

Sustaining North Berwick

Towards a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for East Lothian.

Introduction

Tourism is seen as an important element of East Lothian's economy and the area's popularity reflects the beauty of both the coastline and the hinterland together with its natural environment and wildlife. Golf is also a major attraction.

East Lothian Council's consultation on the challenges surrounding the next Local Development Plan raised questions about tourism and general questions about climate change and nature that have implications for tourism too.

This paper draws on some of the responses made by Sustaining North Berwick to that consultation and is also informed by the Council's draft Local Housing Strategy. It is intended to stimulate discussion and to be developed. It will be submitted to the North Berwick Local Place Plan process.

East Lothian Council's declarations of both Climate and Nature emergencies indicate the urgent need for public bodies, businesses, and communities to focus on sustainability and readiness to address the significant challenges we face.

Given the importance of tourism and its impact on our communities, there is an urgent need to develop a sustainable tourism strategy. Up-to-date data on tourism trends, including the number, occupancy, and broader impact of Short Term Let properties (STLs) is needed to inform this.

What is sustainable tourism?

The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism as:

"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities." <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council considers that sustainable tourism 'refers to sustainable practices in and by the tourism industry'. This involves an aspiration 'to acknowledge all impacts of tourism, both positive and negative. It aims to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the positive ones.' <https://www.gstcouncil.org/what-is-sustainable-tourism/>

Historic Environment Scotland <https://blog.historicenvironment.scot/2021/what-is-sustainable-tourism/> identifies two main goals that sustainable tourism should achieve:

- reduce greenhouse emissions

- benefit local communities and economies

What amounts to ‘sustainable tourism’ may be understood differently according to the perspective of visitors, tourist facility providers, local businesses, and residents. This paper is written primarily from the perspective of local residents concerned about the needs of the environment and committed to promoting sustainable and resilient communities.

What is our vision for sustainable and resilient communities?

Sustainable communities are those which:

- have decarbonised and no longer rely on fossil fuels for energy, moving around or food.
- have strong social networks and mutual support structures.
- have high levels of trust and co-operation developed through friendliness, neighbourliness, caring and a shared sense of purpose.
- live in harmony with nature and promote biodiversity.
- offer affordable homes to attract a range of people who can meet the local skills needs.
- are resilient enough to survive the challenges posed by global heating and changing weather patterns, including events such as ‘the beast from the east’ snowstorm of 2018.

What are the impacts of tourism in East Lothian?

The tourism sector is clearly valued by East Lothian Council as an important part of the local economy. Hotels, Bed & Breakfasts, STLs, Caravan and Camp sites all accommodate visitors.

North Berwick and Dunbar traditionally welcomed high numbers of day visitors who travelled on public transport, benefiting from good train and bus routes from Edinburgh and beyond. This model is very sustainable.

However, many visitors do not travel by public transport choosing motorised transport instead which has consequences that we raise below.

Tourism is evidently double-edged as has been seen elsewhere in Britain such as Cornwall, the Lake District, and parts of Wales.

What are the positive impacts?

Economic benefits – jobs created; income for tourist businesses; spending in restaurants, cafes, and high street shops.

However, the benefits to the local economy are not quantified in so far as there are no data available to the public. Whilst we don't know the extent, there will be significant income that leaves East Lothian for businesses owned beyond our communities.

Moreover, additional jobs tend to be low grade and can be seasonal or intermittent.

What are the negative impacts?

Additional traffic including motorhomes/camper vans

Additional traffic causes congestion, greenhouse gases, air pollution and pressure on parking.

Overnight parking by motor homes/camper vans in residential areas and along the seafront has resulted in problems with human and other waste. The Local Place Plan consultation has demonstrated how strongly local residents feel about this. Parking by motor homes/camper vans at the recreation Ground has prevented regular users of the sports facilities from parking there.

Short Term Lets and second homes

North Berwick is a holiday town, but many of the STLs and second homes have been purchased in very recent years as a capital investment, are operated as a business and provide tourist accommodation for only parts of the year, while removing a home for rent or own forever. Empty properties benefit only the investor. Neither the local community nor the economy benefit from empty houses.

There is an imbalance of STLs compared with homes to rent long term or to buy. The Council's draft Local Housing Strategy acknowledges the impact of STLs in North Berwick in reducing the supply of affordable housing. This leads to critical staff shortages, in essential roles such as social care, retail and hospitality. Ironically, there are times when tourist venues cannot function due to staff shortages.

It makes it harder for local people on low incomes to live in the town and disincentivises those who wish to come to North Berwick.

A high number of short-term lets undermines sustainability and the resilience of social networks when long-term residents find themselves isolated within properties divided into flats where most are second homes or STLs.

The gardens of most sea-front holiday lets have been entirely paved over for ease of maintenance. This undermines biodiversity and sustainable drainage.

The visual impact of bare paved over gardens and the shuttered windows of empty houses detracts from North Berwick's charm.

There is strong evidence that holiday lets fail to manage recycling effectively.

Shoreline and coastal water

Jet skis present a risk to sea creatures and disturbance to beach users.

Camping along the shore poses threats to wildlife.

How can tourism become sustainable and achieve Historic Environment Scotland's goals?

Reduce greenhouse emissions

Transport

East Lothian Council should cease to promote drive destination tourism generally and large diesel vehicles such as motorhomes should not be encouraged.

Public transport should be emphasised & improvements should be campaigned for. Existing train services in East Lothian should be publicised together with Park and Ride facilities.

New bus services in the holiday season should be run to beaches such as Gullane, Yellowcraig and Belhaven from Drem, North Berwick, and Dunbar stations.

The Council should explore alternative places facilities for motorhome stays, including toilet waste disposal, where visitors could leave their vehicles and benefit from the excellent public transport links to North Berwick and Edinburgh.

More active travel routes should be developed including off-road cycle paths and safe walking routes to visitor sites like Tantallon Castle.

Buildings

According to the Passivhaus Trust buildings are 'a significant culprit of carbon emissions – accountable for 35% of total global energy consumption' ¹.

Any new build holiday lets should be as sustainable as possible. Planning permission should only be given to developments of the highest standard. By insisting on the Passivhaus standard, the Council would ensure the delivery of 'net-zero-ready new buildings optimised for a decarbonised grid'.

At the very least, new buildings should be South facing, have PV solar panels, be very well insulated and not be allowed wood burners.

By setting the highest standards, the Council would be offering an example that visitors could follow on their return home!

Benefit local communities and economies

Traffic & parking

¹ https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/what_is_passivhaus.php

All day visitors and motorhomes/camper vans should be discouraged from parking in the town or by the beach in order to avoid additional vehicles driving through the narrow streets making life difficult for pedestrians and reducing air quality.

Day visitors should be directed to car parks on the outskirts of town such as the Law car park which should be extended on the Council owned land.

There should be no overnight parking by motorhomes/camper vans in residential areas or sensitive nature sites including the sea fronts. Motorhomes/camper vans should be encouraged to stay on managed campsites and land should be set aside for extra campsites. 'Wild camping' in motorhomes should be discouraged with measures taken to prevent it.

The number of parking spaces for camper vans/motorhomes at the Recreation Ground should be limited to ensure there is room for local people to park.

Local businesses, especially those benefiting from tourism, could encourage day visitors who arrive by public transport by giving discounts to those who show their train or bus tickets.

Research

The economics of tourism is far from transparent. In order to make better informed decisions, the Council should secure accurate and up-to-date data. This should include research into the relative benefits to the local economy of day visitors and STLs, and should explore how much income leaves East Lothian to STL and other business owners living outside the area.

The Council should commission research on the impact of STLs on not only the local economy, but also community cohesion, and the availability of homes to rent on a long-term basis. This is most pressing in areas like North Berwick where there is a housing crisis caused in part by an imbalance between the number of second/holiday homes and main residences.

Short Term Lets

The Council's policy on short-term lets needs to be sensitive to local circumstances and to be informed by research.

The economic benefits of STLs have been overstated whilst their negative and harmful impact on availability within the long-term rental sector for local people has been underestimated.

The Council should acknowledge the proportion of STLs that are owned by people or businesses outside of East Lothian when calculating the benefit to the local economy.

A planning control area should be implemented in North Berwick urgently to achieve a better balance between residential and business (i.e. holiday lets) use.

A planning condition or legal agreement (as practised by the Duchy of Cornwall) should be put on all new builds requiring them to be used only as a principal residence.

The Council needs to consider how income may be derived from STLs. Owners do not pay Council tax, nor do many pay business rates. The contribution owners of STLs make is modest at best. The Council must be creative in looking at STLs as a source of income.

The Council must acknowledge that each house used for STL purposes, or as a second home is housing stock lost. Housing need is not being met as long as large numbers of houses are being sold to be used as small STL businesses or as second homes. The loss of houses to STL use or second homes is not restricted to small cottages and flats in the older parts of town, there are growing number of houses in recent housing estates and very large flats being used as STLs and second homes.

The licensing scheme for STLs should ensure that proper provision is made for recycling and waste management.

Owners/agents of STLs should encourage visitors to shop locally and buy East Lothian produce, thereby supporting the local economy as well as cutting emissions.

Nature

As access to nature is a major tourist attraction in East Lothian, the Council and tourism industry must maintain essential ecological processes and help to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity, in accordance with the World Tourism Organisation. We need to hear what the Council and providers are doing to support wildlife.

Golf courses should be addressing environmental issues, particularly increasing biodiversity eg. by planting wildflowers on the edge of courses. Clubs could share good practice.

Owners of STLs with gardens that have been paved over should be encouraging biodiversity by greening their area.

Jet skis should not be allowed to operate in the coastal Sites of Special Scientific Interest and RAMSAR bird protection areas in the Firth of Forth.

The Council should halt its practice of allowing new holiday 'pods' in the open countryside which take land away from agriculture and change rural areas.

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