

Campervans, tourist infrastructure and our National Parks

Description

8 NEWS

ANALYSIS, INSIGHT, OPINION

Thursday

Islanders call for motorhome drivers to face new ferry levy

ALAN SIMPSON

MOTORHOME drivers could be charged a levy to travel on ferries to Scotland's most remote islands amid concerns that a 10-fold increase in traffic is causing major problems for local communities.

Figures show the number of motorhomes travelling to the Western Isles has risen over the past decade, with nearly 2,000 to Harris alone.

It follows the introduction of a Scottish Government scheme to make island ferry fares more affordable.

The Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) was introduced to boost remote economies - and worked so well the number of cars on one route is up by more than 80 per cent.

But some ferry services are now struggling to handle the additional traffic and island communities are finding their infrastructure

is groaning under the load of the additional visitors.

Now Western Isles MSP Alasdair Allan has written to Transport Minister Humza Yousaf asking him to consider a "motorhome levy", with the proceeds being used to improve local infrastructure.

The plan is backed by Western Isles Council and transport bosses have confirmed they would consider the move to ease congestion across the ferry network.

Mr Allan said: "It has been a fantastic thing for our local economies in the Western Isles that we have had record numbers of tourists visiting here and enjoying our island hospitality.

"However, this success has brought its own set of problems and it is readily apparent our infrastructure has not been able to keep up with demand.

"The numbers of motorhomes using island ferry routes has shot up nearly 10-fold over the

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last decade and issues associated with motorhomes have been repeatedly brought up.

"There is a lack of suitable sites for them, a lack of waste disposal units and the extra space that they require on the ferries has contributed to the capacity problems we have seen over the summer.

"Motorhomes play an important part in our tourist economy and this should not be about making motorhome visitors feel unwelcome. They are welcome. This is about recognising the pressures created on infrastructure by such a rapid growth in tourism and providing communities with a new source of funding that they can direct as they see fit."

RET bases fares on the cost of travelling the equivalent distance by road and was introduced on the Western Isles, Coll and Tiree in October 2008, cutting fares by up to 55 per cent. It was rolled out to Islay, Colonsay and Gigha in October 2012, to Arran in October 2014 and now covers every route.

But across the network, car traffic has increased by just over 25 per cent which is causing severe problems as locals struggle to book ferries and increased traffic struggles on mainly single track roads.

A Transport Scotland spokesman said: "We are mindful of the increased demands on ferry services given the affordability of travel following the full roll out of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) in the Western Isles.

"Along with operators, we will continue to monitor Scotland's ferry services and frequently review service provision to and from the islands, including all options in regard to demand management measures."

A Western Isles Council spokesman said: "This may be something worth considering and it would certainly be welcome to have additional money available to improve infrastructure in the islands although it would have to be demonstrated to be cost effective."

Herald Thursday. There was a further article and leader comment on Saturday.

The debate about visitor numbers, which started this summer with reports of visitors "swamping" Skye and the North West Coast, has moved to the Outer Hebrides and the current focus is on "motorhomes". However, unlike in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park where the numbers of visitors are treated as a problem, in the West the increase in visitors is generally seen as a good thing. The challenge, as Alasdair Allan the local MSP said, is that infrastructure has been unable to keep up with demand. In suggesting that a levy be imposed on campervans to fund the infrastructure, he has opened up the debate. The Herald, at the end of their leader on Saturday, reflecting on that debate concluded, rightly I believe: "Getting the infrastructure right is the solution: who pays for it is the problem".

What the Herald failed to say was that if our National Parks had been working and being doing the job they were set up to do, they would now be providing a model of how to do this. Moreover, the case for further National Parks, including that mooted for Harris, would be unanswerable.

Unfortunately, there is almost nothing that people on Skye and in the Outer Hebrides can learn at present from our existing National Parks. Both seem keener to ban visitors than welcome them. The Cairngorms National Park Authority has suggested byelaws to restrict access could be used to allow

the An Camas Mor development to go ahead ([see here](#)), while the constant refrain of LLTNPA Chief Executive Gordon Watson over the last year when asked to justify the camping byelaws has been that the numbers stopping off in campervans and tents are too great. The LLTNPA's original provision for campervans under their camping permit system was a measly 30 places, with not a single campervan allowed at their new Loch Chon campsite despite all the parking space there. The LLTNPA's attempt to limit the number of campervans has now fallen apart because of the legal right people have to sleep in vehicles by the road but this has left a policy vacuum.

The policy vacuum provides an opportunity for the LLTNPA to change direction. Instead of trying to stop and control visitors, they should be focussing on what infrastructure is needed to support them. There was no open discussion of this at the Board Meeting earlier this month, although a reference in the Your Park update report that staff were looking to upgrade facilities at Firkin Point and Inveruglas suggests they may now be moving in the right direction.

The basic elements of the infrastructure the LLTNPA needs to provide for campervans should be quite obvious – chemical disposal points, places to leave rubbish and drinking water. When asked for a list of chemical disposal points in the National Park earlier this year, the LLTNPA knew of none outside formal campsites ([see here](#)) and could not even say which campsites had chemical disposal points. The LLTNPA needs to start acknowledging that the lack of facilities for campervans and the lack of public information about this as a problem and also that it has the primary responsibility to sort this out.

The contrast in levels of understanding and understanding between the LLTNPA and the west is striking. Alasdair Allan MSP was able, without apparent difficulty, to identify the lack of facilities, chemical disposal points and capacity on ferries as a challenge. Imagine what the Western Isles could have learned if the National Park had installed chemical and waste disposal points for campervans at the toilet facilities along the A82, (Luss, Firkin, Inveruglas, Crianlarich, Tyndrum) and made these available 24 hours a day. Imagine too what the Western Isles could have learned if the LLTNPA had used its large communications and marketing team (there are at least 8 staff) to engage with campervanners about the infrastructure they would like to see in place and then disseminated the results across Scotland? That could have informed provision of infrastructure everywhere but instead the LLTNPA uses that team to produce glossy materials telling people what they are not allowed to do and where they cannot go.

To take the contrast further, tourism chiefs on the Western Isles have criticised Mr Allan's proposals for a ferry tax on motorhomes because it might put people off visiting. In the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park tourism businesses piled in to support the byelaws banning visitors in the mistaken belief that you could force people to use commercial sites. Funny how all those free marketeers want to constrain choice. A study by Outer Hebrides Tourism has found that people in motorhomes, who are not forced to go anywhere in the Western Isles, on average spend £500 per visit. Both the tourism chiefs and Mr Allan know that the increased number of visitors in motorhomes is good, the debate is

just about how to fund the infrastructure and whether tourism taxes would put off tourists. The contrast with the LLTNPA is that in all the papers that were developed to try and justify banning campers and campervanners, there was no tourism impact development and never once did the LLTNPA consider the impact on the local economy. The LLTNPA should acknowledge in their report to Ministers on the byelaws in December that this was a mistake as has been their attempt to limit the numbers of tents and caravans to 300 (which was an arbitrary figure which has never been justified).

The final contrast between the west and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park about the infrastructure debate is the level of political involvement. Its not just Alasdair Allan that is involved, Kate Forbes the Highland MSP has facilitated meetings on Skye with local councillors and the tourism minister to discuss what needs to be done to support visitors ([see here](#)). In the Saturday Herald Leader of the Western Isles Council, Roddie Mackay, was quoted as saying *“The council is exploring all options that could increase investment in infrastructure required as a result of the undoubted success of RET (the Road Equivalent Tariff which has reduced ferry charges) and tourism”*. Contrast this with the LLTNPA where local MSPs and councillors, including those on the LLTNPA Board, have been notable for their silence on the need for improved infrastructure and investment.

A recent example of this political silence came at the LLTNPA Board Meeting last week when a Board Member referred to visits from large cruise liners which come to the Clyde and then send busloads of passengers to Luss. This was interesting – same issue as in the Hebrides – and helps to explain why visitor infrastructure at Luss is creaking. Not one idea was proposed however on how to rise to this challenge and opportunity. Instead, there was a bizarre discussion about how difficult it was to get agreement from Luss Estates, the Park and the local Council about who should pick up litter where around the Luss carpark.

What needs to happen

Our National Parks should be aspiring to provide models of excellence for how to support visitors, not ban them, and focus the resources which they have, which are far greater than are available on the west coast, on getting infrastructure right.

As part of this the LLTNPA should be committing to develop a proper plan for the infrastructure needed to support campervans in the first year of the forthcoming National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23. This should include a commitment to engage openly people using campervans and local communities to the right type of infrastructure and in what places. Some of this should be easy, for example adapting existing facilities, some more challenging, for example installing new public toilets and disposal points (eg at the carpark at the foot of the Cobbler). I will consider how this could be funded in a future post.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
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Author

nickkempe

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