

## Austerity and its consequences for the enjoyment of the countryside – the Pentlands Regional Park

### Description



Donations from car parking have been used to fund infrastructure improvements in the Pentlands Regional Park

In September I visited the Pentlands Regional Park twice and was quite concerned about how access was being managed in response to the influx of people into the countryside.





People were being kept out, perhaps necessarily, but with no alternatives offered

Parking was restricted, toilets closed and there was a proliferation of “no” signs ([see here](#)). Apart from some quite helpful signage about social distancing and one way systems from the car parks, little was doing to help people. I commented how Regional Parks in Scotland were being slowly strangled ([see here](#)).

To their credit, what remains of the Pentlands Regional Park Authority (RPRPA) has responded to the predicament of having too few resources to manage visitors effectively by developing proposals for new visitor infrastructure and to address funding shortfalls ([see here](#)):

Over recent months and years PHRP has suffered from irresponsible wild

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camping, antisocial behaviour and a significant rise in car park usage, causing problem parking in surrounding areas. We are proposing a series of actions to improve the management of these issues:

- Enhanced traffic and parking facilities / controls at the four main car parks
- Development of active-travel alternatives
- Creation of Warden position with formalised camping area and toilets at Harlaw
- Provision of improved toilet facilities
- Introduction of parking charges in order that we can improve the care of Park infrastructure and recreation management

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PRPA are now consulting publicly on their proposals until 4th December ([online survey here](#)). This is very welcome and contrasts with the way the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) have arrived at similar decisions. The LLTNPA, for example, never consulted publicly on their plans – now three years behind schedule – to introduce car parking charges. The LLTNPA refuses to record its meetings to allow more people to see what it is up too, while the PRPA meeting that agreed to the consultation is available as a webcast ([see here](#)). While long, at over 1 hour 40 mins, the webcast is worth dipping into to see very different views being expressed and see the pressures the Regional Park is under (including from billionaire landowner Alistair Salvesen and the local National Farmer's Union rep). Again this is unlike in the LLTNPA where, even when Board Members ask questions and raise issues, they invariably end up rubber stamping the recommendations of staff. Here is a Regional Park Authority, starved of funds, showing the way to a much better funded National Park Authority.

I also liked the openness of staff. They said it straight, that the problems of the Regional Park stem from cuts in funding from Edinburgh City Council and the other member councils. When people started in their thousands to visit the countryside after release of lockdown the PRPA had only enough resource to pay for one Ranger to be on at weekends and totally insufficient resources to empty the overflowing bins. They ended up having to call the police in to help manage the issues – the wrong solution. The scale of the problem is illustrated by staff conducting an access audit a few years ago and identifying the need for £2-3m investment. Nothing happened, mainly it seems because the national lottery had run out of funds.

The Scottish Government, however, has created its very own rural lottery, in the form of the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund ([see here](#)):



## What is the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund?

The increasing popularity of outstanding scenic areas stimulated by marketing successes such as the North Coast 500 and the rise in popularity of the motorhome sector has led to rapid increases in visitor numbers. This has resulted in some areas, at certain times of the year, experiencing pressure on infrastructure and negative impacts on some local communities.

On 10 October 2017 the First Minister announced a £6 million Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) to address some of these concerns and a further £3 million has been announced by the Scottish Government for a third round of funding in 2020.

Administered by VisitScotland, the third round will seek to build on the momentum generated by the first two rounds of funds to create a strategic network of facilities which will meet visitor and community needs as the industry moves into the recovery phase of the [National Action Plan](#). RTIF will provide leverage for additional and focused investment, stimulate collaboration and support the transition of Scotland to a low carbon economy.

The idea that £6m was sufficient to address the cumulative lack of investment in Scotland's rural tourism infrastructure was head in the sands stuff, designed to distract from the real issues, among which is why Visit Scotland spends huge sums of money marketing Scotland (over £40m a year) while investing almost nothing in facilities to support tourism. The RTIF has been topped up this year but, as Councillors in the Highlands have recently observed ([see here](#)), the funding is not even enough to address the pressing issues there and Councils have no alternatives as the Scottish Government hold all the purse strings.

It is within this context that PRPA staff have submitted their bid to the RTIF, with no time because of the deadlines to consult properly beforehand. The whole process is very time-consuming and staff stated the competition will be fierce. Large amounts of what capacity there remains to manage visitors in the countryside is now wasted chasing grants.

The PRPA's proposals for capital investment to improve parking provision, increase the number of public toilets, create a new camping area and improve path links to car parks generally appear sensible.



Most of the car park

proposals, with the exception of Threipmuir, involve improving existing layouts rather than increasing capacity. As the PRPA acknowledged the fundamental issue that needs to be addressed is how to enable people to access the Regional Park by public transport.



It was interesting to see the proposals for zero-discharge waterless toilets, a more permanent solution to the mobile toilets advocated on parkswatch ([see here](#)).

While there will be debate about the detail, the need for capital investment is not the main issue, even if the Deputy Convener of the PRPA questioned if anything would “work”. The main issue, I believe, is the ongoing lack of revenue funding. To address this the PRPA is proposing to introduce charges for using the new/upgraded facilities: toilet charges to cover their operation and car park charges to bring revenue into the Regional Park, for example to pay for additional Rangers.

The implications and potential consequences are wide-ranging. To work, people need to be forced to use the car parks, which means lots of double yellow lines and clearway orders in the surrounding

areas. These would then need to be enforced, a cost for someone else. Local residents from Balerno raised the issue of why they should be charged for accessing what is effectively their local greenspace at Harlaw. If local residents get season passes that effectively is a large chunk of the revenue lost. The proposal to outsource the collection of charges, again more expense, had not been thought through. That this is not simple is suggested by the fact that three years later the LLTNPA's much vaunted Automatic Number Plate Recognition system is still not in place. In sum there are strong reasons to believe that the cost of introducing car park charges, might result in very little if any net benefits. Unfortunately, following the steps of the LLTNPA, the PRPA appears to have made no attempt at a cost benefit analysis.

Possibly the reason for this is the PRPA staff cannot see any other options. They know that as long as their member Councils are on their knees financially, they won't get any more funding. Facing financial collapse, they have been driven to suggest that those enjoying the Regional Park should be forced to pay for it. Austerity has been used to extend the scope of commercialisation to include our rights to enjoy the countryside. That fits with the neo-liberal world view that the state should provide as little as possible. The iniquitous impact of this was encapsulated by one attendee at the meeting who suggested car park charges should be increased to £10 in order to sort out who really wants to visit.

In a rational world, where people were allowed to consider solutions to problem that were not based on neo-liberal ideology it would be much simpler and fairer to fund bodies with responsibility for managing the countryside so they could do their job properly, without having to fight for pitiful amounts of grant funding or charge for access. Unless and until the Scottish Government recognise the need for both significant capital investment and revenue funding to manage visitor impacts in the countryside, the problems we saw this summer will continue. When it considers the results of its consultation, the PRPA should be brave enough to develop a plan which sets out the resources it really needs. It should then inform the Scottish Government about this so they can no longer hide behind the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund.

## **Category**

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
2. National Parks

## **Tags**

1. Camping bye laws
2. visitor management

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