

# Aires in Southern Scotland

## Campervan Tourism in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway



southern uplands partnership  
*living land, living community*



### 1.0 Introduction

The popularity of caravan, campervan and motorhome tourism in the UK offers an opportunity for Southern Scotland. Caravanners, like bikers, are generally well-off and encouraging them to visit the region, by providing suitable overnight stopping places, otherwise known as aires, could bring badly needed economic benefit to rural communities and businesses in the region. This report aims to give an overview of the potential benefits of providing aires in Southern Scotland, take an inventory of current and potential campervan sites in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway and suggest potential ways to move forward from here.

This work has been undertaken by the Southern Uplands Partnership supported by NatureScot, through the Green Recovery Fund.

### 1.1 What are aires?

Campervan stopovers, known as aires, taken from the French “aire de stationnement et service de camping car”, are places where campervans can stop overnight for free or a small fee.. For campervan tourists, aires symbolise the freedom of campervan holidays, offering the flexibility to stop in an area often only available to campervan travellers. For Southern Scotland introducing aires could offer the opportunity to access a large tourist market and bring a much needed economic boost to the area (see below).

There are some subtle differences in what is meant by the terms “campervan”, “caravan” and “motor caravan” that are useful to note. Motor caravans are a class of vehicle recognised by the DVLA and must meet specific criteria and essentially be self-contained vehicles. The word caravan here is taken to mean a vehicle without an engine that can be towed. Campervans we use here to encompass all motorised vehicles that are used for sleeping in. It is becoming increasingly popular for people to convert vans previously used for trade or transport purposes into campervans, which can be considerably cheaper than buying commercially available motor caravans. These may have the same facilities as a motor caravan but may not have the same DVLA class. We use the term campervan in this report to encompass both motor caravans and self-converted vehicles, noting that aires without sanitary facilities will not be suitable for campervans that do not have their own onboard facilities. Towed caravans, due to the large amount of space needed for parking and maneuvering, can generally not be catered for by aires.

Stopover sites in Europe range from the very basic, providing a flat parking area for campervans and a litter bin, to more established aires with services such as water, electricity and toilets. Figure 1 shows an example from France, where aires are numerous and popular.<sup>1</sup> The availability of this parking (there are over 6000 aires in France and around 4000 in Germany) encourages campervan holiday-makers to visit and spend money in local communities, even when there are few or no local privately owned campervan parks. Further details summarising potential aire facilities is given in section 3.0.



Figure 1. Example of a french motorhome aire.

## 1.2 Scope of opportunity for Southern Scotland

Caravan holidays are an important contributor to UK tourism and the wider economy. There are an estimated **550,000 touring caravans and 357,000 DVLA registered motorhomes** currently in the UK.<sup>2</sup> The UK caravan industry contributes in excess of £6 billion a year to the UK economy in vehicle sales, related services and holiday bookings. According to The National Caravan Council, **£2 billion** was spent on caravan holidays across Great Britain in 2016 alone.<sup>3</sup>

For domestic overnight tourism in Scotland, **840,000 trips** were taken by touring caravans (motorhomes or towed) in 2019. These caravan trips equate to **3.54 million nights spent in caravans** with **£139 million spent on these trips** in Scotland alone. For comparison, this is approximately the same number of trips taken to B&B and guest houses in Scotland (900,000 trips in 2019) and represents a larger amount of money spent than on AirBnB trips in Scotland in the same year (£123 million in Scotland in 2019).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://campingcarpark.com/en/>

<sup>2</sup> DVLA June 2020

<sup>3</sup> [www.thencc.org.uk](http://www.thencc.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.visitbritain.org/great-britain-tourism-survey-latest-monthly-overnight-data>

A survey by Campaign for Real Aires UK (CAMPRA)<sup>5</sup> of 8,956 caravan owners in the UK found that on average, caravan tourists spend **£47 per unit per night** on food, drink and tourist attractions. This does not include parking or fuel. Furthermore 87% of those surveyed tour in their caravans all year round presenting an opportunity for maintaining tourism during winter.

With Southern Scotland not only having its own tourist attractions, but also being on-route for anyone travelling from England to the Scottish Highlands, this could represent an excellent opportunity for Southern Scotland to promote itself as a truly campervan friendly UK destination and to tap into this market. By introducing campervan-friendly parking and facilities strategically across the area, money could be brought directly into a range of local communities, from historic attractions like Abbotsford House and the Borders Abbeys, to small villages with a pub or cafe that would benefit from extra clients, to larger towns with local businesses and tourist attractions.

In its 2019 Tourism Sector Policy Paper,<sup>6</sup> the UK government predicted that UK tourism will see a 23% increase in inbound visitors and a 16% increase in domestic tourism by 2025. The paper highlights the need to support this growth with suitable infrastructure. In addition, Campervan tourism has the potential to be influenced *positively* by the COVID-19 pandemic due to a number of factors. With limited options for oversea travel available, domestic tourism will likely increase in the short to mid term. Campervan tourism is an attractive alternative option due to its intrinsic social distancing, safety and the flexibility it offers compared to traditional accommodation options. Furthermore, Brexit means that campervan tourists will be prevented from spending extended periods of time abroad which may lead to an increase in domestic campervan touring.

Left unmanaged this projected increase in campervan tourism has the potential to negatively impact Southern Scotland, its residents, the environment and local businesses through increase in road traffic, parking capacity, noise, litter and competition (addressed further in section 2.4). However, if well managed, this change also represents an huge opportunity for Southern Scotland to attract tourists, gain access to a large market and bring a much needed economic boost to rural communities, local businesses and attractions. Crucially, this could be done with a little effort and modest investment spread out between multiple different stakeholders including owners of parking facilities, such as Forestry and Land Scotland who ran an overnight parking trial in 2020, Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway councils, community groups, tourism boards, business owners and local attractions.

## 2.0 Current Situation

In contrast to other western european countries, the UK has comparatively few aires. The majority of car parks in the UK have rules prohibiting overnight stays or have height barriers preventing most campers from entering. While private caravan sites are common in many places, they tend to be expensive - upwards of £25 per night. This can be frustrating and unnecessary for campervans that are effectively a self-contained home and do not need access to facilities every night. As a result some campers turn to “wild-camping” - finding areas in nature, lay-bys, streets or parking lots without overnight restrictions to park for the night. This lack of parking and facilities results in visitors feeling unwelcome and locals getting frustrated when tourists park on residential streets

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<sup>5</sup> <https://campira.org.uk>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tourism-sector-deal/tourism-sector-deal>

and lanes - which all too often has the counter-productive result of introducing more overnight parking restrictions, rather than addressing the original problem.

Some aires have been created in the UK including: Donaghadee (NI), Canterbury Park and Ride, Helmsley, Skipton, Hawick (see the case study in section 4.0 below), Craven District Council, Lochore Country Park (Fife), Forestry and Land Scotland Stay the Night scheme, Ardglass Harbour, to name a few. But there has yet to be a consistent approach to develop this area as a means of encouraging campervan tourism.

A recent assessment of the current situation in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, Wales and the wider EU can be found in the *Strategy for Sustainable Motorcaravan Tourism in the UK 2021* report recently published by CAMpRA, which can be found in the resources section of their website.<sup>7</sup> The next section of the report will take a closer look at the current situation in the Southern Scotland councils of Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders.

## 2.1 Current Campervan Parking in Southern Scotland

This section of the report aims to take an inventory of current and potential aires in Southern Scotland. This will include:



Current Aires: free or cheap **dedicated** campervan parking.



Existing Parking: locations where overnight parking is not currently prohibited. These sites may be suitable as aire locations.



Privately owned campsites. Ranging in price from £10 upwards.



Restricted sites where parking overnight is prohibited or height barriers are in place.



Locations on the Forestry and Land Scotland Stay the Night scheme.<sup>8</sup>

The places included in this report are gathered from a variety of sources, including the Scottish Borders Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council websites, online parking apps for campers including *Park4Night* and *SearchforSites*, the Carvan Club<sup>9</sup>, the Camping and Caravanning Club<sup>10</sup> and other online resources. It is by no means an exhaustive list. One goal of this report would be to encourage local communities and business owners, who know their local area best, to consider whether they could benefit from introducing an aire and have a suitable space to do so.

## 2.2 Maps

Clicking on the images of the maps will take you to a website where you can explore them in more detail. If that doesn't work, you can follow the hyperlink below each image.

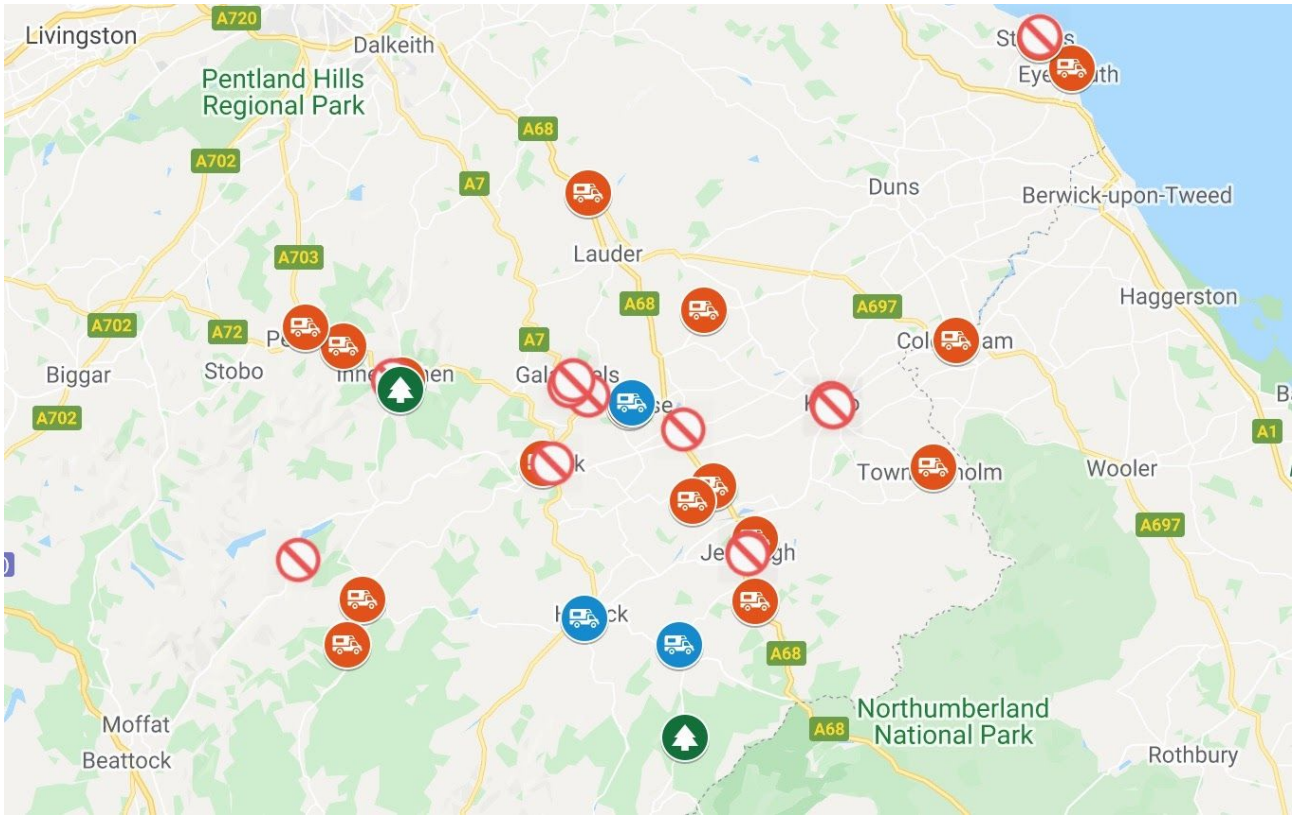
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<sup>7</sup> <https://campra.org.uk/resources/>

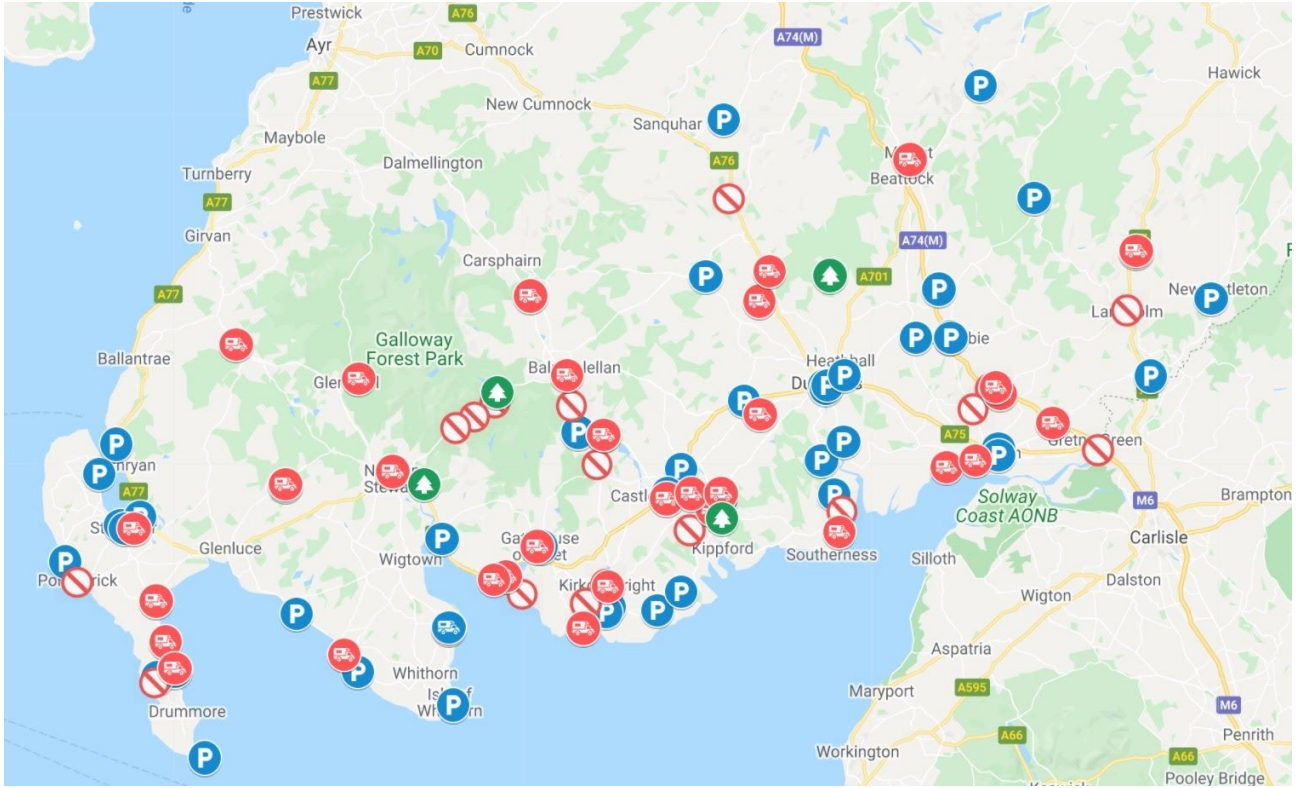
<sup>8</sup> <https://forestryandland.gov.scot/staythenight>

<sup>9</sup> [www.caravanclub.co.uk](http://www.caravanclub.co.uk)

<sup>10</sup> [www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)



An overview of current and potential sites for aires in the Scottish Borders. Click on the map or [here](#) for more detail.



An overview of current and potential sites for aires in the Dumfries and Galloway. Click on the map or [here](#) for more detail.

## 2.3 Assessment

As can be seen from these maps, there are currently very few aires (denoted by the blue campervan symbol) in Southern Scotland.

There are, however, multiple options for car parks suitable for campervans that currently do not prohibit overnight parking and do not have any height restrictions in place (denoted by the blue P symbol). These sites are occasionally used within the caravan tourist community on an informal basis and are mainly advertised via a word of mouth on apps or websites such as *Park4night*. These sites represent an excellent option for locations for potential aires.

By introducing dedicated campervan parking, proportional to the size of the parking, at locations such as these, campervans could be strategically encouraged to visit certain locations where tourists are needed. This can be done at low cost by simply allocating dedicated parking spaces, putting up physical signage at the location, potentially re-marking parking bays and/or advertising the sites as campervan friendly via social media, tourism boards, campervan clubs and/or campervan apps *etc.* Where necessary Traffic Regulation Orders may also need to be considered.

There is of course plenty of scope for expanding on this, either by improving facilities at the site (e.g. water taps, waste disposal, toilet blocks *etc.* see Section 3.0) and/or connecting multiple sites up as a network of “Aires of Southern Scotland” and advertised through local authorities or tourist boards. Providing information at camperstops so that visitors can see what there is to do in the area and what local services there are will further enhance the tourists experience and maximize the positive impact they can have on the host community. This information could also be made available to tourists before they travel, by linking into tourism organisations or a website for the “Aires of Southern Scotland”. Bespoke information like how far from shops/walking distance, special attractions *etc.* would be useful in the trip planning stage. Adding facilities or making existing local facilities available would add extra appeal to sites but are by no means essential at every location due to the fact that most campers are self-contained and only need to access such facilities every few days.

The location of these potential sites (blue P symbol) also offers the opportunity to identify gaps and work with local community groups to introduce aires in regions which already have visitors but do not currently have the facilities to cater for them. For example, the upper Yarrow Valley has reported increased visitors looking to “wild camp” in the last few years, particularly in the summer of 2020. While being excellent for local business, this resulted in problems with littering and antisocial behaviour, in part resulting from the lack of dedicated space and facilities and conflict with locals. An aire would be an ideal way to address this issue by directing and controlling the impact of visitors.

As can be seen on the maps, there are also a number of parking sites where there are currently restrictions on parking (denoted by the no entry symbol). At these sites overnight parking is explicitly prohibited and enforced with cameras, fines, barriers and/or height restrictions. These sites also offer potential locations for future aires if restrictions are in place by default rather than for specific reasons. This would of course need to be addressed on a case by case basis, taking into account local stakeholder interests. If local communities were willing, dedicating an appropriate portion of the parking to campers and putting up signs to advertise this would be a very quick and easy way of making campers feel welcome and getting visitors into these communities.

The aim here is to encourage a questioning of these restrictions and make sure they are in place for a good reason and not just because this is the default. This is particularly important for council run car parks, all of which currently prohibit overnight stays apart from the Haugh Car Park in Hawick. These car parks are often located in towns and near local attractions and could be an excellent way of encouraging campers to stay and spend money on local businesses. Not all council car parks are included on the map, only ones which could potentially be suitable for having some dedicated camper parking (i.e. appear to be large and flat), and which are in a location in which there are currently no other options. Please consult the Scottish Borders Council website for a full list of council-owned parking places.

For example, there are currently no listed campervan parking locations in Galashiels. There is one paid location in Selkirk at the leisure centre but it has a height barrier which is sometimes down, preventing access, resulting in a 1 star review from visitors on Park4Night. In Jedburgh there are several large car parks but none that allow overnight stays.

Outside the towns there are also considerable gaps. For example the Ettrick and Yarrow valleys as mentioned above could benefit greatly from increased visitors and have a huge amount to offer in terms of activities and scenic remote parking places which many campervanner tourists seek out. Other than a grassy area on the shores of Meggett Reservoir and a layby by St Mary's Loch, there are no permitted overnight campervan parking places in this area. Creating an aire in locations such as this could make a huge difference to the number of visitors, how long they choose to stay and how much disruption is caused to local residents.

A crucial part of campervan holidays is the route taken. A scenic drive can be a huge draw to a region, as demonstrated by the success of the North Coast 500 route in the Scottish Highlands. Creating scenic routes such as this in Southern Scotland and ensuring there is dedicated campervan parking along the route would be an incredibly effective way of drawing in visitors. There are some stunning driving routes in the area, for example from Selkirk to Moffat, or along the beautiful Solway Coast.

## **2.4 Addressing concerns**

A key concern often raised in reaction to the idea of aires is that by introducing free or cheap campervan parking, business could be taken away from caravan parks. This was a concern raised in response to the Stay the Night trial, run in the second half of 2020 by Forrest and Land Scotland, the results of the trial are due to be published in early 2021.<sup>11</sup> This is an important point to consider, but there are several reasons why this would likely not be the case. The first is that the CAMpRA survey mentioned previously found that 46% of respondents *already* park outside campsites. Aires would therefore be providing a space for these visitors without taking business away from caravan parks.

The second is that it is likely that by introducing aires in Southern Scotland and promoting it as a camper-friendly destination, business for local caravan parks could increase due to increased visitors to the area, many of which will still want to spend some nights in private campgrounds with the associated facilities and environment.

Thirdly, the vast majority of private caravan parks are in rural locations and do not provide access to towns and attractions that could be provided by aires. A way to ensure money is not taken away

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<sup>11</sup> <https://forestryandland.gov.scot/staythenight>

from these businesses would therefore be to make sure aires are placed in areas and environments that are not currently catered for by private caravan parks. An added bonus of placing aires in more urban areas means more money can be spent locally, rather than visitors being confined to rural campsites with limited nearby businesses.

Other concerns include littering, which can be addressed by providing access to waste bins, or concerns surrounding campervans staying for extended periods of time. This latter issue can be addressed by having limits on the length of stay allowed, with aires often specifying a limit of 24, 48 or 72 hours. The issue of campervans taking up large amounts of space in parking would also need to be considered. In this regard we recommend parking for campervans only be allocated proportional to the size of the car park available and in consultation with local communities. In cases where space is limited one potential solution is to only allow campervans to park up for the night after 6pm once local day traffic has reduced.

For the successful introduction of a network of aires in Southern Scotland open and honest communication with stakeholders where concerns are listened to and addressed will of course be essential.

### **3.0 Aire Facilities**

At their most basic an aire is simply a flat area of ground with space for parking campervans overnight. The area would ideally be quiet at night and safe i.e. away from busy roads.

As mentioned previously, many campervans only need access to facilities every few days so introducing an aire does not necessarily mean adding anything more than a sign allocating designated parking and advertising. That said, having facilities would inevitably add appeal to an aire and would likely draw in extra visitors. Here is a list of campervan facilities that would benefit an aire, in order of importance:

- Proximity to local attractions and amenities such as walking routes, cycling routes, historical sites, museums, tourist attractions, food shops, restaurants, pubs, cafes etc
- Rubbish disposal - a cheap and easy addition would be to have large bins for disposing bags of rubbish. This also avoids potential problems with littering.
- Water tap - almost all campervans have water tanks which need to be filled up every few days.
- Water waste disposal - this includes grey waste water, i.e. water from washing up etc, and black waste, i.e. waste from onboard toilets. While grey waste can be disposed of easily down a drain, black waste needs to be disposed of appropriately to avoid spillage and pollution. A Chemical Disposal Point is a convenient way to do this easily, essentially providing a lidded drain which can be either plumbed in as normal or placed over a manhole.
- Toilets - while most campervans have onboard toilet facilities, not all do. Having a toilet therefore is an extra appeal for these campervans.



- Electric hookup - most campervans are powered by batteries which need to be topped up every few days, or have appliances that can only run on mains power. Electric hookup points therefore can be very useful.
- Additional facilities such as picnic benches, bonfire or BBQ areas all add appeal by providing an area for socialising with locals and other campervans, which is a big part of life on the road.

### 3.1 Charges

The idea behind aires is not to make money directly from parking charges, but rather to give campervanners a place to stay in order to spend money locally. Parking costs should be kept to minimum in order to attract the most visitors, particularly if no facilities are provided and if parking is free for day-time visitors. However, the CAMpRA survey<sup>12</sup> found that many visitors would be happy to pay for access to an aire, particularly if facilities are provided or if additional costs must be accounted for through additional staffing or waste disposal. Respondents on average would be willing to pay up to £10 per day if the aire included facilities, and up to £5 if not.



Figure 2. Left - example of water tap and Chemical Disposal Point, Right - electric hookup points at an aire in Mull.

A more informal way of raising money to cover costs or introduce facilities would be through voluntary methods such as an honesty box. The incredibly positive response to the Hawick Haugh aire (see below) indicates how keen campervanners are to encourage the creation of such places, and it is likely that many would happily donate money to show their appreciation.

## 4.0 Case study - The Haugh Car Park, Hawick

In 2012 the *Hawick Welcome* initiative was created to encourage and welcome visitors to the town. Part of this project was the *Hawick Campervan Welcome*, where dedicated free campervan parking was created and advertised, including access to toilets and a water tap. Visitors are met by locals who welcome them to the town and hand out information on attractions and activities the town has to offer.

<sup>12</sup> <https://campra.org.uk>

The project has by all accounts been a great success, with the total number of visitors from campervans in May-September 2019 alone reaching 777 in 372 vehicles. The total economic impact is hard to assess, but the 2019 progress report on the project stated:

*“As with last year, assessing the economic benefit of the Hawick Welcome to the town is not an easy task, but the evidence we have, albeit only from anecdotal information from Hosts and businesses in the town, is that our visitors can spend considerable sums when they arrive.”*

A rough calculation of the total spent locally by these visitors during this period, based on the average spend of £47 per campervan per night found in the CAMpRA 2020 survey, gives £17,484. The 2019 annual report includes some very positive reviews from campervanners, and has a 4 star rating on the camper parking app Park4Night.

*“Nice to be back, we always get a great welcome when we come to Hawick”*

*“This is our first visit and there’s so much to see and we’ve so little time to do it in. We’ll definitely be back”*

*“Convenient overnight parking, dedicated campervan spaces in a large car park. Close to town centre. Well done local council, more initiatives like this would be great. Recommended.”*

The aire is so popular that £360 was donated to *Future Hawick* by a campervan group in 2020 in appreciation. The money will be put towards installing a waste disposal unit.

## **5.0 Summary and Actions**

Coming up with a strategy to introduce aires in Southern Scotland will require engagement in several areas.

- A good first step would be to look into introducing dedicated free or cheap campervan parking in towns across Southern Scotland. Council owned parking lots, of which there are several in each large town, could provide a convenient way to do this. Locations would need to be assessed to determine if overnight restrictions could be removed and some space could be dedicated to campervans. Community owned land would also be a good potential location, for example The Haining House and Estate which is now run by the Haining Charitable Trust.

Key criteria to look for would be parking lots that are flat and have sufficient space so that large motorhomes can easily maneuver and so that parking would not be taken away from locals. Additionally, places that are fairly quiet at night, away from busy roads and not used for meeting places at night (one of the few complaints from visitors in the Haugh car park in Hawick was that it is frequently used by “boy racers” late at night, keeping campervanners awake). A pleasant location, e.g. with a view or by a river, is also a plus. A place where facilities are already available nearby, or could easily be installed, such as a water tap and public toilets, would also be useful.

- To build up the network of available parking across Southern Scotland and spread the benefits, smaller communities should also be encouraged to consider if an aire could be suitable for them. This would include, for example, villages that have local businesses such as a shop, pub or cafe, and could therefore benefit from more visitors. For example, Lilliesleaf, Ancrum, Denholm etc. Often these villages have village halls which could provide access to toilets or water taps, or indeed parking areas themselves if there is sufficient space. This could be particularly of note for communities that have access to funds, e.g. wind farm funds, and could therefore potentially introduce additional camper facilities such as electric hookups.
- Another step would be to encourage local businesses and larger organisations to introduce aires on their own property. This could include pubs with a large parking area, such as the Horse and Hound Country Inn in Bonchester Bridge which allows free parking if visitors visit the pub or for a small charge if not. It could also include tourist attractions such as Traquair House, Abbotsford House or the Borders Abbeys, run by Historic Environment Scotland, which often have large car parks with facilities which are empty overnight. Forest and Land Scotland, for example, have been trialling allowing overnight stays in a selection of their car parks in 2020, and based on the success of the trial will decide whether to continue doing so in the future. Other possible locations are visitor and activity centres such as Harestanes and Mabie Farm Park, or tourist attractions such as breweries and distilleries (which add the benefit of no one having to be designated driver!). It is important to note that for private businesses and landowners planning regulations must be considered and can potentially make establishing an aire a complicated process, particularly for larger aires.
- Finally, if suitable space and funding could be made available, introducing a new aire, designed and dedicated only to campervanning would be an excellent way of gaining publicity and drawing in visitors. By creating a new area rather than adapting an existing parking lot, it could be designed with campervans in mind, considering the necessary aesthetics and facilities. It could also be an excellent opportunity to showcase Southern Scotland, for example by placing it in a scenic location with information boards, shops selling local produce and sustainable facilities to reflect local projects such as the Galloway Biosphere Reserve.

Many areas of the UK, including Southern Scotland, are currently considerably lacking in free or cheap dedicated campervan parking compared to mainland Europe. The campervan tourism industry is well established in the UK and has great potential to bring money into rural communities. By introducing aire-style parking areas across Southern Scotland and advertising it as a camper-friendly destination, there is great potential to tap into this market that is currently overlooked.