

Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Tourism Working Group** held in Committee Room 1, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Wednesday 14 March 2018 at 10.30 am.

Present

Mr Bill Lobban (Chairman)
Mr Gordon Adam
Mr John Bruce
Dr Ian Cockburn

Mr Craig Fraser
Mr Allan Henderson (via teleconference)
Mr Duncan Macpherson

Also in attendance

Mr C Taylor, VisitScotland

Officials in attendance

Ms T Urry, Head of Roads and Transport, Community Services, Highland Council
Ms N Wallace, Environment Manager, Development & Infrastructure, Highland Council
Mr C Simpson, Principal Tourism & Film Officer, Development & Infrastructure, Highland Council
Ms C Pittendreigh, Graduate Film and Tourism Officer, Development & Infrastructure, Highland Council
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, Chief Executive's Service, Highland Council

MR B LOBBAN IN THE CHAIR

BUSINESS

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Gordon, Mr C Smith and Ms M Smith.

2. Declarations of Interest

Item 3.a – Mr A Henderson (Non-financial)

3. Setting the scene

a. Visitor Expectations – Chris Taylor, VisitScotland

Declaration of Interest - Mr A Henderson declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds that he was a member of VisitScotland but having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

Mr Chris Taylor of VisitScotland gave a presentation which had been separated in two key parts, namely visitors and VisitScotland's role. In terms of visitors, he provided detailed information on customer needs; outlined the customer journey; provided a breakdown of the information used by visitors to

plan their trip; gave a breakdown of the key target audience; explained the consumer profiles which had been profiled into five key segments; and gave information on the compelling brand of the Highlands. In addition, further information was provided on the mix of accommodation used and activities undertaken whilst visiting the Highlands. Overall customer satisfaction was high but there was always scope to improve, particularly in regard to value for money.

In terms of working in partnership with VisitScotland, Mr Taylor set out their five key tasks; gave a breakdown of their marketing activity and the work undertaken to extend reach and get good quality content out on the Highlands; listed the business to business events that VisitScotland would be attending throughout 2018; provided information on the VisitScotland Growth Fund; set out the events directorate; explained how the VisitScotland model to disseminate information had been modernised and adapted to suit customer needs; and explained how VisitScotland supported tourism businesses.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Astonishment was expressed that visiting the Highlands/Scotland was considered as expensive as Scandinavian countries and it was essential that this perception was changed;
- It was confirmed that in addition to the key target markets (USA, Germany and France), work was also undertaken with many other countries such as the Netherlands and also China but until the visa situation changed, this market was limited;
- The Black Isle Tourist Team was currently looking at ways to capitalise on 2019/20 the Year of Water and further information was sought and provided on establishing links and engaging VisitScotland with this ongoing work;
- It was highlighted that it was difficult to find information on hotels that provided facilities for disabled visitors and it was felt that there was a need for this information to be made more accessible;
- It was confirmed that further information would be provided on the level of funding that Highland received from the VisitScotland Growth Fund; and
- The statistical information provided in the presentation was most informative and it was queried and confirmed that VisitScotland worked jointly with partners with high media profiles such as Danny MacAskill, who had been a great ambassador particularly for the Highlands, wherever possible on promotional campaigns.

Thereafter, the Working Group **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that a copy be circulated.

b. Strategic Context

There was a presentation by the Principal Tourism & Film Officer during which he explained that the Highland Council did not have a tourism strategy and instead followed and help to deliver the strategy that had been set nationally by the tourism industry. To aid this, there was a Highland Tourism Partnership, comprising a mix of public and business sector organisations

including Council representatives, which had produced a Highland Tourism Action Plan. A mid-term review had recently been completed of the Action Plan and a copy of this could be circulated. It was emphasised that the Council supported tourism across a wide range of services and also in partnership with High Life Highland. Further information was provided on the Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), of which there were currently seven, that had been established across the Highlands as well as providing examples of the broad range of sector partners that the Council jointly worked with to support tourism growth.

The Working Group **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that a copy of the mid-term review of the Highland Tourism Action Plan be circulated.

4. The role of the Tourism Working Group

At its meeting held on 14 December 2017 the Council approved the setting up of a Tourism Working Group within the Council to take a strategic overview of, and set priorities for the Council's contribution to addressing the issues described in the report presented to Council.

During discussion, it was felt that the role of the Group should be to:-

- Take an overarching view of what was needed for the whole of the Highlands;
- Ensure that Tourism was considered and promoted as part of the Council's regular business and that there should be an implication in regard to Tourism on committee reports;
- Identify funding opportunities to support investment and maintenance of essential tourism infrastructure;
- Advocate and lobby as appropriate to work collaboratively with key strategic partners to support and develop tourism across the Highlands, e.g. work in partnership with Highland and Islands Transport Partnership to develop a strategic network of electric charging station points across the Highlands;
- Identify, develop and prioritise the Council's objectives to address/support tourism; and
- Oversight of the development of a Council Tourism Plan and consideration of potential tourism projects to be incorporated.

Thereafter, the Working Group **NOTED** the position.

5. Development of a Council Tourism Plan

There had been circulated Report No TWG/01/18 by the Director of Development & Infrastructure which summarised recent activity reviewing the Council's support for Highland Tourism and recommended the production of a work plan to prioritise future activity.

During discussion, the following key points were raised:-

- It was acknowledged that the Council was not responsible for delivering tourism but by ensuring that key infrastructure was provided it could influence and have a positive impact on visitors' experience;
- It was felt that there was a need to manage visitor expectations;

- With regard to safeguarding our asset, it was highlighted that Iceland had developed a popular tourist route called the 'Golden Circle' which purposely directed visitors to specific key areas thus making the remainder of the land much untouched and protected. It was also reported that an excellent network of museums had been developed providing alternative activities for poor weather days;
- It was highlighted that Orkney was excellent at promoting local heritage and encouraging and managing visitors and that the Council could learn from this model;
- It was suggested that feedback should be sought locally at ward level and then reported back to the Group to allow them to be prioritised and addressed at a strategic level as part of the Tourism Plan; and
- Concern was expressed that certain tourist areas/activities were experiencing pressures due to the number of visitors but it was highlighted that it was not for the Council to stipulate where tourists could go. However, it was highlighted that there was a multitude of places of interest to visit throughout the Highlands and the Council should dovetail with DMOs to ensure tourists were fully informed of all the options available and this could alleviate capacity at the more heavily visited areas.

Following discussion, the Working Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the previous work undertaken in respect of reviewing the Council's Tourism Services; and
- ii. **APPROVED** the drafting of a Tourism Work Plan incorporating tourism projects to be delivered by the Council or which required support from the Council.

6. Options for funding activity

There had been circulated Report No TWG/02/18 by the Director of Development & Infrastructure which outlined some of the funding issues which would need to be considered if a range of additional tourism activity was to be undertaken and gave some suggestions on funding opportunities that might exist to help support this activity.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was highlighted that the Group needed to provide a high level strategic approach which would evolve following further meetings and enable the remit to be more fully defined;
- There was a need to address the perception that the Highlands was as expensive to visit as Scandinavian countries;
- Concern was expressed at the high rates for hotel accommodation and that if it continued to increase it would become unaffordable;
- Businesses complained about the lack of services provided by the Council in support of tourism, however it was highlighted that the Council had limited financial resources available, therefore new funding opportunities would need to be identified to address the increasing pressure for the provision and maintenance of infrastructure; and
- It was felt that there should be a report to a future meeting on implementation of a tourism levy. Revenue from such a levy would enable significant investment to be made in local infrastructure, enhancing visitor

experience, and this was recognised by industry experts. Therefore, it was essential that this proposal was fully explored.

Following discussion, the Working Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the range of possible funding opportunities that might be available towards tourism projects, most notably the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund;
- ii. **APPROVED** the proposal that the Council should actively explore and inform the funding options that might be available to support any tourism projects that the Working Group might prioritise in a Tourism Work Plan; and
- iii. **AGREED** that a meeting of the Group be scheduled for mid-April 2018 to consider projects to be submitted as an expression of interest as part of the initial application process to secure funding from the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund.

The meeting was closed at 12.15 pm.