

Item 9 - Question Time

To the Leader of the Council

“Following the announcement by Visit Scotland to close over a third of their staffed locations within two years, can you outline what your Administration is doing to provide resilience in the Highland's tourism economy and provide certainty for those working in the sector in Thurso, Durness, Drumnadrochit and Fort Augustus whose offices are earmarked for closure?”

Response to Mr S Mackie

Visit Scotland have been in regular contact with the Council for a number of years over the planned reduction in size of their publicly funded Visitor Information Centre network to reflect changing visitor behaviour and the need to direct resources towards other activities such as their digital presence. These discussions included a request from the Council that emphasis should be moved from the VIC network towards marketing activity and this has taken place over the last few years. This has included significant marketing of the North Coast 500 (NC500) which has brought substantial extra business to places along the route including Thurso and Durness with a recent HIE study indicating that 29,000 extra visitors had been attracted to the area in 2016 because of the NC500.

Visit Scotland is also ensuring that following closure of some of their staffed offices, a network of locations providing information to visitors will remain through their Visit Scotland Information Partner (VIP) programme which includes over 250 Highland businesses including the Council's learning and leisure partner High Life Highland sites.

The Council has also embarked on the rollout of a public Wi-Fi service in a number of Highland locations. Recognising that many visitors now access information on their mobile devices locations have been selected with visitor use of the service to gain information in mind. The locations formerly served by a staffed centre that are receiving free public Wi-Fi are Dornoch, Drumnadrochit, Fort Augustus, Nairn, Thurso & Wick with further locations under consideration for a further phase of Wi-Fi provision.