdoor toileting and risk to private water supplies
- Investigating fly-tipping and taking enforcement action

Public information

- Limited promotion of some key services e.g. locations of public toilets or motorhome waste facilities
- Dissemination of unhelpful and sometimes inaccurate information – particularly on social media

Additional visitor management activity undertaken in 2020

Nithean a bharrachd a rinneadh gus luchd-tadhail a stiùireadh ann an 2020

As described above the 2020 summer season saw some particular challenges and a number of activities were undertaken to try and address some of these. However, the immediacy of some issues, lack of preparation time and Covid related restrictions did limit what could be done with limited notice. Some of the key activities undertaken were as described below, and these form a useful start points for defining what might be done for the 2021 season and beyond.

- Production of a Community and Business guide giving guidance on reopening.
- Investing £60,000 in increased bin capacity and collections at key tourism sites. Support was given to some community litter patrols
- Amenity Services were able to work quickly to open all public toilets
- Access team provided Scottish Outdoor Access Code advice when requested
- Roads implemented temporary 'No parking' measures
- Parking regulation signs and officer engagement
- New car parks partially opened
- Engagement with stakeholders, Members and local representatives

Proposed actions for 2021

Gnìomhan gam moladh airson 2021

Activity		Indicative budget
Road management and improvements		
Improved passing places and lay-bys, road signs, road verge protection, road traffic orders		£280,000
Passing places and lay-bys	Replacement of damaged or missing Passing place signs and some road strengthening	
Road signs	Additional advanced warning signs where required	
Road verge protection	Strengthening and marker posts	
Traffic orders	Additional restrictions such as clearways and waiting prohibitions to address safety concerns	
Any other activity	Liaising with stakeholders about additional parking	

Parking management		
Install charging at tourist dominated car parks. Improved signs & regulation. Additional officers for fee collection & enforcement.		£250,000
Parking charge schemes	A list of approximately 21 sites is to be considered by Area Committees for early intervention with further sites to be proposed in longer term rollout	
Parking Enforcement Officers	Employment of 4 additional temporary Parking Enforcement Officers for 12 months with a view to fund permanent posts from enforcement income in future years	
Parking enforcement	Review of regulations & improved enforcement / liaison with enforcement agencies	
Signs	Upgrade of Car Park signage and information for users	
Access rangers		
New seasonal access rangers		£300,000
Promotion of responsible behaviour	10 x seasonal ranger posts to promote responsible behaviour and possible enforcement (litter, parking, fires, dogs). Reduce the amount of, and damage from, open fires, littering and outdoor toileting. Posts to include weekend and evening work to address informal camping issues.	
Partnership working	Ranger team to work in co-operation & co-ordinate with communities, land managers and other organisations, such as Highlife Highland, NatureScot, Forestry & Land Scotland, National Trust for Scotland and Nevis Landscape Partnership to arrange joint or overlapping patrols & monitoring and ensure consistent messaging. Working with Police & Fire services.	
Monitoring and maintenance	Monitor the use of countryside car parks and roadside parking. Monitoring informal camping and related issues. Ranger activity to include minor improvements to, and maintenance of, countryside sites & paths.	
Work with volunteers	Work with local communities to establish and train a local volunteer warden scheme to assist with monitoring and liaison with visitors.	
Signage	Installing and maintaining temporary signage and other communications on safe and considerate visits to the countryside, particularly regarding any Covid 19 restrictions and guidance.	
Public Toilets		
Increase provision of comfort schemes, investment in public toilet improvements		£60,000
Comfort schemes	Provide additional comfort scheme provision at key locations, including the offer of a seasonal comfort scheme if required	
Council operated facility improvements	Improvements to interior facilities and installation of motion sensor lighting	
Promotion	Promotion of the current network of public toilets and comfort scheme locations through tourism groups, visitor websites etc.	
Any other activity	Installation of additional footfall counters and increasing provision of charging at some locations	
Waste Management		
Increased bin capacity and collections for key visitor sites		£180,000
Increased bin capacity bins	This will be achieved through a combination of larger 1100 litre bins with lid design to reduce the risk of fly-tipping and a larger number of 240/360 litre	

	litter bins. The bins will be combination of both general waste and where possible recycling bins. The bins will be clearly marked with information on responsible waste disposal. There will be increased bins within all Highland areas with improved focus on areas of high risk.	
Litter bin collection	The collection frequency of litter bins will increase by a combination of swapping bins over using additional seasonal staff and pick-up vehicles and existing refuse collection vehicles and staff.	
Fly-tipping and Litter	Additional seasonal staff and pick-up vehicles will be used in the North West, North Coast, East and Central Sutherland, West Coast, Dornoch/Tain areas, Skye, Lochaber, B&S and Lochness areas; the staff will be used for swapping over full litter bins, increasing litter picking and providing a fast response for any reported incident of fly-tipping.	
Motorhomes		
Improved provision and promotion of services for motorhomes		£200,000
Additional motorhome waste disposal points	Investigate options for installation of a new facility in Ullapool alongside planned car park improvement work	
Additional motorhome waste disposal points	Creation of template design for future sites based on current project at Bayfield car park, Portree.	
Bid in grant scheme for commercial caravan & campsites	Operate a bid in grant scheme to assist / encourage third party commercial caravan & campsites to allow waste disposal by non-residents. Locations to be selected to create a strategic network of opportunities across Highland.	
Promotion of network of disposal sites	Production and distribution of a guide to motorhome waste disposal sites. To be circulated through business groups, online and via social media groups	
Supporting commercial provision of motorhome stopover sites	Production of a guide to planning and licencing requirements for small scale overnight facilities to assist landowners seeking to create those facilities	
Public Transport		
Enhanced bus services		£60,000
Enhanced bus service - Skye	Bus services from Portree and, if feasible, Broadford to visitor sites on Skye to run for three peak months. Timetables to be defined but will be designed to provide new routes and/or enhance frequencies when buses are not committed to school journeys. These would include a park & ride provision to reduce car traffic to congested locations. Fares income to defray some costs. Dedicated publicity would be produced.	
Promotion of bus services	Development of tourist-oriented transport publicity and a multi-journey or multi-operator ticketing scheme.	
Bus Partnership Fund bid	Bus Partnership Fund bids to Transport Scotland are being prepared for infrastructure provision which will enable improved bus services, with the specific target of reducing congestion. One bid will be focussed on tourist-related services in Skye and the Cairngorms National Park and can include quick wins (for completion in 2021/22) and longer-term projects.	
Other activities		
Joint initiative with Cairngorms National Park Authority to improve visitor management in the Glenmore corridor		£125,000

Continued engagement with National Trust for Scotland to improve visitor management in Glencoe & Glen Etive (RTIF scheme)	
Continued engagement with stakeholders, Members and local representatives to improve visitor management in the Arisaig/Morar/Mallaig area.	
Establishment of a Visitor Management Partners group for the whole Highland area. Share information and provide consistent messages to the visiting public	
Continued engagement with national visitor management strategy groups	

Projects under way during 2021

Pròiseactan a thathar a' gabhail os làimh ann an 2021

In addition to the visitor management plans described, a number of capital projects have been completed during winter 2020/2021 or are under way that are expected to be completed during spring / summer 2021. By providing new and improved tourism infrastructure these will provide further support to ongoing visitor management. Those new projects that will be ready during the 2021 season are: -

- Lochinver motorhome waste disposal
- Falls of Shin motorhome parking and waste disposal
- Brora motorhome waste disposal and signage
- Golspie, tourism signage
- Dornoch visitor parking; phase 1
- Tain Rose Garden public toilet improvements
- Invergordon Shore Road laybys to support cruise sector
- Cromarty motorhome site and facilities
- Rosemarkie public toilet improvements
- Cromarty and Nigg; new ferry slipways
- Uig Fairy Glen parking
- Staffin, Quiraing parking
- Staffin Kilt Rock parking extension
- Storr new public toilets, motorhome waste disposal and additional parking
- Dunvegan Coral Beach parking
- Portree car park extension and motorhome facilities
- Bealach na Ba layby/viewpoint improvements
- North Kessock motorhome parking and waste disposal unit
- Inverness - motorhome waste disposal unit
- Isle of Eigg public toilets
- Mallaig public toilets
- Glenfinnan footbridge linking the new car park to the viaduct viewpoint
- Corpach, Fort William Puffer Pier slipway
- Fort Augustus – Car Park extension