

Visitor travel plans for countryside leisure destinations

In the UK travel plans are now well developed as a concept for schools and employers to help reduce congestion and emissions and provide health benefits for students and employees. A number of individuals are also consulting specialists on how to reduce their car dependency. In comparison, work on travel to countryside leisure destinations is much less developed. This report looks at the particular problems and challenges facing rural leisure destinations and suggests processes that can help develop and deliver visitor travel plans.

The car is the overwhelmingly favoured method of transport for rural leisure visits and encouraging people to change is a challenge. To date most visitor travel plans have focused on developing and promoting new travel opportunities rather than changing existing travel behaviour. However, this may increase overall visitor numbers without reducing the problems of car traffic and although the social and economic objectives may be being met, the environmental ones may not be.

What was done

A brief literature review of available studies and reports of visitor travel plans in the UK was undertaken. As a result of this, a rationale was formulated which is intended to develop the visitor travel plan process. Building on the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies, the report suggests the need for a more rigorous approach, to ensure objectives were being met, and that there was clear and effective communication with target audiences at every stage of the process.

Results and conclusions

The study argues that a visitor travel plan should form an integral part of a management plan for rural leisure destinations with significant numbers of visitors. There are three major reasons for this:

- **Environmental** - to help to mitigate the impacts of unrestricted car usage to and within that destination, in particular to protected and historic landscapes and Nature Reserves.
- **Social** - to ensure equality of opportunity for all, especially target groups within key catchment communities, so that those without access to their own transport have equal opportunity of access.
- **Economic** - by supporting more sustainable forms of tourism by increasing the number of visitors staying longer in a locality and using local services including local public transport to the benefit of the local community and local economy.

A visitor travel plan should follow a clear process. It must begin by bringing all stakeholders together, as well as local representatives of relevant regional and national agencies, into a formal partnership. It is also necessary to appoint a full or part time project champion to drive the plan and its implementation forward.

Other key stages include the creation of a vision, clear objectives, and the targets required to meet those objectives. This should lead to a series of agreed and properly funded action points.

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Communication with stakeholders and client groups through targeted marketing is essential at all stages of the process, as is monitoring both to demonstrate value for money and to create a feedback loop to make the plan more effective in meeting its targets.

A good visitor travel plan is a continuous process, and will need regular revision and development (probably on a three year cycle) to meet changing economic and social circumstances.

Natural England's viewpoint

Natural England believes visitor travel plans are an essential tool in addressing the impacts which arise from car-based leisure travel and in seeking to provide visitors with a wider range of more environmentally sustainable travel options. It's important to note that the guidance can be applied to a range of situations and types of countryside destination and that it can be used by a variety of organisations from small tourism enterprises through to large countryside or environmental organisations. This guidance supplements Natural England's own internal guidance on the development and production of visitor travel plans for the National Nature Reserves under its management control.

Selected references

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Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR022 - *Visitor Travel Plans for Countryside Leisure Destinations*.

Contact us

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Keywords

Leisure, National Parks, tourism, transport, travel plans.

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