

Assessment of the Potential Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy



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Contents

1. Purpose of this Assessment
2. Key Environmental Findings
3. Conwy's Environmental Context
4. Impacts of Tourism Pressure
5. Potential Positive Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy
6. Potential Negative Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy
7. Biodiversity Considerations (Environment (Wales) Act 2016)
8. Well-being of Future Generations Considerations
9. Examples from Other Destinations
10. Impact of Changes in Visitor Numbers
11. Conclusion

1. Purpose of this Assessment

This appendix considers the potential environmental impacts associated with the introduction of a Visitor Levy in Conwy County Borough.

It focuses on:

- Likely positive and negative impacts on the natural environment
- How visitor behaviour may change
- How reinvestment of levy revenues could mitigate pressures
- Alignment with statutory environmental duties in Wales

The assessment recognises that environmental impacts would be indirect, and that outcomes would depend on how levy revenues are governed, targeted, and monitored.

2. Key Environmental Findings

Conwy's environment is central to the visitor economy but already under pressure in coastal, upland and rural locations.

A Visitor Levy does not directly protect the environment, but it could provide a dedicated funding stream for mitigation and enhancement.

Environmental benefits are not automatic and depend on:

- Ring-fenced and transparent use of funds
- Targeting investment at high-pressure locations
- Ongoing monitoring of impacts

There are risks, particularly around:

- More day visits and car use
- Redistribution of visitors to less-managed locations

Overall, the levy presents a moderate environmental risk but high potential benefit if well managed.

3. Conwy's Environmental Context

Conwy's visitor offer is fundamentally shaped by the quality, diversity and distinctiveness of its natural environment, which is central to the county's identity and a major driver of the local visitor economy. These natural assets attract visitors throughout the year and support a wide range of tourism, leisure and outdoor recreation activities that are important to local communities and businesses.

The county encompasses an exceptional variety of environments, including:

- A substantial stretch of the North Wales coastline, featuring beaches, dunes, cliffs and marine habitats that are integral to Conwy's appeal as a coastal destination.
- Extensive upland and rural landscapes within and adjoining Eryri National Park, valued for their scenic quality, biodiversity and recreational opportunities.
- An interconnected network of rivers, woodlands, farmland and historic landscapes, which contribute significantly to both the character of the county and the overall visitor experience.

Within these landscapes, Conwy contains a significant number of internationally and nationally designated sites, including Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). These sites are integral to the county's reputation as a high-quality visitor destination but are also particularly sensitive to visitor pressure, especially during seasonal peaks and in areas experiencing concentrated activity.

While the introduction of a Visitor Levy is not intended to directly impact the environment, there is potential for secondary environmental effects arising from changes in visitor behaviour, travel patterns or length of stay, as well as from how levy revenues are reinvested locally. The way in which any revenues are governed, targeted and monitored will therefore be a key factor in ensuring that Conwy's natural assets are protected, enhanced and sustainably managed, in line with statutory environmental duties and for the benefit of residents, visitors and future generations.

4. Impacts of Tourism Pressure

Tourism activity can give rise to environmental pressures, particularly in high-footfall locations and during seasonal peaks. In Conwy County Borough, these pressures are most commonly experienced in:

- Coastal locations, especially during periods of good weather, where beaches, promenades, and coastal paths attract large visitor number
- Popular upland and rural destinations within or adjoining Eryri National Park, which are valued for landscape quality, access to nature, and outdoor recreation
- Well-established walking, cycling, and outdoor recreation routes, including coastal paths and rural trails that pass through environmentally sensitive areas
- Towns and villages experiencing seasonal congestion, where visitor demand places pressure on local infrastructure, transport networks, and public spaces

4.1 Main environmental pressures associated with tourism

The principal environmental pressures associated with tourism activity in Conwy may include:

- Littering and waste management impacts, with increased demand on collection and cleansing services during peak visitor periods
- Traffic congestion and parking pressures, particularly in rural and coastal communities not designed to accommodate high volumes of visitor traffic
- Carbon emissions, primarily associated with visitor travel to and within the county
- Soil erosion and path degradation, where sustained footfall affects sensitive landscapes, including upland paths, dunes, and coastal routes
- Disturbance to wildlife and habitats, including trampling of vegetation and disruption to breeding, feeding, or resting patterns in designated and non-designated sites

Evidence from across Wales indicates that sustained high visitor numbers can adversely affect biodiversity and habitat condition where appropriate mitigation measures are not in place or adequately resourced. These considerations are particularly relevant in Conwy, given the extent and sensitivity of its natural and coastal environments and their importance to the county's visitor economy.

5. Potential Positive Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy

The Visitor Accommodation (Register and Levy) Etc. (Wales) Act 2025 requires that levy revenues be reinvested for purposes that include:

- Mitigating the impact of visitors
- Supporting sustainable tourism growth
- Maintaining and improving infrastructure, facilities, and services for visitors and residents
- Promoting and supporting the Welsh language

The introduction of a Visitor Levy has the potential to deliver a range of positive environmental outcomes, particularly where revenues are ring-fenced and reinvested locally to manage visitor pressures and support sustainable tourism. While a levy is not intended to directly regulate visitor behaviour, the funding it generates can provide additional capacity to protect and enhance the natural assets that underpin the visitor economy.

5.1 Enhanced investment in environmental management

Visitor Levy revenues could provide a dedicated funding stream to support:

- Maintenance and upgrading of footpaths, trails, coastal routes, and access infrastructure
- Improved waste management and cleansing services, particularly in high-footfall locations
- Provision of toilets, signage, and visitor facilities, reducing informal or damaging use of sensitive areas
- Such investment can help mitigate the impacts of visitor pressure and reduce long-term environmental degradation.

5.2 Improved protection of sensitive sites and habitats

Levy funding could support targeted measures to protect:

- Designated sites such as SACs, SPAs, SSSIs, and local nature reserves
- Coastal, upland, and rural habitats vulnerable to erosion or disturbance
- Areas experiencing seasonal or weather-related surges in visitor activity

This may include active habitat management, visitor management measures, or enhanced monitoring of environmental condition.

5.3 Support for sustainable and regenerative tourism

A Visitor Levy can help shift tourism activity towards a more sustainable or regenerative model, by funding initiatives that:

- Reduce the environmental footprint of tourism
- Encourage responsible visitor behaviour
- Balance environmental protection with economic benefits

Over time, this may help ensure that tourism growth does not come at the expense of environmental quality.

5.4 Increased environmental awareness and education

Levy revenues could be used to support:

- Environmental education and interpretation, including signs, information boards, and digital resources
- Campaigns promoting responsible behaviour, such as litter reduction, wildlife protection, and respect for local environments
- Engagement activities that improve understanding of the value and fragility of natural landscapes

Improved awareness can contribute to longer-term behavioural change among visitors and residents.

5.5 Reduced pressure through improved visitor management

Where resources are available, levy funding could support:

- Measures to better manage the distribution and timing of visitor activity, reducing pressure on the most sensitive locations
- Improvements that channel visitor use onto designed routes and facilities, reducing informal erosion or habitat damage
- Seasonal management approaches to address peak-period impacts

This can reduce unplanned or unmanaged environmental harm.

5.6 Contribution to climate and environmental objectives

Visitor Levy revenues may also support projects aligned with wider environmental and climate objectives, such as:

- Encouraging lower-carbon travel options where feasible
- Enhancing environmental resilience in coastal and flood-risk areas
- Supporting adaptation measures in response to climate change

This helps align tourism activity with national and local environmental duties.

5.7 Potential environmental benefits from changes in visitor behaviour

If the levy leads to a small reduction in overnight visitor numbers or length of stay, there may be secondary environmental benefits, including:

- Reduced congestion and traffic emissions
- Lower pressure on sensitive sites during peak periods
- Reduced cumulative impacts where visitor numbers previously exceeded environmental capacity

While such outcomes are uncertain and difficult to quantify, they may contribute positively where visitor numbers are exceptionally high.

Positive environmental impacts are not automatic outcomes of introducing a levy. They depend on:

- Clear governance and decision-making arrangements
- Transparent and targeted use of revenues
- Effective monitoring and evaluation of outcomes

Without these conditions, the opportunity to deliver environmental benefits would be significantly reduced.

6. Potential Negative Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy

While a Visitor Levy has the potential to support environmental protection and sustainable tourism within Conwy County Borough, there are also potential negative environmental impacts that should be acknowledged. These impacts would be indirect, uncertain, and dependent on visitor responses, neighbouring authority decisions, and how levy revenues are deployed locally.

6.1 Displacement of visitor behaviour

If the introduction of a Visitor Levy leads some visitors to alter their behaviour, there is a risk of:

- An increase in day visits, particularly to Conwy's coastal destinations and towns, where car-based travel is more prevalent
- Greater pressure on parking, traffic flows, and roadside access in coastal and rural communities
- Increased environmental pressure on popular sites without the benefit of overnight levy revenues to fund mitigation

This risk is particularly relevant where visitors choose not to stay overnight in Conwy but continue to visit during peak periods.

6.2 Redistribution of visitor pressure within the county

Rather than reducing overall demand, a levy could result in:

- A redistribution of visitor activity towards alternative coastal locations, rural villages, or upland access points
- Increased use of less-managed or less-resilient sites, particularly in rural areas adjoining Eryri National Park
- New environmental pressures emerging in locations not currently experiencing high visitor volumes

Such redistribution could create additional pressures in sensitive landscapes if not accompanied by effective visitor management.

6.3 Increased pressure arising from reinvestment

Investment funded through levy revenues—for example in improved facilities, access, or public realm—may:

- Increase the attractiveness of certain coastal routes, countryside paths, or upland recreation areas
- Lead to higher visitor numbers in environmentally sensitive locations
- Exacerbate pressure where increased access is not matched by active site management

While reinvestment is intended to deliver environmental and community benefits, there is a risk that enhancements inadvertently attract additional demand.

6.4 Limited mitigation in high-pressure locations

If levy revenues are lower than anticipated, constrained by administrative costs, or spread across a wide range of projects:

- Capacity to mitigate environmental pressures in coastal hotspots, rural access points, or park-related locations may be limited
- Existing issues such as erosion, littering, and congestion may persist
- This risk is particularly relevant in locations experiencing sharp seasonal demand.

6.5 Continued environmental pressures where behaviour does not change

If visitor behaviour remains broadly unchanged following the introduction of a levy:

- Ongoing pressures on coastal environments, rural lanes, and popular upland routes may continue
- Environmental impacts such as littering, habitat disturbance, and erosion may remain unless targeted measures are implemented

In such circumstances, the levy alone would not be sufficient to address environmental challenges.

6.6 Equity and perception risks in Conwy communities

Negative perceptions may arise if:

- Coastal and rural communities continue to experience high visitor pressure without visible environmental improvement
- Visitors and residents are unclear how levy revenues are being used to support environmental protection
- Environmental benefits are not clearly attributable to levy funding

This could undermine public confidence in environmental interventions linked to tourism.

6.7 Uncertainty and cumulative effects

Environmental impacts associated with a Visitor Levy are difficult to predict with precision. Wider factors such as:

- Weather patterns driving coastal and countryside visitation
- Seasonal concentration of visitors in peak months
- Decisions by neighbouring authorities on levy adoption may interact with local tourism trends to generate cumulative environmental impacts, particularly in sensitive coastal and upland areas.

6.8 Mitigating considerations

Potential negative environmental impacts within Conwy could be mitigated through:

- Clear governance and transparency around the use of levy revenues
- Targeted investment in coastal, rural, and park-adjacent locations experiencing the greatest pressure
- Ongoing monitoring of environmental impacts and visitor behaviour
- Alignment with existing destination management, biodiversity, and climate policies

While there are potential environmental risks associated with introducing a Visitor Levy in Conwy County Borough, these are largely indirect and can be mitigated through targeted reinvestment, effective visitor management, and ongoing monitoring of impacts in coastal, rural, and park-related locations.

Table 1: Summary of Environmental Impacts of a Visitor Levy

Impact Area	Potential Positive Impacts	Potential Negative / Risk Impacts
Visitor pressure	Better management of high-footfall locations	Redistribution to less-managed sites
Coastal & upland environments	Investment in path maintenance, erosion control	Continued pressure if funding is insufficient
Waste & cleansing	Improved services in peak periods	Ongoing litter if behaviour does not change
Biodiversity	Targeted habitat protection and monitoring	Disturbance if access improvements increase use
Transport & carbon	Support for sustainable travel initiatives	Increased car-based day visits
Community confidence	Visible environmental improvements	Negative perceptions if benefits are unclear

7. Biodiversity Considerations (Environment (Wales) Act 2016)

Tourism activity can affect biodiversity through disturbance to wildlife, pressure on habitats, and damage to sensitive vegetation. Within Conwy, these impacts may be most pronounced in coastal habitats, upland areas, and internationally and nationally designated sites, particularly where visitor numbers are seasonal or highly concentrated.

While biodiversity considerations do not determine whether a Visitor Levy is introduced, Conwy County Borough Council has a statutory duty under Part 1 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity. This duty must therefore inform how any levy revenues are spent.

Targeted and well-governed investment of levy revenues could help mitigate biodiversity pressures and deliver positive outcomes, for example through:

- Improved site and visitor management in sensitive locations
- Habitat protection and restoration projects
- Monitoring of designated sites and priority habitats
- Measures to reduce disturbance to wildlife and degradation of vegetation

In this context, biodiversity enhancement and protection should form part of the criteria used to prioritise levy-funded projects, ensuring that any investment supports the sustainable management of Conwy's natural environment and contributes to long-term environmental resilience.

8. Well-being of Future Generations Considerations

A Visitor Levy has clear relevance to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, particularly the goals of:

- A Resilient Wales – protecting ecosystems and biodiversity
- A Healthier Wales – access to high-quality natural environments
- A Prosperous Wales – sustaining the visitor economy
- A Wales of Cohesive Communities – managing impacts on local areas

Long-term environmental stewardship is essential to delivering these outcomes.

9. Examples from Other Destinations

Internationally, visitor levies have been used in a range of destinations to support environmental protection and visitor management. Examples include:

- New Zealand, where levy revenues have funded conservation, habitat protection, and visitor infrastructure
- Iceland, where tourism taxes support the protection and management of sensitive natural attractions
- European alpine and rural destinations, where levies help fund path maintenance, habitat protection, and sustainable land management

These examples demonstrate that, where revenue is well targeted, tourism levies can support both environmental protection and long-term destination sustainability.

10. Impact of Changes in Visitor Numbers

If the introduction of a Visitor Levy were to lead to a small reduction in overnight visitor numbers, potential environmental effects could include:

- Reduced pressure on sensitive sites
- Lower levels of littering and traffic congestion
- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions associated with travel

However, there is also a risk that:

- Some overnight stays could convert to day visits, potentially increasing traffic and pressure without generating levy revenue
- Visitor demand could redistribute spatially rather than reduce overall

These impacts would vary depending on visitor responses and whether neighbouring authorities also introduce a levy.

11. Conclusion

The introduction of a Visitor Levy in Conwy County Borough presents both environmental risks and opportunities. Potential adverse effects, such as displacement of visitor behaviour, increased day-visiting, or continued pressure on sensitive coastal, rural and park-adjacent locations, remain uncertain. The extent of these impacts would depend on how visitors respond to the levy, wider tourism trends, and policy decisions taken by neighbouring authorities.

Set against these risks, the most significant environmental opportunity associated with a Visitor Levy lies in the potential creation of a dedicated funding stream to support environmental mitigation, visitor management, and the transition towards more sustainable and resilient tourism. Where revenues are clearly governed, transparently allocated, and targeted at locations experiencing the highest environmental pressure, levy funding could play an important role in reducing environmental harm, managing visitor impacts, and enhancing biodiversity and landscape quality.

Given the central role that Conwy's natural environment plays in underpinning the visitor economy, community wellbeing, and the county's long-term sustainability, any decision on whether to introduce a Visitor Levy should place environmental protection, mitigation and enhancement at its core. While the levy itself would not directly reduce environmental pressures, it could provide a valuable mechanism to support these objectives where effectively implemented.

The environmental outcomes associated with a Visitor Levy would depend on:

- The strength and clarity of governance arrangements
- The transparency and targeting of levy-funded investment
- Integration with environmental, biodiversity and climate policies
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of impacts and outcomes

Ultimately, the environmental value of a Visitor Levy lies not in its introduction, but in how effectively revenues are reinvested, how impacts are monitored, and how environmental objectives are embedded within destination management decisions, to protect and enhance Conwy's natural assets for current and future generations.