

Scrutiny of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill:

Community Engagement

Summary of community engagement to support the Local Government Housing and Planning Committee

Participation and Communities Team

October 2023

The Committee agreed to support online engagement through Your Priorities with community engagement. The online platform was open for submissions from 26th June to 15th September 2023.

The Participation and Communities Team extended an invitation to communities and third sector organisations across Scotland to ask if and how they would like to support their community to engage in scrutiny of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill. As a result, five separate community meetings were held across Scotland with the support of community organisations.

These were hosted in person by Arran Community Voluntary Service, Gairloch Community Council, Loch Goil Community Council, The Ripple Project in Edinburgh and online with the Scottish Community Tourism Network. We are very grateful to everyone who attended and especially to the organisations who hosted and supported each meeting. Further details are in Annexe 1. Individual detailed notes from each meeting were separately uploaded onto the Your Priorities site and can be read here: [Visitor Levy \(Scotland\) Bill - Join the discussion \(parliament.scot\)](https://parliament.scot/your-priorities/visitor-levy-scotland-bill-join-the-discussion)

Who took part?

52 people attended **4 in person meetings** in **Arran, Gairloch and Loch Goil and Edinburgh** and there was **1 online** meeting involving people from a variety of **diverse locations across Scotland; urban and rural (islands and remote rural)**. They included **local residents, community council members, accommodation and community tourism providers and community organisations**.

Key Themes

Each discussion followed the 7 key points of the Bill. The following notes summarise the key themes emerging.

- The power to charge a Visitor Levy
- Impact on accommodation providers
- Types of overnight accommodation included in the Bill
- The rate of the Visitor Levy

- When and where the Visitor Levy could apply
- Requirement to consult on the introduction of a Visitor Levy
- Money raised should be spent on services used by tourists.

The power (for local authorities) to charge a Visitor Levy

55% of people disagreed that local authorities should have the power and 45% agreed

A small majority of people in the community meetings **disagreed** that local authorities should have the power to charge a levy. Many were concerned about the implications and how the local authority would manage it:

Lack of trust and confidence in local authorities

Across all meetings people expressed a lack of trust and confidence in local authorities to administer the scheme. There was concern about how decisions would be made and where money raised would be spent. And how communities might have a voice in that. People asked for local authorities to be open and transparent with some sort of accountability framework built in.

Island challenges

People on islands pointed out the additional challenges that they already face, the additional cost of living on islands (food, fuel) and transport.

Other initiatives

They raised that on some islands like Eigg and Arran voluntary donations are already being made, are working well and it is being decided locally how those funds are spent. They felt other considerations could be made to charge on disembarkation for example.

Some people considered that Business Improvement Districts were a better way to raise funds and improve areas.

Some people felt local authorities should have a Visitor Management Plan before they are allowed to introduce a Visitor Levy.

One person said that they would be pleased to contribute to the local economy

Some people thought the revenue raised might not make a significant difference and the local authority would need to spend it on new staff to manage it

Urban views

In Edinburgh residents were keen that visitors should pay for the services that they are using and mitigate the impact on services like transport, rubbish and roads. Living in an area with a high intensity of tourists significantly impacts on residents. For example: daily transport and having friends and family to visit was a challenge due to the costs of accommodation and people described avoiding the centre of town

due to the impact on mental health (anxiety due to very large numbers of people). 'Could a levy mitigate this by displacing numbers to different areas or at different times of the year?' This was echoed in both rural and urban locations.

Impact on accommodation providers

77% of people disagreed that the responsibility for collecting the levy should lie with accommodation providers and 33% agreed.

Impact on small businesses

In all meetings people were concerned about the impact on small businesses from Short Term Lets regulations, crofting registration (rural), the pandemic, minimum alcohol pricing, inflation (energy), and chronic staff shortages.

Fragile rural economies

In all meetings people described the closure of accommodation in their area and the knock-on impact. They are concerned a visitor levy will put off new providers.

In addition, many people in island and rural communities feel they face extra challenges such as increased costs and transport issues and feel this will add a new challenge to an already fragile economy. People described many smaller businesses run by older people (challenged by new administrative processes) in remote areas where the loss of one or two providers has a big knock-on impact on the local infrastructure. They felt it is hard for people to learn new skills and results in people choosing to close. Some people (in the meetings) said they already decided to close accommodation provision due to the Short Term Lets regulations.

People said the financial memorandum is not detailed enough. It does not explore the impact on fragile areas that depend on tourism.

Increased administrative burden

For small providers (hostels, campsites, B&B caravans) there is a disproportionately increased administration burden and prices, which is time consuming and cannot be absorbed.

People feel it may further drive out community tourism (smaller accommodation providers). *On the Cateran Trail there used to be 12 places to stay now there are 6. It is one of many issues facing accommodation providers, regulations STL and crofting regs, Brexit, shortage of labour and inflation.*

Concern was expressed about the impact on small accommodation and community tourism providers

People described how their social enterprise accommodation is volunteer run and at capacity.

The implications of VAT

In all meetings there was a strong concern that the levy could take some small providers over the VAT threshold.

Incentives over penalties

Some people feel that the penalties are 'draconian' for accommodation providers and out of proportion and would be better focussing on a reward for complying. This was expressed in several the meetings.

Alternative approaches

People suggested other considerations for how a levy could be raised

- Car parks
- Vignette – widow sticker for a 'paid tour/ an e-tag system
- Charge for the A roads
- Ferry charge
- Road tolls, Cruise ships,
- Dismemberment fees for small islands

Types of overnight accommodation

93% of people in the community meetings disagreed with the types of accommodation included in the Bill and 7% agreed.

Include wild camping, campervans, boat moorings and cruise ships

People felt that the Bill should include other types of accommodation, wild camping, campervans, and boat moorings.

In each of the rural meetings people described the problem of wild campers and campervans and the massive impact on the surrounding environment, visitor and public services such as waste and pollution. They pointed out that day trippers and people mooring boats are not providing a contribution.

There was concern that a levy increased costs for camping and could lead to more wild campers, but at the very least does not address the issue.

People said... *it is targeting the wrong visitors. People in accommodation are already paying, what about campers and motor homes.*

In Edinburgh people felt that it should exclude rooms in an occupied flat or home.

People also asked about business travellers. And were concerned that they will be *taxed* but won't see benefits of the leisure investment.

The rate of the Visitor Levy

59% of people in the community meetings agreed with the rate as a percentage charge and 41% disagreed.

For a percentage rate

People felt that this would be more proportionate, fairer and less costly for smaller accommodation providers.

Some people supported the flexibility in the Bill to allow the local authority to set the rate. Others were concerned that this could change across authorities.

For a flat rate

Some participants preferred a flat rate rather than a percentage as this would be easier to administer and clearer for visitors, providers and councils. There was concern about how a percentage would be calculated if accommodation included an evening meal, breakfast, or leisure facilities. Or for outdoor centres. How would larger hotel and leisure complexes manage this compared to a hostel for example.

Concerns about future increases and variations across authorities

There was concern that the rate may change and that different councils could charge different amounts.

When & where the Visitor Levy could apply?

51% of people in the community meetings agreed about where and when a visitor levy could apply 49%.

Transparency about how decisions are made and applied

Across all meetings people said this must be transparent, how it is decided about when and where it is applied.

Some people thought it makes sense to charge in some areas and not in others.

Some people disagree it should be for the whole of the region not just a specific area

There was concern that on a very local levy the local authority may decide to use the levy on events such as music events as a fundraiser. *There is already great pressure on event organisers.*

People asked how a local authority would decide who to prioritise. *How will Highland council for example decide how to allocate funds such a huge geographical area.*

Dispersing visitors to other quieter areas

Some people thought that a variation across the country and or seasonal variations could reduce visitor numbers outside peak seasons. But then others felt it wouldn't be enough of a deterrent. Residents in Edinburgh thought it would be helpful if it

discouraged visitors for example in the festival period and spread visitors over the year.

Requirement to consult on the introduction of a Visitor Levy

100% of people in the community meetings agreed that local authorities should be required to consult.

Local Democratic Decision-Making

In every meeting we heard that the people are very concerned that the local authority will listen to people and act on it. People asked for it to be transparent, with results taken on board and accountability built in.

Some people asked to get the timing of a consultation right. For example, in winter when tourism facilities are not so busy with the tourist season.

People specifically asked that local authorities:

- Ensure they consult with local communities.
- Work with Destination Management groups.
- Give communities ownership over decision making - and can say what the money should be spent on.
- Build in some sort of recourse to ensure that the local authority carries out what is being asked for by the community. Establish a framework that will be used by the local authority to scrutinise the impact, management etc.
- Involve Community Councils by giving them a role in the spend and scrutiny of the assessment.

Money raised should be spent on services used by tourists.

54% of people in the communities meeting disagreed that the money spent on services should be used by tourists and 46% agreed.

Funds should benefit the local community, and services for visitors

What most people did agree on however, in all meetings (urban, rural, remote and islands,) that they felt the resource raised should be used for the benefit of local communities to mitigate the impact of tourism, and visitors – rather than encouraging more tourism. Or for trying to spread the impact of high numbers to other areas.

Funds raised should benefit a whole area, visitors and locals

Should be cross cutting – for tourists, business and community

Funds for infrastructure improvement

People said:

Money should be for greater good not just tourists.

Community councils and community groups should have some decision -making powers.

A great opportunity to make this revenue cover less glamorous areas of tourism work. Waste, toilet facilities, camper van hook ups, parking.

Money should be spent on city infrastructure for all, not just visitors and not on further promotion of tourism but managing the impact.

Frustration over current spend on services and how it would interact

There was frustration in some areas over the current local authority spend and how present services are not adequate to deal with litter and recycling.

There was concern from some about already having very high council taxes (Argyll & Bute) and a feeling that current services are not being delivered. People felt that the revenue should be spent on those services that are currently underfunded. People from a small island said that they felt that the 'council already does very little'.

How will it impact existing voluntary schemes?

People asked *Would it be extra additionality? Arran trust already do this and is careful to not fund what LA is responsible for.*

People were concerned about how communities would access funds if at all

People asked how communities could access the revenue raised and some thought money should be ringfenced. Others expressed concern as some services are already funded by communities and not councils.

It's not always transparent. Already hard to bid for money for community development with very tight deadlines.

How would the community have a say in how it is spent?

What is collected in the area should be spent in the area.

Dispersing the impact of high visitor numbers

In Edinburgh residents asked if the money could be spent on incentivising people to visit other areas of the city.

Take smaller versions of the Xmas market to different areas of Edinburgh.

Annexe 1

Details of Community Meetings

Arran Community Meeting



Hosted by Arran Community Voluntary Service

The Douglas Hotel, Brodick, Arran
Thursday 3 August 9 – 10:30am

7 people attended the meeting

Organisations represented included: North Ayrshire Council/Community, Auchrannie Hotel/ Auchrannie Trust, Lochranza Community Hotel CIC, Arran Dairies, Arran Community Council , Lagg Distillery, VisitArran, Arran Trust.

Scottish Parliament staff: Laura Black, Rachel Hunter, (Participation and Communities Team).

Gairloch Area Community Meeting



Hosted by Gairloch Community Council

Gairloch Community Hall

Wednesday 30th August 7 to 8.30pm

7 people attended – 5 of whom are or were involved in accommodation provision. Some providing accommodation as not their sole interest but a small number of rooms or lets. All came with broad interests and different 'hats' on; community council members (Gairloch CC, Gairloch Area Development Ltd, Wester Loch Ewe, Visit Wester Ross CC) and local residents.

Scottish Parliament staff: Kate Smith (Participation and Communities Team)

Loch Goil Community Meeting



Hosted by Loch Goil Community Council

Lochgoilhead Village Hall

Thursday 31 August 7 to 8.30pm

11 people attended – 5 of whom were accommodation providers. Some providing accommodation as not their sole interest but a small number of rooms or lets. All came with broad interests and different ‘hats on’; Community Council members (Lochgoilhead and Carron Community Council), local residents, volunteers and business including Carrick Farm, Resident, property owner, resident and Cove UK Employee.

Scottish Parliament staff: Kate Smith, (Participation and Communities Team)

Ripple Project Community Meeting



Hosted by the Ripple Project

The Ripple, Restalrig, Edinburgh

The Ripple, side by side with local people, is improving the quality of life for all ages in the community by helping people to help themselves.

13 people attended the meeting

The group included local residents and staff from the Ripple Project.

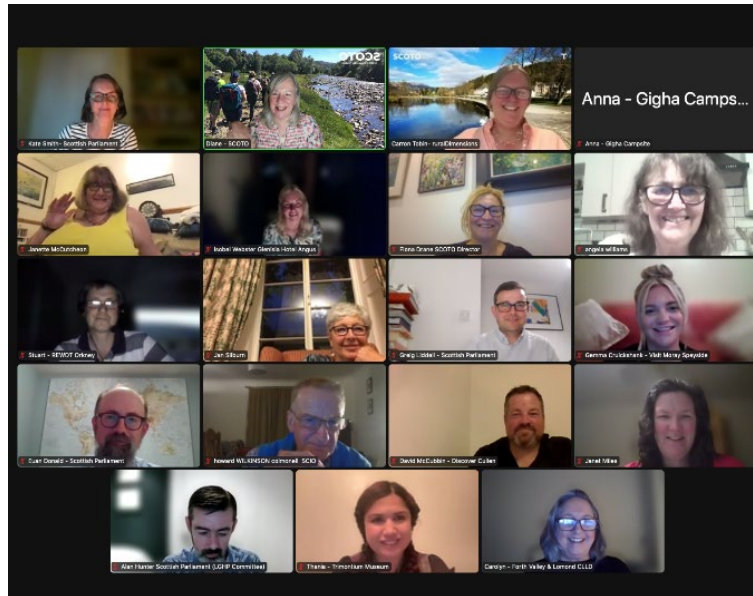
Scottish Parliament staff: Kate Smith, (Participation and Communities Team)

SCOTO Community Tourism Meeting

**Hosted by
Community
Network**
Online on
Thursday 7th
to 8.30pm

14 people
attended the
meeting
Scottish
Tourism
(SCOTO).
attended from
Scotland and

a mix of different backgrounds, all involved in community tourism; community owned and volunteer run hotels and campsites, shops, accommodation providers, community owned islands, community associations and the tourism industry.



**Scottish
Tourism**

Zoom
September 7

(plus 2 staff)
online
hosted by
Community
Network
People
all over
were from a

Organisations and areas represented included: Isle of Eigg, Individual/ Fearn Antiques, Forth Valley Food and Drink C.I.C., Rousay, Egilsay &, Wyre Development Trust, Gairloch & Loch Ewe Action Forum (GALE), Colmonell community association Scio, Glenisla Hotel Angus, Trimontium Trust and Museum, New Galloway Community Enterprises Ltd, Dunkeld and Birnam Community Development Trust, Isle of Gigha Camp and Motorhome Site, The Langholm Initiative - Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, Destination Development and Tourism Consultant, Discover Cullen, Dunkeld, Birnam and District, Community Development Trust, Scoto Director, Ravenspoint, Visit Moray Speyside

Scottish Parliament staff: Natalie Giblin (Committee Assistant), Alan Hunter (Clerk), Greig Liddell (Senior Researcher), Kate Smith, (Participation and Communities Team).