Enhanced Sustainable Travel Provision

April 2021

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1.   Purpose

1.1   This discussion paper intends to provide an overview of the visitor transport systems failure which has resulted in car dependency for visitors wishing to enjoy Scotland's rural landscapes. The consequence of this failure is high and ever increasing car volumes which in turn bring high emissions, congestion, visitor management pressures and a non-inclusive recreational opportunity.

1.2   The interlinked impacts of Covid-19 and car dependency across rural areas in relation to our climate, health, biodiversity and economic emergencies are a challenge to understand and fully consider. Car dependency trends across rural visitor hot-spots, which have been exacerbated by Covid-19, are having a clear and acute impact across all stakeholder interests however the challenge can at times appear overwhelming due to car dominance, layers of policy and breadth of stakeholders.

1.3   We intend to highlight some key systemic issues, raise the transport policy gaps around rural visitor hotspots and offer some suggestions which could help deliver modal shift across these iconic and popular destinations.

2. National Policy Context

2.1 There has been a widely welcomed clear shift in national policy towards fairness, inclusion and the urgent challenges presented by the climate, health and biodiversity emergencies.

2.2 The Climate Change Act 2019 and the updated Climate Change Plan set a strong national ambition for net zero by 2045 and transport is one of the central pillars. Predictably reduced independent car dependency and use features strongly.

2.3 The new National Transport Strategy (NTS2) re-affirms the transport hierarchy and we have witnessed significant jumps in funding over the last 10 years for active travel for functional daily journeys. However with this funding context daily journeys are constrained to repeat trips by the same individuals and do not absorb daily journeys enjoyed by ever-changing visitors to a location.

2.4 Both National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) and the ongoing Strategic Transport Project Review (STPR2) have excellent aspirations and clearly align with NTS2 however neither are currently nimble enough to shift with the "journey flip" that Covid-19 has accelerated. They remain focused on urban journeys, rural to urban commuting or essential lifeline trips. The need to address the significant volume of rural visitor hotspot journeys for leisure or recreation falls through the policy gaps.

2.5 Locations such as Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park are estimated to receive 7M visitor trips a year with 85% of those estimated to be by car. Popular destinations such as the Pentland Hills, Cairngorms National Park and Glencoe and Glen Nevis show similar behaviours. The volume of these journeys and the potential broader benefits that a wider reduction in car dependency could bring merits a clearer position in national transport policies. Particularly with the Covid-19 "journey flip" the UK is seeing with a reduction in commuting pressures and a comparable increase in recreation and leisure pressures. This is not expected to revert back post pandemic.

2.6 Transport partners are hopeful that the new Scottish Transport Act also offers and opportunity for positive change around governance and levers which can create modal shift.

3. More People Bring More Cars?

3.1 Scot Gov and Transport Scotland Reports state that if we continue as we are now, forecasts suggest a 40% increase in vehicular travel by 2037. STPR2 looks further into Covid-19 trends and confirms that national weekend traffic was up 26% on pre lockdown levels.

3.2 These statistics back up what has been seen on the ground at rural visitor hotspots where traffic congestion and visitor management pressures have reached new levels and brought significant costs to the public purse through enforcement and emergency infrastructure development in an effort to prevent chaotic and dangerous parking.

3.3 NPF4 talks of carrying capacities of rural areas but it's important to note that, bar a few exceptions, that **carrying capacity is around cars and not people**. Huge strides have been made over the years to promote the health benefits of visits to Scotland's inspiring landscapes, the outdoor recreation and tourism sectors have rightly celebrated the duel benefits that more and more visits bring to visitors health and the local and national visitor economies.

3.4 Even pre Covid-19 NatureScot research showed a jump in visits to the outdoors; "while the percentage of the population reporting taking any visits to the outdoors increased from 79% in 2006 to 85% in 2019/20, the proportion taking visits frequently increased by a larger degree, from 44% reporting taking visits at least once a week in 2006 to 63% in 2019/20. Most of this growth in participation has taken place since 2012."

3.5 This again chimes with some visitor hotspot path data which has shown a jump in numbers of people enjoying iconic hills such as Conic Hill or Ben A'an over the last 10 years from approximately 25,000 a year to in excess of 100,000. At these remote locations sustainable or active travel are not a viable options so these new visits are largely being made by independent car. Based on an accepted pre Covid-19 average of 2.4 people per car we could estimate that each hill is generating in excess of 40,000 car journeys a year.

3.6 Whether the jump in outdoor visits across the country is the "Instagram affect", improved general awareness of opportunities, destination marketing or a general shift in behaviour there are obvious societal benefits which should be celebrated. However whilst no competitive public transport alternative exists, the consequence is what we have seen this year with car parks and roads full from early morning and frustrations in all quarters running high.

3.7 During these exceptional times we of course cannot promote shared public transport to the degree we would want to, however even if that tool were available the services simply do not exist around rural visitor hotspots to the extent that they present a viable option to anyone with access to a car. Our transport frameworks were understandably built upon provision of essential life-line services for residents and have not yet been able to pivot to address high volume journey generators related to recreation and leisure. Demand Responsive Transport and the train network have a role to play however to be able to address visitor pressures at key locations and create a coherent multi-modal network improved then targeted bus services are one clear solution.

3.8 Scottish Government clearly see bus a key mechanism to effect modal shift and have committed £500M to the new Bus Partnership Fund which will complement the powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, enabling local authorities to work in partnership to develop and deliver ambitious schemes that incorporate bus priority measures. Although the fund has a focus on addressing congestion the partnership approach is also expected to leverage other bus service improvements to help tackle the climate emergency, reduce private car use and increase bus patronage. To this end the NPA is already working with Stirling Council on their bid.

3.9 The current framework does allow space for bus operators or private enterprises to provide services where they see value, however understandably the targets for those companies are around profits and not modal shift. Those companies are not coming forward in rural visitor hotspots because they would be competing from a clear disadvantage against the independent car which is well served by cheap or free car parks. To choose sustainable transport over the car a visitor needs a competitive option in terms of time, flexibility, cost and experience.

3.10 An additional barrier to private sector intervention is the seasonal nature of our recreation and leisure visits to rural areas. Potential operators raise concerns around "dead time" of winter where buses would not be used and staffing would have to be seasonal. The current system of continued subsidised services through the year would not be appropriate for services based on visitor volumes as one of the goals is reduced emissions. Running empty buses would see wasted subsidies and carbon emissions.

3.11 The illustration below gives a snapshot of the existing mobility system seen in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park during the season:
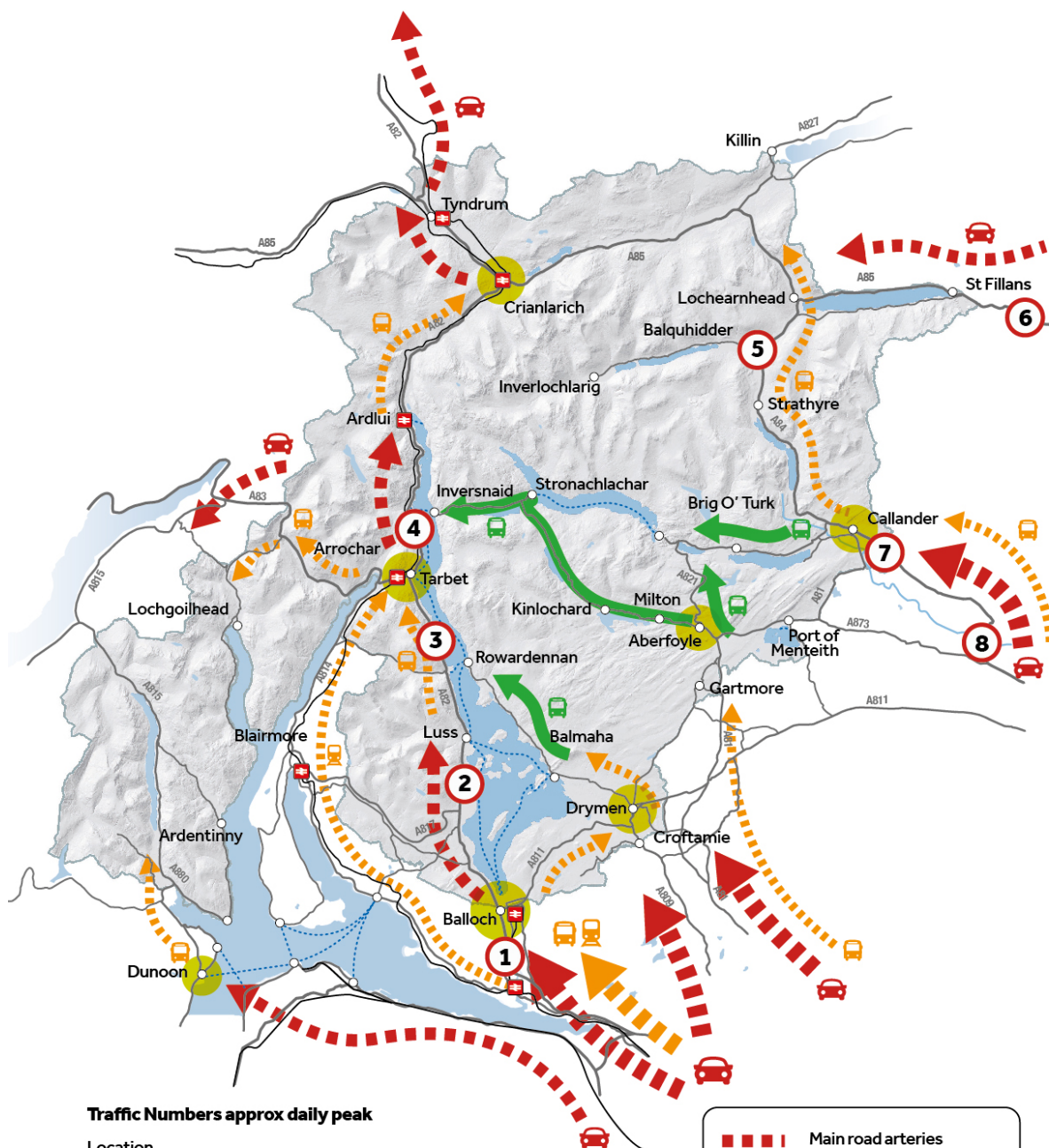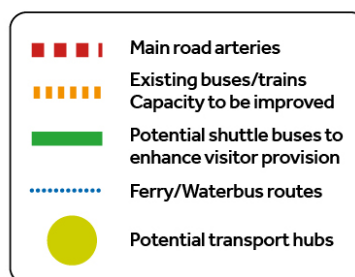
Traffic Numbers approx daily peak

Location		
1	A82 South of Balloch	7,000
2	A82 Arnburn Farm	3,800
3	A82 North of Firkin	2,800
4	A82 Loch Lomond	(4,500)
5	A84 Leitters Farm	1,100
6	A85 West of Comrie	650
7	A84 Easter Coillechat	2,500
8	A84 Doune	3,000

Data source: Transport Scotland May 2020

Legend

- Main road arteries
- Existing buses/trains Capacity to be improved
- Potential shuttle buses to enhance visitor provision
- Ferry/Waterbus routes
- Potential transport hubs

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Ordnance Survey 100031883

4.   More People Bring Benefits

4.1   It is important to focus on the benefits of more people enjoying and valuing the outdoors, the natural environment and Scotland's National Parks.

4.2   Alongside the well-documented benefits to health and local economics, these increased visitor numbers also shift the transport economics. Stakeholders have all shown an interest in a shift towards a new more efficient mobility service if we are able to create a system which "flips" the current model, which a based upon lifeline resident services, to one which is based on journey demand but which subsequently provides improved essential resident lifeline services with reduced subsides.

4.3   A good example of the current system failure is that public transport provision to the rural visitor hotspot destination of Balmaha from Balloch has **more capacity on a November Tuesday morning than a Saturday in the peak of the summer**.

4.4   Connectivity also suffers when mobility systems are purely based on residential need, exemplified by the scenario where **a Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park visitor in Balloch or Drymen wishing to go to Aberfoyle is recommended to go via Glasgow.** DRT can help but it is under-promoted and is unlikely to develop to a level where promotion and capacity can help it deliver significant visitor modal shift at hotspots.

4.5   The connectivity constraint also extends to multi-modal journeys due to the piecemeal nature of provision. Services are created by transport authorities or operators for specific journeys and don't facilitate cross network journeys. Consequently timetables do not dovetail as they could, charging systems are incompatible and the promotion of low carbon travel opportunities or itineraries is near impossible.

4.6   Discussions throughout 2020 have clearly illustrated that stakeholders agree that there are now enough "customers" to justify investment into new transport systems and services which reduce emissions, congestion, and create jobs as part of a green economy.

4.7   Additional benefits of such a shift away from rural visitor car dominance include: an efficient and targeted infrastructure investment around hotspots and transport corridors; a more inclusive transport system; greater opportunities for behaviour change messaging and influence; and assistance of the aspiration for reduced urban car reliance and ownership and consequently modal shifts from visitors in their daily lives no matter where they live.

4.8   Many of the trends highlighted above existed pre Covid-19 and have been accelerated or exacerbated. An entirely new shift has been the loss of international visitors and amongst some of the hardest hit have been Bus Tour Operators who have relied on that market for 80% of their revenue.

These companies are actively looking at how they can pivot to survive, use their fleet of buses and protect the significant staffing levels they have built. There are opportunities for partnerships at visitor hotspots for these fleets and drivers with exceptional tourism expertise to provide for domestic tourism needs whilst we adjust to a new international travel system.

5.   Can we afford to do nothing?

5.1   The recent work by the Committee on Climate Change set out an assumption of a 10% modal shift by 2030 within its net-zero scenario and the Update to the Climate Change Plan commits to **reducing car kilometres by 20% by 2030**.

5.2   If we do nothing we can expect the trends highlighted earlier in this note to continue which could have catastrophic impacts on the National Park landscape and would certainly require unprecedented levels of investment enforcement and regulation which would seem entirely out of sync with national and international policy. The consequences for our rural economies and businesses would also be stark.

5.3   E-vehicles clearly offer part of the solution but simply replacing like for like will simply reduce emissions and not address the clear congestion, visitor management, inclusivity, health and landscape considerations.

5.4   In a potential longer term scenario, where urban car ownership reduces as part of the national shift towards reduced emissions, it is essential that Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park has a fit for purpose transport system that continues to allow visitors to enjoy and value the National Park and support our rural businesses and communities.

6.   Critical friends and leadership

6.1   Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park includes four Local Authorities as Transport Authorities and is also served by three Regional Transport Partnerships, predominantly SPT and Tactran. All clearly see the systems issues around provision and pressures but have goals and outcomes based around a structural focus on essential resident lifeline services. SPT and Tactran are working on their new Regional Transport Strategies over the next year.

6.2   Visitor facing stakeholders including VisitScotland, local Destination Groups, Local authority Economic Development teams, and businesses are acutely aware of the pressures but not sighted on the detailed transport discussions or policies and, particularly now, are focused on business survival.

6.3   Scottish Government and Transport Scotland are clearly setting out policies and funding to effect rear modal shift but more work is required by critical friends to raise the need to address "journey demand" and help reshape a mobility system that delivers in rural areas with high visitor journeys.

6.4 The new <u>National Visitor Management Steering Group</u> and associated deliver groups on Education and Engagement, Infrastructure and Enforcement offer great opportunities for holistic approaches to increasing and emerging issues. A fit for purpose rural transport system is critical to shared aspirations for improved infrastructure and behavioural shifts.

6.5 Looking beyond Scotland, we are not alone, virtually all of the <u>UKs National Parks</u> are wrestling with the same transport challenges as Loch Lomond & The Trossachs. LLTNPA shares experiences across a NP Transport Group and is working particularly closely with <u>Snowdonia National Park</u> who are developing innovative and ambitious mobility service systems with <u>Transport for Wales</u>. The wider Europarc Network for protected landscapes across <u>Europe</u> also has visitor transport and modal shift as an ever increasing priority.

7. Immediate actions and opportunities

7.1 Whilst we work to address the systemic issues described above the NPA and partners are working on a programme of initiatives which could help alleviate some the urgent pressures. This programme includes:

- <u>Behaviour Change Campaign</u> focused on hearts and minds of visitors and positively promoting the individual and wider benefits of sustainable travel decisions.
- <u>Transport focus</u> added to Access & Recreation Team responsibilities
- <u>Visitor Transport Co-ordination</u> – new 1 year post being developed

And when CV19 Guidance allows:

- <u>Digital National Park Journey Planning</u> service which helps visitors find and book multi-modal low-carbon visits across the area.
- <u>Pilot Shuttle Bus Services linked to travel hubs</u> at critical visitor hotspots; Balmaha to Ben Lomond (£2500pw for 30 min service)/Callander to Aberfoyle (£5000pw for 45 min service).

7.2 Further steps could include;

- Investing in <u>strategic travel hub improvements</u> that facilitate better connectivity, park and ride and links to active travel networks
- Development of better <u>online travel information</u> to facilitate planning of visitor itineraries
- Investigate linkages to <u>management of car parking through charging structures</u> and regulation
- Snowdonia style <u>pre-book only car parking</u> to encourage pre planning and behaviour change
- Working with transport authorities to investigate where <u>subsidies could be better structured to support sustainable tourism outcomes</u>

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