

Covid-19 and the unfolding countryside tourism disaster – £10 million needed now.

Description

Having argued last week ([see here](#)) that the Scottish Government could lift the shutdown of self-catering accommodation and its advice not to travel further than 5 miles, its announcement on Wednesday ([see here](#)) that this would now happen on 3rd July was a step in the right direction. Neither restriction has been necessary for weeks now. The risks of transmitting Covid-19 outdoors or in self-catering accommodation are both very low and there has been no scientific rationale for these restrictions since the first few weeks of the lockdown.

If the opening of the much higher risk indoor venues which is due to start just a week later, from 10th July, results in further outbreaks of Covid-19, it is very important that the unjustifiable restrictions on outdoor recreation and travel are not re-introduced. Any future lockdowns need to be far more proportionate and targeted at preventing people gathering indoors and close together in groups outside.

The issue that now needs to be addressed is that the number of people wanting to visit Scotland's countryside over the summer is likely to be higher than ever before. Unfortunately government appears completely unprepared and no body more so than the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority. This post takes a look at what is likely to happen over the next few weeks and what needs to be done.

The likely surge in visitors to Scotland's countryside

Thursday saw the start of the school holidays in Glasgow. Normally thousands of families would be heading abroad before the English school holidays start. They have nowhere to go. Glasgow's parks were heaving until the rain today. Already many families have decided to ignore Scottish Government advice not to travel more than five miles and decided to head out into the countryside for the day. On 3rd July more families and people who are still observing the Scottish Government's advice not to travel, will also start to go out to the countryside. Unless the weather intervenes, this will result in a higher number of day visits to the countryside than ever before.

Most people also want some sort of holiday and, if flights abroad don't re-start (as seems likely), families who are constrained by school holidays in ways that other people aren't, will be likely to take them in Scotland.

The potential demand will be affected by a number of factors but can be estimated from past data. The most recent tourism statistics ([see here](#)) show that in Scotland in 2018 there were around 16 million overnight visitors, who stayed for 65.4 million nights, and a further 153 million day trips. Most of these visitors are from Scotland and the UK. Unsurprisingly, the relative spend of international tourists

(who are more likely to do expensive things like stay in Edinburgh or go deer stalking), is greater:

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Overall Tourism Summary: Visits, Nights and Spend – Value and Percent Change

Country of Residence	Visits	
	000s	% Change 2017/18
Scotland	5,788	+8%
England	5,751	-5%
Wales	264	+22%
Total GB Overnight Tourism	11,803	+1%
Northern Ireland Overnight	221	+26%
International Overnight	3,538	+10%
Total Overnight Tourism	15,562	+3%
Total Day Tourism	137,800*	-9%
Grand Total	153,362	-8%

Across the UK there are 72.6m trips abroad at an average 9.8 nights each year. If apportioned by Scotland's share of the UK population, 8.2%, that makes just under 6 million trips abroad or c55 million nights away. If even half of those people were now as a result of Covid-19 to decide to holiday in Scotland, the number of domestic overnight stays would almost treble. Add a similar increase in demand from the rest of the UK and it's obvious that increased "staycations" will vastly outnumber the loss of visitors from abroad.

This potential increase in demand could be slightly offset by fear, a reluctance from some people to leave home. This was recorded in the most recent visitor market surveys from early June ([see here](#)):

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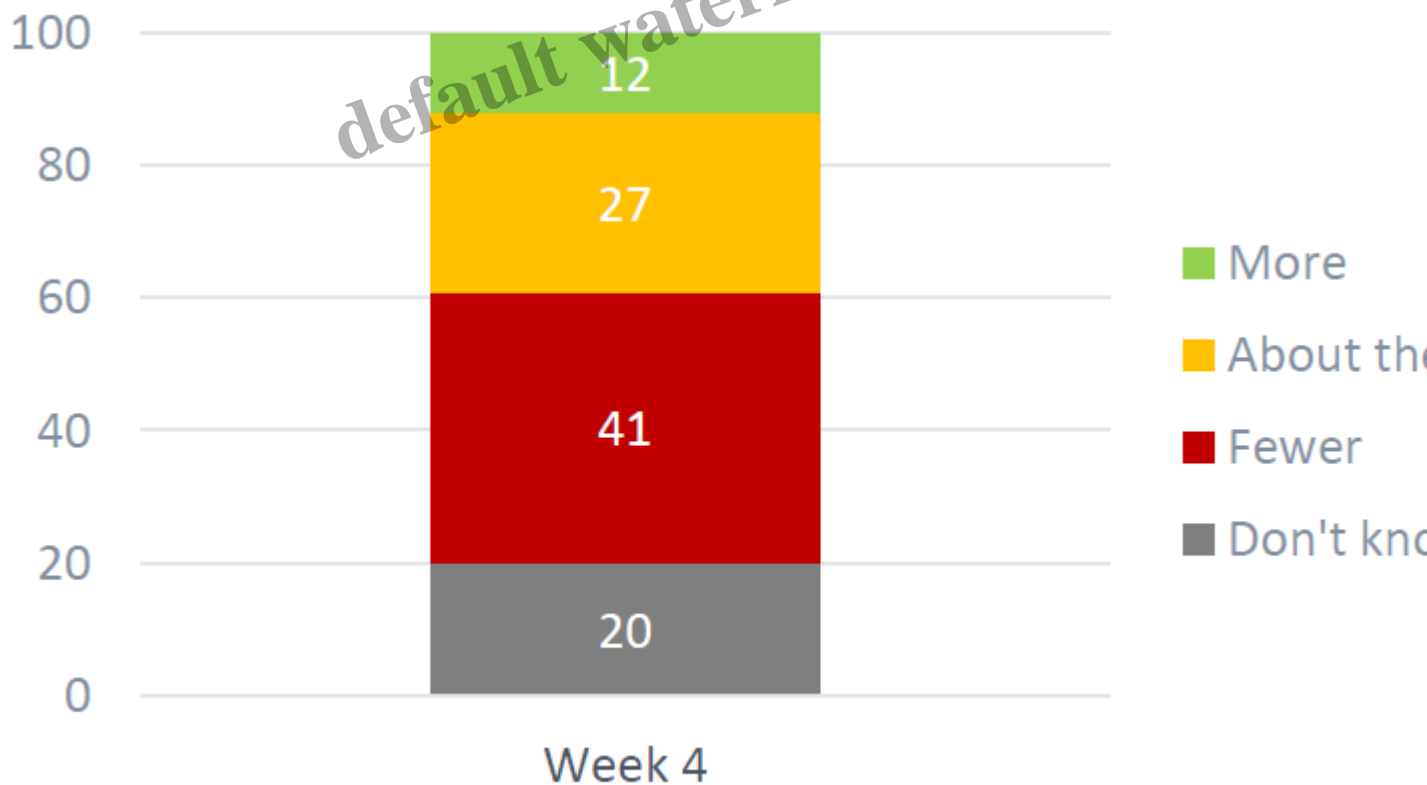
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Anticipated number of U.K. trips th

- Compared to normal, U.K. adults anticipate taking fewer short breaks over the rest of 2020.
- This proportion is virtually unchanged from previous weeks.

Figure 10. Number of UK short breaks (1-3 nights) over the rest of this year compared to normal, Percentage Week 4, UK



Yesterday, however, booking agencies recorded their highest number of bookings for self-catering accommodation ever. This turnaround may be linked to the finding in the surveys which showed that people felt far more confident about taking holidays if they involved being outdoors:

Table 3. Top line Metrics – Specific short break and holiday plans

<u>Key Metrics</u>	
Leading England destination likely to stay in between June - Sept	S
Main type of destination likely to stay in between June - Sept	C
Main accommodation type likely to stay in between June - Sept	C

Table 4. Top line Metrics – Broader leisure activity

<u>Key Metrics</u>	
Place/activity generating highest engagement compared to normal	C
Place/activity generating lowest engagement compared to normal	P a

People know outdoors is safer and are making plans based on that. The implications are that people are far more likely to want to visit the countryside than the towns and, just as importantly, more people will want to stay outside, camping and campervanning. What appears to have changed in the last month is that people now realise that self-catering, because it is self-contained, is also safe. Whether bookings in hotels, which employ far more people, picks up remains to be seen.

The demand for camping is likely to be increased further because of the economic hardship caused by the coronavirus. For many people camping will be the only affordable option.

If the numbers of Covid-19 cases continue to drop, attitudes may change further, but at present the surveys confirm that the UK tour industry, with older people coached from hotel to hotel and attraction to attraction, is unlikely to get going anytime soon and any recovery will be based on the great outdoors. This has massive implications for the tourism industry but also for the management of the countryside.

The likely impact of this surge to the countryside

At present many car parks and toilets in the places that people are most likely to go for day trips remain closed. The problem is particularly acute in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park where all National Park toilets and car parks remain officially closed and where Stirling Council has renewed its closure of the Rowardennan and Bracklinn Falls roads until Thursday 16th July. This concentrates people in even fewer places without appropriate facilities.

Even where a car park has been opened, capacity is insufficient:

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Road by Ben A'an car park 20th June (photo from facebook). People had removed the tape from the car park so this was the over-spill.

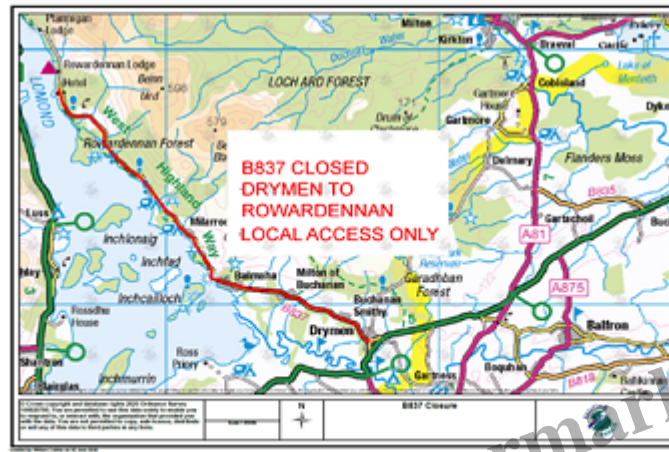
The number of people at Ben A'an is likely to have been increased due to the closure of the car park at Balmaha and the road to Rowardennan.

UPDATED: Emergency Road Closure: B837, Drymen to Rowardennan

The B837 road has been closed since Friday 5th June. This closure will continue until Thursday 16th July from Drymen to Rowardennan.

This closure is for the purposes of public safety.

Please Note: Access will be maintained for locals, buses and emergency services.



Stirling Council's decision to shut the road to Rowardennan effectively denies people the right to walk up Ben Lomond

Social media forums are awash at present with questions from people asking where to go and good places to try out hill walking for the first time. The suggestions that tend to come back involve places Conic Hill, Ben Venue, Ben A'an and Tinto. With access to Conic Hill almost impossible, it's not surprising that pressure has increased even further at places like Ben A An.

Last updated: 25 June 2020 - 5:55pm

Current closures

- > Please stay local to visit our forests and land.
- > Our forests remain open to those who can travel to them without a car.
- > All car parks, mountain bike trails, visitor centres, cafés, toilets and other visitor facilities remain closed.
- > GoApe treetop adventure sites at Glentress and Aberfoyle, as well as Nevis Range Mountain Experience remain closed.

The closure of Forest and Land Scotland car parks has made the situation even worse. A little birdy, however, now tells me that some are quietly re-opening

Unsurprisingly, the three big issues are the same as they have been since the creation of the National

Park, parking, toileting and litter and these issues are creating concerns in local communities and an element of backlash. Thankfully, some organisations have now written to the Scottish Government about the impending disaster:

Destination National Park Group and the Friends of Loch Lomond describe visitors going to the toilet on public beaches, in woodlands and in local residents' gardens; dangerous roadside parking and tailbacks in towns and villages where the car parks have remained closed; and littering at a scale not seen in the national park for many years.

The letter goes on:

“*We would earnestly ask for your assistance in encouraging public sector bodies to start quietly re-opening their car park and toilet facilities to help ease the very real problems being encountered on the ground which are impacting adversely on the health and wellbeing of local residents and visitors.”*

With the five-mile limit lifting on 3 July, these concerns are only likely to get worse if car parks and toilet facilities remain closed.

From Guardian, 26th June. See also
<https://www.thenational.scot/news/18540806.loch-lomond-locals-issue-toilets-plea-scottish-government/>

Unfortunately it appears that the LLTNPA, which lost all capacity to act independently of the Scottish Government years ago, will not do anything to prevent these issues until given the go-ahead by Scottish Ministers. If Scottish Ministers wanted to be helpful, therefore, the best thing they could do is tell public authorities that they should start re-opening car park and toilets now.

There is now very little time to prepare for the 3rd July when the number of people wanting to visit the countryside is likely to be higher than ever before. At the online LLTNPA Board meeting ten days ago there were a couple of references to the possibility of increased demand but no consideration of how great this might be or what might need to be done to meet this. No-one suggested estimating the total costs and approaching the Scottish Government for help.

Previous research would have provided a good starting point for discussion:



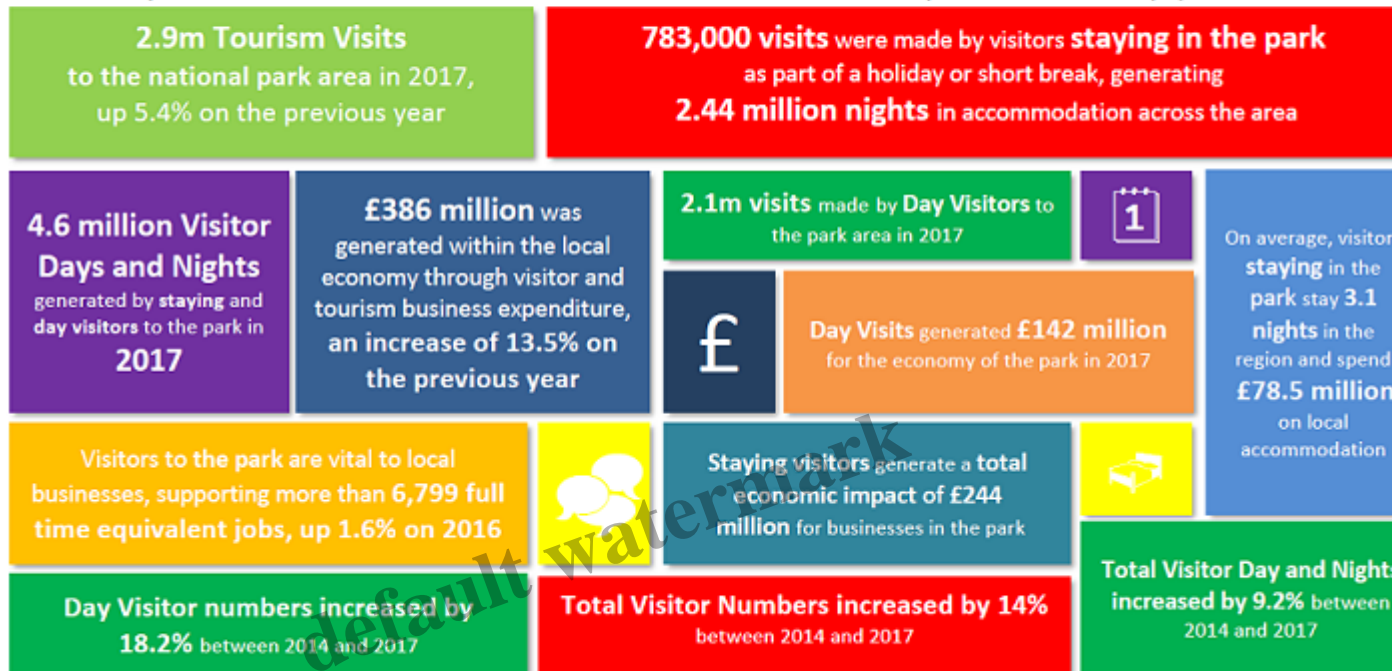
Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park

STEAM Tourism Economic Impacts
2017 Report
Narrative Summary



Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park's Visitor Economy 2017

This is a summary of the tourism trends research undertaken for Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park by Global Tourism Solutions (UK) Ltd.



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<https://www.lochlomond-trossachs.org/park-authority/publications/tourism-economic-impact-2017-lochlomond-trossachs-national-park-authority/>

So what happens if the number of day visitors and overnight visitors in the National Park double, from 4.6 million to 9.2 million days and nights, with most of this concentrated in the next few months? And what happens if within this, as seems likely, the demand for camping and campervanning trebles?

Shortcomings in current capacity

Over the past four years I have blogged on numerous occasions (some links below) about the deficiency in visitor infrastructure in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park and the systematic failure of the LLTNPA to address the issues. Grossly inadequate provision of visitor infrastructure is now going to come home to roost (and will be replicated to varying extents across Scotland):.

- Insufficient public toilets across the National Park ([see here](#)). The lack of capacity shortages will be made worse by the need to close the toilets frequently to allow regular cleaning.
- The lack of chemical disposal points for campervans ([see here](#)). There is just one public disposal point at Tarbet

- Absence of litter bins in large parts of the National Park and lack of staff to clear up litter where it does occur ([see here](#)). People are less likely to litter in places that are kept litter-free
- Absence of mechanisms to manage high levels of traffic, e.g on east Loch Lomond, and chaotic regimes for car parking, with a charging free for all ([see here](#)). Traffic will be made worse because of the limitations on anyone using public transport at present even where it does exist.
- Lack of campsites and inappropriate and insufficient camping permit areas within the camping management zones ([see here](#)). The shortage of places will be made worse by the requirement to put physical distancing measures in place. Parking chaos

Even if ALL current capacity is re-opened by the 3rd July, it will be insufficient to cope. That, however, is not going to happen because the upgrade work for the toilets at Firkin Point and Balmaha was suspended during the lock down and they remain out of commission.

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11. Proposed Site Solutions

Table 1 – Proposed Site Facilities (see site maps for detail)

	Toilets	Improve Car Parking	BBQ & Picnic Site	Recycling & Waste Point	Bin
Glenoglehead	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loch Lairig Cheile	No	No	No	No	No
Loch Earn North (4 sites)	Yes (1 site)	Yes	Yes	Yes (1 site)	Yes
Loch Earn South (5 sites)	Yes (1 site)	Yes	Yes	Yes (1 site)	Yes
Inverlochlarig	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Loch Lubnaig North	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loch Lubnaig South	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Kilmahog	No	Yes	No	No	No
Loch Venachar North	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loch Venachar South	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Extract from Five Lochs Visitor Management Plan

The reason that the LLTNPA is in this situation is because of its failing as a National Park, particularly over the last six years. In 2012, led by Grant Moir, now Chief Executive of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, the LLTNPA produced a plan to address some of the gaps in visitor infrastructure in the Trossachs, a first step towards developing such plans elsewhere. The plan was not perfect but it was far ahead of anything that had been done before and contained concrete proposals:

Out of the 6 new public toilets proposed for the Trossachs, only one, at Loch Lubnaig has been delivered. Had those toilets and other visitor facilities been in place, as intended, the LLTNPA would have been in a reasonable position to respond to a surge in visitors. Instead, Gordon Watson, now Chief Executive, abandoned the plan without any discussion at the Board. Board Members like Tory Councillor Martin Earl, now locally elected member for Callander, who had been involved in the plan never protested publicly. It's his constituents that now face the brunt of that failure.

Instead of developing infrastructure for all visitors, the LLTNPA decided to target informal camping. It presented camping as the root of all visitor problems across the National Park and, after manipulating the public consultation, introduced the camping byelaws around all the most popular lochs. The byelaws were approved by Scottish Ministers on the basis that there would be a significant increase in camping provision. That too, has now been abandoned ([see here](#)), with only the campsites at Loch Chon and Loch Achray, c50 places in all, to show for it. Over a thousand campsite places have been lost since the LLTNPA has been created. The consequences of the LLTNPA's camping failures are now going to be exposed as never before.

What needs to be done?



The solutions to the immediate problems faced by the National Park are quite simple and could be applied across Scotland, but they need urgent action and investment now:

- Install portaloos in all the most popular visitor locations that lack public toilets and add portaloos to the places (like Luss) which lack sufficient capacity
- Create temporary campsites and places for campervans to stop off, as happens in the English National Parks. All that is needed is portaloos, some mobile washing facilities and a water supply. The Woodland Trust for example at Glen Finglas offered the use of a field for such purposes but this was rejected by "can't do" National Park officials. The LLTNPA should be encouraging bids from farmers and other landowners to do this now.
- Double the number of permits available under the camping byelaws or, even better, suspend them for the rest of the summer and free up the Ranger Service to do useful things instead of checking permits
- Install traffic management systems to help people as they have done in the Lake District. There is no reason why we shouldn't have an app to do this across Scotland


Beech Hill, Windermere



 Not very busy


Take Your Litter Home.  No Overnight Stays or Camping . No Fires 

 This is a pay and display car park  Please pay using contactless payment. Public toilets here are currently closed.

Fell Foot, Windemere



 Pre-book only

Please park responsibly. Please respect social distancing <- 2 metres ->  

 To book your tickets click [here](#).



Laybys on West shore of Windermere, near Harrowslack

 Not very busy

Please park responsibly. Please respect social distancing <- 2 metres ->  

High Dam, near Finsthwaite

 Not very busy

 When this car park is full, try the Stott Park Bobbin Mill Car Park.  Do not park in passing places or narrow the road in any way.

Farmer and Emergency Access Required 24/7.  This is a pay and display car park 

Please pay using contactless payment.

Extract from Lake District app last week

- Ensure LLTNPA Countryside Rangers are placed in visitor hotspots, like Balmaha and Luss, so they can assist the police to manage traffic, help people disperse into the countryside to stop overcrowding (and the risk of virus transmission) and nip any emerging problems in the bud. The Cairngorms National Park Authority has taken on seven new Rangers to help meet demand.
- Enhance the capacity of other Ranger and visitor management services. The National Trust for Scotland, which owns Ben Lomond, announced last week it was having to make 3/4 of it

countryside Rangers redundant ([see here for excellent statement from Scottish Countryside Rangers Association](#)). Forest and Land Scotland, the largest landowner in the National Park, has been steadily cutting back on its visitor services. Such services will be needed as never before.

- Create additional temporary parking capacity in fields.
- Re-focus the large LLTNPA communications team on promoting alternative destinations and routes to the public, as is happening in the Lake District National Park, to help reduce traffic congestion and prevent overcrowding. There is plenty of space in the National Park and the rest of Scotland, unlike in England where there are no access rights and space is constrained, hence the crowded Dorset beaches. The challenge in Scotland is most people have only heard about popular places and they need to be helped to disperse through the countryside.
- Install litter bins in every layby and every popular stopping off point and empty them regularly. All the evidence shows that if litter bins are there, people will use them. Unfortunately the last LLTNPA Board Meeting was obsessed with how they could get people to take their litter home (and avoid all costs). It doesn't work. Most people deposit litter in bins where they are available or will carry it out when away from the public road, it's where there is no provision that the problems start. The Recycling facilities promised in the 5 Lochs Plan have never been delivered.

Paying for it all

Set aside the misuse of resources that has taken place over the last few years, even if the LLTNPA had achieved what it was set up to do, it would now be facing problems. In other Public Authorities the position is far worse, with Councils facing financial meltdown. Highland Council, the top rural tourist destination, now has a £96.9m deficit as a result of Covid-19 ([see here](#)). In that situation, there is no way they can invest in the facilities and resources that are needed to manage the visitor surge over the summer. The Scottish Government therefore needs to step in with an emergency funding package.

How much is required is not that difficult to work out:

- £1000 a week would pay for a cluster of 6 portaloos, at c£240 for the hire plus £100 per day to allow for staff to cover and clean as per infection prevention requirements. That comes to £16k for 4 months July-Oct. 200 such clusters across Scotland would cost £3.2m.
- Additional cleaning for 200? existing public toilets at £100 a day would cost £2.4m.
- 1000 additional litter bins at c£100 would cost £1m. Much of the cost of emptying them could be met if included in regular litter collection rounds but,
- Costs of additional collections in visitor hotspots and litter picking need to be estimated. £2m?
- Additional Rangers (and saving jobs of Rangers being made redundant) c£11k for four months. 200 Rangers would cost £2.2m
- Costs of temporary campsites should be met by campsite fees

This very rough estimate comes to a total additional cost of c£10m. Even if underestimated by 50%, £20 million is not a lot of money to prevent a countryside disaster. That would come to less than £4 a head for everyone living in Scotland.

In the longer term we need to invest far more than £20m in green infrastructure in the countryside, as Helen Todd, Campaigns and Policy Manager for Ramblers Scotland, has recently argued ([see here](#)). The summer surge in visitors is, for example, likely to put our footpath network under pressure as never before and expose the failings of our inadequate system of core paths ([see here](#)). Had the Scottish Government put a £2 a night tourist tax into place ([see here](#)), as happens in other countries,

a £20m emergency investment, and much of the longer term investment could have paid for itself. In the absence of an equitable and fair mechanism for getting visitors to contribute to the costs of infrastructure in the countryside (and punitive car park charges are not the way to do this [see here](#)), the Scottish Government should stump up the cash now. Scotland's countryside and people living in rural areas deserve no less.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. camping
2. Litter
3. LLTNPA
4. Scottish Government
5. Tourism
6. visitor management

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