

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



A Report to a meeting of the Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Date of meeting: 9th November 2021

Cabinet Member: Councillor Gareth Wyn Griffith
Councillor Gareth Thomas

Contact Officer: Dafydd Wyn Williams – Head of Environment Department
Sioned Williams – Head of Economy and Community Department

Contact Number: 32371

Subject: Research into the motor homes situation in Gwynedd

THE DECISION SOUGHT

In light of the need to have better control of motor homes, the Cabinet is requested to accept the research in Appendix 1 and approve the following:

- i. Authorise the Head of Environment Department in consultation with the Head of Economy and Community Department, to undertake a pilot project for the use of up to six of the Council's parking sites (or part of the sites) within the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority Area, to provide facilities for motor homes to stay overnight and to include allocation of sites, but subject to securing capital funds and the necessary consents.
 - ii. That a further report on the results of the pilot is presented to the Cabinet within three years.
 - iii. Give consideration to and undertake enforcement measures to accompany the above.
 - iv. Present the research to the Welsh Government and ask them to review the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960.
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THE REASONS WHY A DECISION IS NEEDED

Taking account of the vast numbers of motor home users who have been visiting the County recently and over the past few years, and the concerns raised by the area's communities, it was agreed that it would be useful to carry out some research into the situation in Gwynedd.

The research work has been completed and is included in Appendix 1 of the report, and contains an evidence base that offers a better understanding of the situation locally and further afield. The research also highlights the need for measures to better manage the motor homes sector in the County, and we believe that the decision sought can contribute towards this.

INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The research in Appendix 1 looks at:

- The local situation and provision in Gwynedd
- The planning context, and parking and traffic issues
- The current situation and provision in the UK
- The international situation and provision in other countries
- The needs and tendencies of motor home users
- The views of Gwynedd residents and communities about the motor homes sector
- The situation in Gwynedd 2021
- Findings and ideas in terms of improving the management of motor homes in Gwynedd

Growth in motor home use

1.2 During recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of motor homes registered in Britain by the DVLA. The National Caravan Council recorded a 71% increase in motorhome sales between 2019 and 2020, with reasons relating to Covid and the ability to be self-contained driving this increase.

1.3 We also need to consider the large increase and popularity of converting vans into motor homes. Although many of the vans are self-contained and are insured as a motor home, vans like this are not accounted for as motor homes by the DVLA because their outside appearance is more similar to an ordinary van.

1.4 We note that research conducted in 2019 on motor home visits in the Scottish highlands (the North Coast 500) evidences that visitors travelling in motor homes spend 33% of their holiday expenditure on accommodation, with the remaining 67% on things like food and drink, attractions and local shops.

The current situation in Gwynedd

1.5 In Gwynedd, concerns have been raised in several communities across the county, as an increasing number of motorhome owners decide to stay in 'public' places and on 'public' land, where there is no lawful right to stay in a vehicle overnight.

1.6 STEAM 2019 figures for Gwynedd show that 7.8 million visitors visit the county annually and contribute £1.35 billion to the local economy. The Gwynedd accommodation survey 2018/19 calculated that there are 366 caravan and camping sites in Gwynedd that could provide a service to motor homes. There was an average of 59 pitches for each campsite.

1.7 On the one hand it appears that there is an abundant provision to meet camping needs in Gwynedd. However, we must note that a large number of caravan and camping sites now operate on the sale of seasonal pitches to caravan owners, which means a substantial reduction in the number of touring pitches that are available.

The current planning context

1.8 In terms of the local planning policy context, the most relevant policies to motor homes are the policies relating to touring caravan sites, as they come within the legal definition of what constitutes a caravan. The policy in the Gwynedd Planning Authority area

permits proposals involving touring sites, subject to specific criteria. In the National Park planning authority area, the policies prevent the development of new touring sites, but permit the extension of existing sites subject to specific criteria.

- 1.9 After obtaining legal opinion, and emphasising that each case will need to be assessed on its own merits in terms of fact and degree, there is a strong basis for concluding that the use of land (e.g. public car parks, other lands etc.) for motor homes to stay overnight will generally require planning permission. It also follows that the use would require a site licence under the provisions of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960.

Parking and Traffic Issues

- 1.10 The current situation:
- Motor homes are welcome to park in our car parks where we have not installed height restrictions.
 - Motor homes are required to keep to the parking restrictions
 - No overnight stays are allowed in any vehicle.
- 1.11 Current powers:
- At present, the Council has powers to issue a Penalty Charge Notice to any motorists parking unlawfully under the Traffic Management Act 2004.
 - A 'no overnight camping' clause is part of a legal order in some locations.
 - The Council does not currently have powers to fine motorists who park vehicles overnight in roadside locations.
 - The Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 allows us to introduce restrictions through a Traffic Regulation Order (Permanent), or a Temporary or Experimental Traffic Regulation Order to restrict / prohibit parking.
 - The Legal Department is looking into the possibilities of re-establishing bye-laws that existed in relation to roadside lay-bys to enable them to use enforcement against those staying in them overnight in a motorhome to move on.
 - The Environment Department and Economy Department have already installed 'No overnight camping' signs in many locations where complaints have been received.

Questioning the owners of Caravan and Camping Sites in Gwynedd (April 2021)

- 1.12 As part of the research, an on-line survey was conducted with the owners of caravan and camping sites in Gwynedd. The purpose of the research was to find out more about the county's camping provision, and find out local opinions about the situation.
- 1.13 A total of 153 surveys were returned. 41 surveys had been filled in fully. The following analysis is based on the 41 fully completed surveys, and the main findings are noted below:

Main findings:

- A mainly seasonal provision between April and October is available
- The average number of touring pitches available is 14. This is a much lower figure than the average of 59 pitches calculated through the visitor accommodation research, which suggests that a large number of pitches are used based on seasonal agreements.
- A high occupancy level during the main season, May – September.
- 38 out of the 41 respondents had experienced an increase in the number of motorhome visits over the past five years.

- Around 60% had experienced an increase in the number of motorhome visits in 2020.

Questioning motorhome owners

- 1.14 As part of the research on-line surveys were conducted to target the owners of motorhomes. The purpose of this research was to find out more about owners' travelling tendencies. Owners were targeted through social media networks.
- 1.15 A total of 12,500 surveys were returned, with 8,833 having been completed fully. For the purpose of this research only the fully-completed surveys were used, and the main findings included:

Main findings:

- Regular travellers. 80% travelled between 5 and 10 times a year.
- 95% were self-contained vehicles.
- 52% stayed in one place for 1 or 2 nights only.
- 65% used their vehicles throughout the year.
- 92.2% stated that they would use a provision similar to 'Aire' if it was available.
- The three main needs when travelling on holiday in a motor home were fresh water, being able to dispose of toilet waste, and refuse disposal. Electricity provision was last on the list.
- When on holiday, 68.9% use a mixture of stays in campsites and wild camping.

The needs of visitors travelling in motor homes

- 1.16 Recent research by CAMPRA ("Campaign for Real Aires") summarises the main differences between visitors who travel with a tent / caravan and visitors who travel with motor homes. The main differences in terms of the customs and needs of visitors travelling in motor homes include:
- They prefer locations that are within towns or villages or within walking distance to services such as shops, restaurants etc.
 - They travel all year-round but the stays in one place tend to be for 24 to 48 hours.
 - The motor home is the only vehicle - and they rely on a bicycle, walking and / or public transport.
 - The services they usually need are water, and waste and refuse disposal facilities.
 - Interests include using local restaurants, and visiting town centres and local attractions.
 - They bring some food for the journey and then use local eateries.

Provision for motor homes in the UK and further afield

- 1.17 There are examples of areas in the UK that have adapted or provided parking sites for motor homes, and others have developed full "aires" facilities as can be seen in Europe. Very simply, an "Aire" is a designated overnight parking area to be used by fully self-contained motor homes.
- 1.18 The research highlights that there is no consistency from area to area, and although some local authorities have developed specific plans for motor homes, most authorities continue to deal with motor homes according to the requirements of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960.

- 1.19 In the rest of Europe, sleeping overnight in a motor home is classed as 'parking' and not 'camping', and countries such as France and Germany distinguish between motor home and caravan/tent activity.
- 1.20 In Europe (outside the UK) there is a wide provision of facilities for motor homes. In France, Germany and Italy, "Aire" (France), "Stellplatz" (Germany) or "Sostas" (Italy) facilities can be found in almost all major towns and villages in the country.
- 1.21 The aim is to encourage visitors who are travelling in motor homes to stay in a town or village in order to offer some economic benefit to the local community and gain better control of the sector.

Finding the views of Gwynedd residents and communities

- 1.22 As part of the research, during summer 2021 an on-line consultation was carried out for a six-week period with a survey to find out the opinions of Gwynedd residents. The survey enquired whether or not motor homes were a problem, whether better management of motor homes was needed and how that could be achieved, and whether residents supported the trialling of a facility such as "aires". 4,868 responses were returned with 2,169 completed fully, and the main findings from the fully completed surveys included:
- A high percentage of local residents noted that there were problems in their area because of motor homes. 46.1% noted that they are a problem at certain times e.g. the summer, weekends, and 17.9% noted that they are a problem all year round.
 - The majority of local residents stated that the most suitable solution would be to trial new ideas e.g. a series of 'aires' in more urban sites, using the Council's existing car parks of private businesses (1,599 or 73.7% supported this)
 - 69.2% stated that they would be happy to see the use of car parks in more urban locations being trialled, and overnight parking being permitted for specified periods e.g. 48 hours.

The Situation in Gwynedd 2021

- 1.23 The Council jointly with partners has put measures in place on the ground to try and gain better control of motor homes over the past two years. Section 6 of the research work provides an overview of this.

Main findings of the research

- The motor homes sector has grown more and more in recent years, with trends predicting further growth over the coming years.
- The customs and needs of motor home owners in terms of the way they spend their holiday are different to 'more traditional camping'.
- It appears that the provision available on caravan and camping sites in Gwynedd does not always meet the needs and travelling patterns of motor home owners.
- The majority of caravan and camping sites are open from April to October, and at particular times of the year especially during 2020 it is suggested that there are capacity issues.
- There are examples in Scotland and England of measures that have been put in place to try to meet the needs of motor home users, which often include overnight use of car parks, with relevant restrictions.
- 92.2% of motor homes users stated that they would use a provision similar to 'Aire' if it was available.

- A provision of "Aire" facilities (or similar) has been established in several other European countries, and the aim is to encourage visitors travelling in motor homes to stay in a town or village in order to offer some economic benefit to the local community and gain better control of the sector.
- According to the public consultation, a high percentage recognise problems in their areas because of motor homes, with the majority (73.7%) supporting the idea of trialling facilities similar to "aires".

1.24 The evidence emerging from the research highlights the need to look at possible measures to obtain better control over motor homes in Gwynedd, and includes possible recommendations for trying to achieve this. The evidence shows that, following consultations with the public and the motor homes sector, there is support for trialling a facility similar to "aires", and we believe that this needs to accompany measures relating to management and raising awareness as is noted in the recommendations. It also highlights the need to review the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960, and consider how this sector has subsequently changed.

2. NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

2.1 If the Cabinet agrees with the decision sought, capital investment will be required for trialling the use of up to six of the Council's parking sites (or part of the sites) to provide facilities for motor homes to stay overnight. The investment will be necessary in order to satisfy the requirements in terms of planning, licensing and any other relevant requirements. It is very difficult to put a definite amount on the capital investment that will be required for a maximum of six sites, as it will probably vary from site to site based on what infrastructure and services there are currently on the parking sites, and what is needed as extra to meet planning, licensing and parking requirements etc. As such, we have identified an indicative amount of £90,000 (based on £15,000 per site) and up to £10,000 for professional fees (for applying for planning permission, a site licence etc), which gives an indicative capital investment of £100,000. We may possibly be able to attract grants to help with the capital costs, but we cannot guarantee this at present. The aim therefore is to submit a bid for £100,000 of capital funding to the Council's transformation fund, and should we be successful, these are the next steps, emphasising that the timetable is only indicative:

Stage 1: Work prior to submitting applications (Planning and Licensing) to include meetings and input from the relevant Services – before the end of December 2021

Commission a piece of research on potential sites to assess them for planning, licensing, parking needs and any other needs. The matrix prepared as part of the research work will assist with this in respect of planning, with standard conditions being a consideration for licensing requirements. This will also assist with identifying more accurate costs for the capital investment, which will also be a consideration when identifying up to six sites for the trial and in preparing plans for them.

Stage 2: Submit applications (Planning and Licensing to follow) before the end of February 2022

The applications to be submitted will be based on the work from Stage 1

We note also that work will proceed (as far as possible) with the process of amending / creating the order, subject to securing planning permission, as well as consideration of the additional enforcement measures that may be put in place to accompany the provision of the facilities.

Stage 3: Subject to Stage 2, commission work on the ground for developing the facilities before the end of June 2022

Stage 4: Facility/ies operational – the first to be operational before the end of March 2023

- 2.2 The trialling will not only be an opportunity to assess how the facilities are operating, but it will also help us to identify what the requirements will be in terms of management, maintenance and enforcement, the income generated from the use, and whether or not additional resources are required for the effective operation of the facilities.

VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

The Monitoring Officer:

I can confirm that Legal Services have supported the preparation of this report. Undertaking a pilot appears to be a sensible way of finding a response to the increase in popularity of Motor Homes. I note that comparisons are being drawn with the provision of "Aires" on the continent. Although it can be seen that such arrangement presents an image of possible provision it needs to be borne in mind that the regulatory arrangements in Europe are entirely different to Wales. It is also important to note that we are local planning and caravan site licencing authority. Therefore, there are high expectations in relation to the propriety of our arrangements. However, in general the recommendations are appropriate and in particular I support the call to amend the caravan sites legislation as this also feeds directly into permitted development rights.

Head of Finance Department:

I support the decision being sought, in particular the intention to pilot the use of up to 6 Council parking sites to provide facilities for motor homes to stay overnight. Paragraph 2.1 provides an outline of the capital costs of the pilot, stating that a bid from the Transformation Fund will be required if sources of grant are not available. If bid from the Transformation Fund is submitted, a detailed analysis of the costs will need to be developed and approved."

Appendices

Appendix 1 The Research [DRAFT] that includes 3 appendices.
