

National Parks for all | Making car-free travel easier



Campaign for National Parks was founded over 80 years ago to lobby for the conservation and enhancement of our most stunning landscapes and ensure they were available for everyone to enjoy both now and in the future. Securing improved access to the countryside has, therefore, always been an important part of our work.

Today, a significant proportion of the population are still excluded from many parts of our National Parks because the opportunities for visiting without a car are so limited. The need for many visitors to rely on the car also puts at risk the precious landscapes and wildlife in the Parks.

We want to make it easier for people to visit and enjoy the National Parks of England and Wales by more sustainable means. This briefing summarises our recent research which examined existing and current sustainable transport initiatives, and sets out recommendations about how to improve the options for travelling to and around National Parks more sustainably. The research was based primarily on a review of relevant published literature and was not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of every single sustainable transport initiative in the National Parks.



Why access to National Parks matters

National Parks are our finest landscapes and are recognised for their natural beauty, wildlife, cultural heritage and the recreational opportunities they offer. They are national assets, providing natural resources such as clean water and opportunities for tranquillity and healthy outdoor activities. National Parks receive public funding in recognition of their special qualities and the benefits they provide but unfortunately not everyone is able to visit and enjoy them. Nationally, a quarter of households do not have access to a car and there have been significant cuts to rural bus services in recent years.

The Governments of both England and Wales have aspirations to increase the number of visitors to National Parks. We support these aspirations but we want them to be achieved in a way which does not detract from the very features which attract people to these areas. The limited transport options means there is currently a strong reliance on the car among visitors to National Parks and high volumes of traffic can have a negative impact on the tranquillity and natural environment. Providing improved alternatives to the car ensures that increased numbers of people can visit without damaging the special qualities for which these areas are valued as well as allowing people who do not have access to a car to visit them more easily.

Visitors to our National Parks make a huge contribution to the rural economy, spending over £6 billion each year and supporting thousands of jobs in tourism.

The benefits of improved access

Increasing the options available for travelling to and around National Parks sustainably would provide many benefits including:

- For individuals - improved physical and mental health through opportunities to engage with nature.
- For local economies – there is evidence that visitors by public transport spend more than those arriving by car.
- For the environment and local communities – by reducing the number of people who travel to National Parks by car and the associated impacts in terms of carbon emissions, noise pollution, road danger, blight and severance.

Tackling the issue

We believe there are a range of ways to improve car-free access to and around National Parks including:

- Providing more options – increasing their availability and frequency and ensuring they are affordable;
- Providing more and better information about the existing options; and
- Making options easier through, for example, integrated ticketing or real time information, or more attractive through, for example, incentives.

We have tried to identify options that do not rely on significant amounts of additional funding. However, given that the National Parks are national assets, there is a case for providing more public resources to ensure that they are available to everyone.





Increasing the options for travelling to and around National Parks

Walking and cycling

Walking is the most popular recreational activity in National Parks and there are good networks of footpaths but walking is rarely promoted as a means of transport. Cycling is more likely to be used as transport as well as for recreational purposes as it allows people to travel longer distances. It is also possible to combine cycling and rail travel for journeys in some of the Parks.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has supported a shared electric assist bike (e-bike) scheme which included a number of pilot projects aimed at visitors. The evaluation of this programme identified the need to explore the potential for increasing e-bike (and pedal bike) availability at more rail stations, travel hubs and accommodation networks across the UK. Many of the measures that are important for supporting the use of e-bikes are the same as those which are needed to encourage cycle use more generally. These include conveniently located, secure cycle parking and cycle-friendly accommodation (and information about where to find this). Most important of all is providing good segregated cycle routes and making roads safer for cyclists by reducing the speed of vehicles and giving cyclists clearer priority.

There is significant potential for e-bike use by visitors in National Parks, particularly if measures are introduced which increase the opportunities for visitors to travel to and from National Parks using a combination of rail and e-bike. Another form of shared transport that has been launched recently in urban areas is dockless bike hire but there have not yet been any examples of such schemes launching in rural areas.

Rail services

The extent to which rail provides a viable option for travel varies significantly between the Parks. Some have good rail connections to nearby urban areas as well as between settlements within the Park. Many of the branch lines serving National Parks are now supported by Community Rail Partnerships which promote the services available and work towards providing improved services and stations. In November 2017 the Westminster Government published a strategic vision for rail which discusses the potential for expanding Britain's rail network where there is a strong enough business case. Re-opening certain branch lines could offer significant potential for improving visitor access to National Parks. However, any such re-openings would need to be planned and designed carefully to avoid damage to the National Park and to ensure the benefits were maximised. The Westminster Government is also currently developing a Community Rail Strategy and this must take account of the needs of visitors.



Bus services

Despite the significant cuts to rural buses in recent years, there are a number of examples of successful bus services which continue to operate in National Parks. These provide a valuable service for both residents and visitors. Where resources have been put in to improving access by bus to National Parks, it is clear that there is a huge demand for it. However, many of the bus services that were operating in National Parks have been reduced or cut back completely in recent years and even those services which survive face a continual struggle for funding.

Many of the local bus services in National Parks are now run by the voluntary or community transport sector. Examples include DalesBus, the Little White Bus and the Western Dales Bus in the Yorkshire Dales, MoorsBus in the North York Moors, Cuckmere Community Bus in the South Downs and the Exmoor Community Bus. Some of these have been set up with support from the local transport authority in order to replace subsidised bus services that were previously operated by the private sector. The cost to the local authority is significantly less than the cost of contracting a commercial operator as the operators of these services rely heavily on volunteer drivers in order to keep costs down. As such initiatives rely on significant input from the local community for both their setting up and running, mechanisms need to be put in place to make this as easy as possible to ensure that motivated individuals are not deterred from coming forward.

DalesBus has used some innovative approaches to secure finance in recent years such as crowdfunding and sponsorship but these take significant time and effort to secure and many are one-off opportunities which are unlikely to be repeated. There is an urgent need to identify greater security of funding for bus services in National Parks. In the longer-term it is likely that a complete overhaul of the way bus services are planned and paid for will be necessary to ensure that rural areas continue to be served by buses in the future.

Boat services

In some National Parks, notably the Broads and the Lake District, boat services contribute to the range of transport options. Unfortunately the departure points for such services are not always easily accessible for those without cars.

Shared journeys

Recent advances in technology have seen the development of a number of initiatives from the private hire and bus industry aimed at offering flexible on-demand shared journeys, usually booked via an app. Most of these are currently aimed at commuters in urban areas but a scheme based in Harrogate called Vamooz has been used for shared bus trips for journeys to the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Such services rely on their users being willing, and able, to use a smart phone, mobile data and bank account to book and pay for journeys. This could limit who is able to use these services, particularly in those rural areas where there is poor mobile connectivity. However, there is the potential for shared transport services to help improve access in National Parks, particularly to key visitor attractions ('honeypot' locations) from the nearest railway station or nearby urban areas.

Private vehicles

We recognise that many residents and visitors to the Parks feel they have no choice but to use a car if they have one available and our main focus is on increasing the availability of potential alternatives to the car and people's awareness of those choices. However, there are some places in National Parks where high levels of car use are so damaging to the environment that it may be appropriate to consider measures to restrict car use. As petrol and diesel vehicles are phased out over the coming decades, there will be a need to ensure that there is adequate provision in National Parks for those using electric vehicles while still encouraging them to use alternatives to the car whenever possible. A further change in the future will be the increasing use of connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs), often known as driverless cars. To date most of the attention on the use of CAVs has been focused on urban areas, and it is essential that the implications for National Parks and other rural areas are also considered.

Increasing the information available about existing options

It is important that it is as easy as possible for people to find out about the alternative transport options that do exist. Good promotion of sustainable transport initiatives helps ensure they are well-used and are thus more likely to continue, so it is one relatively easy way of supporting improved access to and within National Parks. National Park Authorities (NPAs) have an important role to play in this.

An audit we undertook in 2017 identified significant variation in the quality of information available on the NPA websites. A few are very impressive with easy to use online travel maps and advice on how to get to popular areas. It is notable that the NPAs providing the best information are not necessarily in areas with the greatest range of options available. We provided the NPAs with individual feedback and several have subsequently made improvements. However, there are still lots of opportunities for NPAs to do more to promote sustainable transport options as the first choice for getting to the Parks and to ensure that there is the best possible information available on the options that exist in their area.

We also welcome the launch of Good Journey, an initiative which provides information on car-free travel to visitor attractions, many of which offer discounts to non-car users.

Making travel to and around National Parks easier

For sustainable transport schemes to be successful they must be made as easy as possible for the potential user. This includes, for example, allowing for easy interchange between different modes of transport through the use of integrated ticketing and timetables and the use of single ticket solutions which allow people to book their travel by public transport as part of booking a ticket for a visit to an attraction or activity. Other examples of measures aimed at making sustainable travel as easy as possible include improved luggage storage; secure cycle parking at stations and public transport interchanges; increased on-board capacity for luggage and bicycles; and easy access to bike hire at public transport interchanges. The car free tourism packages offered in National Parks in some other countries demonstrate what could be offered here. These includes measures such as luggage transfers from the nearest station and the opportunity to book a complete package which includes rail travel, a week's accommodation, taxi-transfers and a ticket allowing several days' local travel by public transport.



Photography: Jason Patient



Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

Who should be taking the lead on improving transport to and around National Parks?

A large number of different organisations have some responsibility for the provision, promotion and funding of transport in each National Park including the NPA, local transport authorities (LTAs), local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), bus operators, train operating companies, Network Rail, Westminster/Welsh Governments, and individual tourism attractions and accommodation providers. With so many different organisations involved, there is a need for one organisation to take a strategic overview of how best to improve access for visitors. We believe that NPAs should take on this role. Although they are not transport authorities, they are planning authorities and can use their planning policies to influence travel patterns. They should also have a strong interest in improving sustainable travel as it makes such an important contribution to National Park purposes.

The need for further research

There is a need for more comprehensive evidence to demonstrate the importance of investing in visitor transport and the benefits of improved access to National Parks. This would help make the case for increased support from Governments, NPAs, local transport authorities and others. For example, it would be helpful to have more evidence of the benefits to the local economy as a result of increased expenditure by visitors arriving by sustainable transport, and the cross-sector benefits such as improved health and well-being. This could be part of a wider piece of work to develop new economic models which take account of the full range of costs and benefits associated with visitor travel to, and around, National Parks.

Based on this research we make the following recommendations:

- **National Park Authorities should take a strategic lead** in improving transport to and around their National Park. This should involve working with local partners to identify and improve opportunities for visitors to get to particular locations without a car and to secure the necessary funding for those improvements from LEPs, LTAs and other relevant bodies.
- **National Park Authorities, Destination Management Organisations and all other relevant organisations should provide high-quality, consistent and up-to-date information** about options for car-free access. In particular, the National Park Authorities **should actively promote and update the car-free guides** that have been produced for each of the National Parks, as well as promoting initiatives such as Good Journey.
- The Westminster and/or Welsh Government should provide funding for a **‘smarter travel National Park’ pilot** to test new types of **on-demand app-based shared services and the use of travel demand management measures**. The pilot should also support **the development of sustainable travel hubs** - key centres within the Park offering a range of activities within one location and good car-free access to other locations nearby. The evaluation of the pilot should inform future policy and funding priorities.
- National Park Authorities should work with local transport authorities, transport operators, accommodation providers and tourist attractions to **tackle ‘the final mile’**, the journey from the nearest station or major public transport interchange to a visitor’s final destination. This should include the development of **services such as luggage transfers, shuttle bus services and integrated ticketing**.

