

Scrutiny of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill
Local Government Housing and Planning Committee
Community Meeting - Aviemore Youth Hub
Monday 2 October 2023 10.30 to 12.15

The Participation and Communities Team organised a community meeting in Aviemore on behalf of the Local Government Housing and Planning Committee.

Thank you to everyone who attended and to Voluntary Action Badenoch and Strathspey for their support and advice in reaching the local community and advising on a suitable venue.

People who took part

9 people attended the meeting from the local community.

People attending represented: accommodation providers, Aviemore & Vicinity Community Council, business owners and employers, Cairngorms Business Partnership, Cairngorms Housing Partnership, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Grantown Business Association, Grantown Initiative, Grantown Museum Heritage Trust, Growbiz, local residents, Kingussie Development Trust, Newtonmore Business Association, Newtonmore & Badenoch & Heritage, Tomintoul & Glenlivet Development Trust.

Members of the Committee attending

Ariane Burgess MSP, Convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, Ivan McKee MSP, Member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

Scottish Parliament Staff

Natalie Giblin, Committee Assistant, Alan Hunter, Assistant Clerk, Greig Liddell, Senior Researcher, Kate Smith, Community Participation Specialist

The meeting started with a short presentation from Greig Liddell from the Scottish Parliament Information Service (SPICe) on the proposed Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill.

Meeting Notes

The discussion followed the 7 key points of the Bill. The following notes summarise the key points that were raised in the meeting.

1. The power for local authorities to charge a Visitor Levy

People could see the benefits in a levy but raised the following concerns:

Lack of trust in the Local Authority to administer

One of the main points that was raised in the meeting was concern about the lack of trust in the local authority and concern about the ability of the local authority to manage a levy and what the collection mechanisms would be.

Greater impact on small businesses

People asked how a large resort would compare to smaller business in how and what they charge for. For example, if a resort includes in its 'accommodation' charge use of a swimming pool and facilities, this is not separated out. There needs to be transparency about the amount that is taxable and the amount that is being taxed. There is a big concern over smaller organisations and how that will work.

Addressing the impact of tourism

One person said, *The biggest issue for the Cairngorm community is 'dirty camping', tents pitched close to the road, and motorhomes. There were 100 vehicles from Glenmore to the car park to Cairngorm on a Sunday morning in early September. It would be good if the levy reduced the burden on the local economy to manage. These cars pay nothing and contribute nothing and are taking away from the visitor experience.*

On a positive note, people felt that if there is a levy introduced in some areas and not in others it might reduce the burden on the busier areas. It might reduce demand on some parts of park. But it is complex and very fragmented.

Interaction between different authorities

There was concern about how a levy might work in Cairngorm National Park when there are 5 different local authorities. Each local authority could take different percentage.

Transparency and local control

Frustration was expressed that *it is a tax over which we don't have any say until it's a foregone conclusion*. People said that they did not feel that it was comparable to European taxes. *They (visitor levy's) are local, small scale and on the spot. Further there is nothing in the legislation which makes the local authority spend the revenue raised in Aviemore, in Aviemore if they raise it there.*

The impact of increased regulation

There was concern about the impact of Short-Term Lets legislation, that it is an increased burden and that the area will lose accommodation providers. Time should be allowed for this to 'bed in' before introducing new regulations.

2. Impact on accommodation providers

Increased administration burden and prices

Concern was expressed about the impact on small accommodation and community tourism providers (Hostels, campsites, B&B caravans, boat moorings).

As a community hostel provider, the additional administration is a high burden. We are low cost, and this will put up our costs. Anything that adds to our capacity such as doing these returns is an issue. We have high volume but are low cost. A percentage charge is good because it keeps us competitive, but we have a high volume. We are trying to streamline our admin but there are new challenges.

We need to understand impact on accommodation providers – we need to walk through process, software updates, and the impact on businesses covering more than one local authority area.

VAT

People were concerned about the administration burden, particularly in relation to VAT.

Many small businesses deliberately stay just beneath the VAT threshold so don't have to make quarterly returns. A concern amongst the group was that this increase charge could take people over the VAT threshold which they very carefully manage.

VAT and income tax could be a problem. Closing over winter and quarterly returns are a problem. Small businesses owned and operated by a same person, such as older people. The short-term licensing has been mentally draining.'

For anyone that trades close to the VAT threshold if you go over by 1% you have to pay 20% back to the VAT. You may have to cancel bookings to take you back below.

Wild camping and motorhomes

Could there be a potential increase in wild camping and motorhomes not using campsites and not addressing but increasing the current issue. There was concern that levy proceeds could be spent on dealing with issues caused by wild campers. Motor homes and wild campers being charged a levy on a site but not in the wild.

People questioned if there are other technologies that could be used – *an opportunity to catch people as they come in, record their number. We are potentially storing up a problem if we don't look at that*

It may increase dirty camping. And campsite revenue could be far less. Biggest issue in Aviemore is this exact issue. – Are there other opportunities such as in Canada the Banff National Park highway 1 – a number plate charge.

Consider other ways of charging a visitor levy

Our research suggests on a third of a visitor spend is on accommodation. We should look in the round such as transport.

3. Types of overnight accommodation

Accommodation that includes other services.

People were concerned about how you would break down serviced accommodation. There could be an argument that the room size is not a big part of the cost. Larger places which are all inclusive could end up with a smaller accommodation charge. For example, breakfast, sport and leisure facilities etc.

This could be the same for areas such as outdoor centres, school groups. What is catering, what is an activity etc.

Impact on international tourism

People asked what the effect would be on international tourism. *Scotland is the second most expensive destination in the world. Could an additional levy have a negative impact on tourist numbers?*

4. The rate of the Visitor Levy

Concern about lack of upper limit on rate and that each council can charge different percentage rates

There is no cap on rate – rumours of council saying 5% but what's to stop them saying 10%. Could have more impact.

We need clarification on when the local authority consults –We need to work together. If this has negative impact how quickly can we react and we need to have notice.

People also asked about business travellers. They will be taxed but won't see benefits of leisure investment.

5. When & where the Visitor Levy could apply?

Impact on current visitor donation systems

Concern that charging a levy may make community donations go down. Aviemore public toilets have a donation/cost. Other Community Development Trusts may have other things in place or be planning them. Will people not want to donate. People felt that other community owned assets may suffer.

People shared examples of community tourism services introduced:

Aviemore public toilets are operated by Highland Council and Highland Council has invested in Glenmore two new toilets. Huge investment. That is a voluntary contribution. Disparity within an area such as Strath trying to provide services.

Other examples included:

- *Grantown Development Trust who owns local toilets which require a lot of resource and an ongoing budget.*
- *Fairy pools car park £25,000 to maintain. Want to stop dirty camping.*
- *Grantown Development Trust has had a waste disposal installed.*
- *Bowling club – massive community asset – relatively small investment big community asset.*

6. Requirement to consult on the introduction of a Visitor Levy

There was a concern regarding whether a consultation would genuinely listen to people and act on their feedback. And if people would want to take part in another consultation.

Would it be nuanced enough. Business are sore after STL – There is a lack of trust in councils to get it right.

Something as simple as having the same HMRC system, ending with 30% of STL are going under the radar. (as in not licensed).

Where do community councils come in. No obligation for consultation with your local population. Consulting is good but no obligation to act on the consultation. Nothing to say it is listened to. Trust issue with LAs. Takes away from the local demographic.

How would a consultation make sure voices were heard. Not every area has a Community Council and then other community organisations don't have same powers.

People are tired of consultations – how will they identify where they spend the money. Some communities more proactive than others. Volunteer fatigues is massive.

7. Money raised should be spent on services used by tourists.

People felt that there needs to be a clear and transparent way of deciding how and where the money raised should be spent. There was concern generally on how that area of spend will be decided. Suggestions were made that it could be spent in areas of need where revenue is needed and not necessarily where the highest numbers of tourists visit. And could try to address a better distribution of visitors.

Money should be directed on areas that have already been agreed, park partnership plan that has been consulted on and agree by Scottish Ministers.

Money raised in Aviemore does not need to spent in Aviemore because other areas more in need. But would not want it spent in Inverness on flowers.

Will the money be ringfenced and how do communities have a say

If you raise taxes in a specific area and then will it be ring fenced for that area?

Where do we as community or businesses entities get to have a formal say?

People said:

The local community is being proactive – but it is killing people doing that level of support and volunteering

The local authority may spend money on things on they already spend on.

Local decision making

There is an assumption that local authorities will spend the money – there should be a mechanism for national park to access the funds. People would feel more confident if the national park was in charge of spending the money.

It would be good if we can spread the income throughout the Strath and enhance the attraction for visitors Aviemore is capacity.

There was a view that decisions should be made at as local a level as possible. Some were content that the local authority would decide where the money was spent.

People said that it needs to be clearer how the money should be spent it needs to be more nuanced and localised.

Needs to be a lot stronger and clarified.

You can't do a cost benefit analysis when it's not known what it will be spent on.