

A response to the consultation document "Snowdonia Green Key Strategy Statement" from the mountaineering club Red Rope

Introduction

Red Rope is a UK-based national mountaineering club with over 400 members. In 2000 it celebrated its 20th anniversary at a party held at the Chamois Hut, Waunfawr.

Throughout its history it has had a strong association with Snowdonia. On formal club trips alone we estimate that members have spent an average of over 400 bed-nights a year in Snowdonia.

As a result of our mountaineering activities we have provided an input into the local economy. In days out on the hills fuel is required for transport and is purchased from local garages. Visits to roadside tea-bars, cafes, restaurants and pubs are an important part of the experience.

Considerable amounts of time and money are spent purchasing outdoor equipment, guidebooks and maps, second-hand books, pictures and posters and food and drink from local shops. All these activities provide an income for the employment of shop staff. The purchase of mountaineering equipment has also proved important in stimulating the development of several internationally known equipment suppliers in the Llanberis area.

At the hut or bunkhouse the rental pays for electricity, bottled gas, the supplied water as well as providing funds for the hut owners to employ local builders for maintenance and alterations.

Our members frequently attend courses run at the numerous outdoor centres such as Plas-y-Brenin, and those course fees pay for the employment of not just the mountain training staff, but also a considerable number of catering, cleaning and administrative staff.

Our club membership represents just under 1% of the registered membership of the British Mountaineering Council, the lead body for mountaineering. We consider the profile of our membership to be similar to the BMC membership at large. Considering that, and as a result of our mountaineering and economic activity in the Snowdonia region, we feel that our opinions are not offered lightly.

Our general response

We welcome any initiative whose aim is to promote the tranquil enjoyment of natural beauty, as well as the introduction of good, affordable, reliable public transport into and within the greater Snowdonia region.

We would also welcome any sensible steps taken to promote economic regeneration within the region. For far too long the area has suffered from chronic levels of unemployment, under-employment, rural poverty and low wages. As a result housing conditions have often been far from satisfactory, and there has been a very significant incentive for young people to leave the area to work in the conurbations.

However, wishing matters could be different is not in itself a recipe for success. The Strategy Document offers many useful suggestions of ways of promoting regeneration, but we believe that it is dangerously flawed in two particular areas.

In 2.8 the document states, in reference to environmental damage and low rates of economic activity, that “The situation is neither environmentally or economically sustainable.” This statement is an assertion, and viewed in any kind of objective light, is inaccurate. It cannot be seriously suggested that Snowdonia faces some kind of ‘environmental wipe-out’ if traffic levels increase by a 15 - 20% within the next twenty years.

However, even if we were to accept this proposition for one moment, the fact is that the proposals would lead to a fleet of buses being consistently driven round Snowdonia. By contrast in the current situation the visitors’ cars drive to a parking point and then do not move until the users’ outdoor activities are over. Cars may in some senses be less efficient than buses but it makes no sense to base a major capital project and a major piece of social engineering on such a marginal improvement.

Neither is evidence produced to demonstrate that indicators of poverty and depopulation are significantly on the increase in the last decade. This contentious statement significantly undermines the credibility of the entire document. Whilst it is undeniable that GDP per head of population in 'some' parts of Snowdonia are lower than other areas, this does not necessarily indicate a problem. The costs of living are also significantly lower and fundamentally the area will always suffer from lower GDP values simply because it is a national park.

Many people have been curious about the real motivation for these proposals and their predecessors. The statement in 2.8 further promotes the widely held view that the only real reason for these proposals is that it would be a creative way of spending money that could become available via EU funding initiatives. If this is the case it would be a grave mistake and the proposals should be withdrawn forthwith.

An alternative motivation may be to desire promote commercial developments. However the infrastructure required to support large-scale commercial developments would be detrimental to the park environment. The wealth of the park is environmental not economic, always has been and should remain so.

It is possible that the authors of these proposals had a more 'altruistic' motivation, regarding the non-spending visitors as a potentially large source of revenue. In fact the most probable outcome of the proposals is that these visitors would be 'tricked' into parting with their money in new developments close to the car parks in the peripheral towns.

The real losers in this scenario are the existing businesses in the heart of the national park. As we point out later, we would also expect a loss of revenue to the core area businesses if there were a decline in active mountaineering. Thus these businesses would lose revenue from both directions, further reducing the income into the core of the area.

The second area of the report that is very disappointing is the lack of explicit acknowledgement of the long-term economic benefit that has been brought to the region via outdoor activities.

The issue here is not that that input has been disregarded. We feel that the failure to acknowledge that input strongly suggests that the impact of the proposed changes on the economics of the mountaineering community have been completely overlooked by the authors of this document.

Here we are not overstating the importance of mountain-related activities in the local economy. Let us take for example mountaineers who are based in London who twenty years ago, without question, would have driven to Snowdonia for a weekend of mountain activity. Now the roads around London and in the Midlands are so congested that the journey takes longer. Cheap air fares are available from airports local to London where short breaks to warm sunny climbing areas are affordable. Without doubt their loyalty to Snowdonia will be strained further if access to mountain activities is affected by ill-conceived parking constraints and transport schemes.

Essentially the point we are making here is that unless care is taken the income locally from mountaineering activities may decline dramatically.

Specific points

Mountaineering activities essentially involve three stages:

- a. Arriving at a point of the road nearest to ones' objective of the day. This must be achieved in a timely manner or the activity becomes pointless.
- b. Undertaking the activities needed to meet the objective. This part is not susceptible to accurate timing, and frequently participants finish this section wet, tired, hungry, thirsty and even in the wrong place.
- c. Recovery from the second stage first by rapidly changing into dry clothes, re-hydrating, snacking etc. before moving off to a place where a proper meal, and, in all probability, some alcoholic drink can be found.

If all the above is to be achieved without the use of a car then the pre-requisites for a public transport scheme to gain the confidence of the mountaineering community are:

- a. An early start to the service. Throughout the year it is not infrequent to start from the road at 6 a.m. If a mountaineer is parked at a gateway she or he might be facing a trip which requires two buses to get to the start point.
- b. A frequency to the service which obviates long waits i.e. 20 minutes maximum. In periods of bad weather longer waits will merely lead to numbers of people requiring treatment for exposure/hypothermia.
- c. A late finish to the service. During the high summer it is not infrequent to come down 'off the hill' after 11 p.m.
- d. Buses that are designed to carry large numbers of rucksacks, tents etc. without compromising access to the bus.
- e. Routes that are designed with mountaineering in mind. In this context we were particularly surprised to see that there was no provision for a circular bus route Llanberis-Capel Curig-Bethesda-Llanberis, or for a circular Llanberis-Waunfawr-Beddgelert-Pen-y-Pass-Llanberis.

Secondly, there are many outlying areas of Snowdonia which would not be significantly touched by the scheme. Some obvious examples are the east-facing valleys above the Conwy such as Cwm Eigiau, Llyn Crafnant and Lynn Geirionydd. Again access to the Moelwyns, either from Blaenau Ffestiniog or Croesor was not discussed. This is not an attempt to provide an extensive list. However as no reliable and frequent bus service is to be provided in those areas then it is only right and proper that the current arrangements for parking continue unchanged, or are reviewed and materially improved.

Thirdly, the proposals to force mountaineers wishing to access the central areas of Snowdonia during the high season onto public transport by preventing day parking will have two significant effects. The first has already been indicated – namely if the bus service is not adequate, then mountaineers will stop coming to Snowdonia. The second is that by limiting parking to two hours maximum the plan will unwittingly increase the amount of traffic through the park by casual visitors, as many of them will be unwilling to pay the charge for such a short stop and instead will drive round and round. On top of that two hours is insufficient time to allow people to walk properly away for the car, so this will lead to additional pressure on particular 'hot-spots' within the park i.e. Cwm Idwal.

What we also found curious is that there were no proposals to limit through traffic through the area – for example a significant proportion of traffic on the A5 is from HGV and cars coming up the A5 on their way to Anglesey and Holyhead. This kind of traffic could be discouraged by diverting it up the Conwy valley. At the same time more tranquillity could be introduced to the mountain areas by deliberately forcing drivers to slow down, i.e. by reducing the width of the road.

Another very significant point which appears to have been overlooked is the impact of building large car parks in the gateway towns. Whilst this might be possible at Portmadoc it scarcely seems credible that there is anywhere in Bethesda where this could be undertaken without having a serious impact on the scenery. We are very concerned that this proposal has not been thought through. It is an integral part of the scheme and if it cannot be achieved the entire project is fatally damaged.

We are also concerned that the number of roadside parking spaces in the ‘core’ area will be reduced before the other measures have been put fully into place and subjected to a period of significant public use.

We fully welcome the proposals to develop the railway infrastructure and a network of cycleways. However it has long been the case that new paths and cycle routes have been needed linking Pen-Y-Grwyd, Pen-Y-Pas and Llanberis avoiding the dangerous roadside, and we were disappointed that there was no proposal for such a development.

On p33 of the document it states “The consultants propose that short-term car parkers at Capel Curig and Beddgelert might be offered discounted or free parking if a certain sum is spent in local shops or food outlets.” We consider this to be a most promising proposal as it provides for a virtuous circle of economic activity, namely:

- a. The driver pays a charge for parking – the council benefits and is able to spend the additional income on local services.
- b. The charge is refunded when a purchase takes place. This purchase and other ones in the same shop would not have taken place without the incentive of the refund.
- c. The shop-keeper is refunded the difference by the council, so has gained trade but is not out of pocket. As not all drivers will claim their refund the council makes a surplus on the parking charges.

However for this scheme to be effective it needs to fulfil two conditions:

- a. Shopkeepers will not participate if reclaiming the refund from the council is a lengthy and difficult process. The great majority of shops in any given area must be participants.
- b. The ‘tariff barrier’ that must be surmounted before the refund is given must not be too high i.e. if the parking charge is £2 the ‘tariff barrier’ should not exceed £3. If, for example, the required minimum spend was instead £10 then many young/poor people would not make purchases. However, it would be preferable if there was no tariff barrier.

There would be some additional benefits, namely:

- a. The area alongside the parking machines could be used to display all the new information that the report describes and more. Listings could be shown of all the local attractions where the parking charge could be redeemed. Local businesses would therefore be able to advertise much more efficiently than they may be able to do currently - reducing their overheads and also reducing the number of visitors driving around aimlessly on the off chance of finding something to do.
- b. Such a system would not require any relocation of existing businesses because visiting patterns should not drastically alter as a result. The increased revenue into the park would be spread according to existing patterns of visitor spend.
- c. The gateway proposals are likely to create visitor hot spots or cold spots. The refunding of parking charges would not have this effect.

According to the projections in the report, the proposals will take between 5-7 years to be fully implemented. This is too long. By contrast, introducing a parking/voucher scheme above could be done much more quickly and at a vastly reduced cost. A sensible strategy would be to introduce this scheme before the huge capital expenditures needed to create the gateway car parks are initiated. The effect of this 'park and purchase' scheme could then be monitored to see if it is producing the expected levels of additional income. If it delivers the desired effect then the rest of the scheme is unnecessary, saving huge sums of money. If the effect is negligible it gives a breathing space in which a new more sophisticated and less damaging development scheme can be developed over a longer timescale. Act in haste, repent in leisure.

Conclusions

It is our considered view that these proposals run the grave risk of significantly reducing the income into the locality from a previously consistent source of income – the mountaineering community.

We are concerned that there is a 'hidden agenda' motivating the delivery of these proposals.

There is much to commend the proposals for the development of bus services, bicycle networks and new rail links. However more thought needs to go into the frequency and the routing of bus services and the type of vehicle used. There is surprise that no controls on through traffic have been proposed. Off-road walking and cycle routes need to be developed to improve safety.

It is not clear that the proposals to develop large car parks at the 'gateway' towns can be achieved without significant environmental damage. The proposed restrictions to parking in the core areas are almost certain to be counterproductive.

Proposals to allow a rebate on parking charges against expenditure in local shops are welcomed.

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