

Agenda Item	5.
Report No	CS/24/13

LAIRG and KYLE OF SUTHERLAND – VISITOR FACILITIES

Report by Director of Planning and Development and the Corporate Manager

Summary

This report describes the response made through the Partnership for Continuing Employment (PACE) for staff affected by the closure of the Falls of Shin Visitor Centre and wider action underway to promote the area to visitors following the closure of the Visitor Centre and Carbisdale Castle.

1. Background

1.1 The Falls of Shin Visitor Centre was destroyed by fire on the 20 of May 2013. The Centre was a major tourist attraction in the area. Following a detailed assessment by the owners it was confirmed that the Centre could not re-open this season. The closure of Carbisdale Castle in 2011 with the loss of 12,500 bed nights/annum adds to the concerns about loss of visitor numbers and employment in the area. Business owners, local community groups and public agencies have been working to mitigate the immediate impact and assess longer term prospects for development.

2. Employment

2.1 The Partnership for Continuing Employment (PACE) is initiated and led by Skills Development Scotland following notice of any impending or actual redundancies notified to them from businesses. It normally involves Jobcentre Plus; development agencies and the local Council – though other public agencies and businesses will be involved in events depending on the nature of the situation. The principal aim is to obtain employment for employees affected and to offer advice and guidance to them on skills development and financial advice. Depending on the scale of the redundancies in relation to the local economy, there may be separate but related initiatives to promote alternative employment through specific development opportunities and funding. Members may recall that this approach was used to provide support in response to the closure of the Castletown-based company, Icetek Freezers Ltd earlier this year.

2.2 There were 12 permanent jobs at the Centre with normally up to 10 further seasonal posts over the peak season. A PACE group was convened the week after the fire and organised a meeting open to all staff affected. It is understood that the permanent staff are on notice of redundancy until the end of August. Meantime there has been follow up activity with them through New Futures Sutherland, Lairg Learning Centre and the Council's Employability Service providing additional assistance through the Work Club at Lairg Learning Centre. Some individuals are considering signing up to courses at North Highland College and other bespoke courses may be available through the Learning Centre. Contact will be maintained with individuals and

assistance given as required with guidance, learning and job-seeking by SDS, JCP, Council and local agencies.

3. Wider Impacts

- 3.1 Following the fire there was a necessary period of investigation and assessment for the business and their advisers. Permission has been given to clear the site and work has been undertaken to make the site accessible and useable by the public.
- 3.2 An initial meeting has been held with senior officers of Visit Scotland, HIE, Forestry Commission and Highland Council with representatives for the Balnagown Estate. The Estate has advised that the earliest the Centre could reopen would be 2015. A further meeting to discuss their plans will take place in October.
- 3.3 The local communities have stressed the importance of the Falls of Shin visitor centre as an economic driver to the area and asked Highland Council to support every effort to see the development of a new facility.
- 3.4 The community companies from Lairg and the Kyle of Sutherland, supported by the Council, have been proactive and have, for example, arranged for signs at Falls of Shin to direct people to the businesses and services in their villages. They are also working with Visit Scotland on marketing the area and with Forestry Commission on promoting the walks and cycle trails in the area.
- 3.5 Tour companies responsible for organising coach parties to Falls Of Shin in the past are now regularly using the Highland Council Ferrycroft Centre as an attraction. The Lairg and District Communities Initiatives who operate the centre have worked well locally with the Lairg Community Council and the community to cater for this. The Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust has opened up the Bonar Bridge Hall as an attraction for visitors to come and use and have organised events to keep people visiting the area.
- 3.6 The two community companies, supported by HIE and the Highland Council, are working with Visit Scotland. Events are being planned in the autumn with both Community Companies and local businesses to prepare for next season. The Falls of Shin Visitor Centre is accredited by Visit Scotland and so qualifies to have the Brown Tourist Signs. Investigations are taking place on how to best adapt these signs to reflect the fact there is no visitor centre at the moment, whilst retaining the potential to reinstate in the future.
- 3.7 The Council will continue to support the local response as much as possible and also remains committed to promoting and investing in Sutherland - for example, through the Dornoch Sports Centre.

4. Resource, Legal, Equality, Climate Change, Risk:

- 4.1 There are no direct implications arising from this report, though the action taken is aimed at minimising the economic impact of the fire on individuals and the wider community.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note the PACE response and comment on the further actions to date to support the local economy.

Designation Director of Planning and Development and the Corporate Manager

Date 8 August 2013

Authors Andy Mackay, Ward Manager
Bob MacKinnon, Employability Team