

**The Highland Council
Tourism Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Tourism Committee held remotely on Thursday 16 July 2020 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr G Adam	Mr B Lobban (late arrival 10.58am)
Mr R Bremner	Mr H Morrison
Dr I Cockburn	Mr D Macpherson
Mr C Fraser	Mr S Mackie
Mr J Gordon	Mrs M Paterson
Mr A Henderson	Mr D Rixson
Mr A Jarvie	Ms M Smith

Non Members also Present:

Mr A Baxter	Mr J McGillivray
Mr B Boyd	Mr A MacInnes
Mrs I Campbell	Mrs D Mackay
Mr A Christie	Mr D Mackay
Mrs M Davidson	Ms A MacLean
Mr J Finlayson	Mrs T Robertson
Mr R Gale	Mr G Ross
Mr A Graham	Mr P Saggars

Also in attendance:

Mr C Taylor, VisitScotland

Officials in attendance:

Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment
Mr A McCann, Economy & Regeneration Manager
Mr C Simpson, Principal Tourism & Film Officer, Development & Infrastructure
Ms L Joiner, Tourism Projects Co-ordinator, Development & Infrastructure
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, Chief Executive's Office
Ms F McBain, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office
Ms M Zavarella, Clerical Assistant, Chief Executive's Office

An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to the Committee.

Ms Maxine Smith in the Chair

**1. Appointment of Chair
Cur Cathraiche an Dreuchd**

Mr D MacPherson seconded by Mr D Rixson moved that Mr G Adam be appointed as Chair. Mr R Bremner seconded by Dr I Cockburn moved that Ms M Smith be appointed as Chair.

In a vote between the two candidates, Ms Smith received 7 votes and Mr Adam received 6 votes - with no abstentions.

It was therefore **AGREED** to appoint **Ms M Smith** as Chair of the Tourism Committee – the votes having been cast as follows:-

Votes for Mr G Adam: Mr G Adam, Mr J Gordon, Mr A Henderson, Mr H Morrison, Mr D MacPherson, Mr D Rixson

Votes for Ms M Smith: Mr R Bremner, Dr I Cockburn, Mr C Fraser, Mr A Jarvie, Mr S Mackie, Mrs M Paterson, Ms M Smith.

Appointment of Vice Chair

Mr D Rixson seconded by Mr A Henderson moved that Mr G Adam be appointed as Vice Chair. Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr A Jarvie moved that Mr S Mackie be appointed as Vice Chair.

In a vote between the two candidates, Mr G Adam received 8 votes and Mr Mackie received 5 votes - with no abstentions.

It was therefore **AGREED** to appoint **Mr G Adam** as Vice Chair of the Tourism Committee – the votes having been cast as follows:-

Votes for Mr G Adam: Mr G Adam, Mr C Fraser, Mr J Gordon, Mr A Henderson, Mr H Morrison, Mr D MacPherson, Mrs M Paterson, Mr D Rixson

Votes for Mr S Mackie: Mr R Bremner, Dr I Cockburn, Mr A Jarvie, Mr S Mackie, Ms M Smith

2. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were no apologies for absence.

3. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

Item 5 – Mr A Henderson (Financial)
Item 6 – Dr I Cockburn (Non-financial)
Item 7 - Mr A Baxter (Non-financial)

The undernoted Members declared interests relating to all items on the agenda, for the reasons provided, but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interest did not preclude their involvement in the discussion:

Financial interests applicable to all items:

Mr G Adam - land leased to Black Isle Yurts was owned by his personal pension fund and as a part owner of two self-catering units

Mrs M Davidson – family business received a low percentage of its income from tourism

Mr A Henderson – B&B provider

Mr B Lobban - Director of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd

Mr H Morrison – Hotel owner

Mr R Bremner – B&B owner (currently not trading)

Mr J Gordon – Air BnB owner (currently not trading)

Mr A Baxter – member of Scottish Tourist Guide Association and Highlands of Scotland Tour Guide Association, and as a professional Tour Guide.

Non-financial interests applicable to all items:

Mr D Rixson – secretary of the Mallaig Heritage Centre

Mr G Adam – non-executive director of Black Isle Yurts Ltd

Ms Maxine Smith – owner of cruise sector company, Thistle Excursion (not trading this year)

Mr J Gordon - Director of Skye Connect

During discussion the Chair pointed out that a significant number of Members had tourism interests and reference was made to advice provided by the Head of Corporate Governance to Mr A Henderson in respect of his declarations of interest, that general financial interests should be declared at the start of each meeting, with the usual test from the Councillors' Code of Conduct to be used to decide whether the interests merited a withdrawal from the meeting. The Chair clarified that if discussion was to take place with direct relevance to a particular business than Members should not participate in discussion.

The Committee **NOTED** the position.

**4. Role and Remit of Tourism Committee
Dreuchd agus Raon-ùghdarrais Comataidh na Turasachd**

There was presented a summary of the proposed role and remit of the Tourism Committee which covered tourism strategy, management, investment, and consultations. It was intended the proposed remit would be presented to the Council in September 2020 for approval.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:-

- working with partners and as wide-ranging engagement as possible should be included. Members should advise the ECO Infrastructure and Environment of any relevant organisations for Highland-wide or local partnership working;
- concern was expressed at the lack of budget and resources allocated to the Tourism Committee and, although it was explained this work would come under the Council-wide economic recovery strategy, it was suggested there was an appetite to seek resources to support the Tourism Committee, noting that the Recovery Board had requested the Tourism Committee to be reconvened. Recovery of the tourism economy would require significant work, and it was acknowledged that this would need to be resourced, and it was suggested that consideration should be given to scheduling frequent meetings e.g. on a monthly basis alternating meetings with workshops;
- Crown Estate monies was suggested as a possible source of funds for innovative tourism recovery projects;
- it was important the remit included the provision of support to areas or towns not traditionally associated with tourism, to help them develop marketing strategies; and
- attention was drawn to the need for infrastructure support, for example damage to verges from vehicles of people visiting attractions.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that:-

- i. having accepted there was an appetite to seek resources to support the Tourism Committee, that this be investigated; and
- ii. liaising with partners be added to the remit and that Members advise the ECO Infrastructure and Environment of any relevant organisations for Highland-wide or local partnership working.

**5. Presentation: VisitScotland
Taisbeanadh: VisitScotland**

Declarations of Interest – Mr A Henderson declared a financial interest in this item in terms of being 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 his involvement in the discussion.

There was a presentation by Chris Taylor, Regional Director, VisitScotland on the work being undertaken to market Scotland for the remaining tourism season and how they are supporting and advising businesses and visitors.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:-

- attention was drawn to the importance of extending the traditional tourist season into Autumn and Winter, with various suggestions on marketing opportunities including fire festivals, bothy nights, astronomy opportunities, staycations, castle and history tours. It would be beneficial if some tourist organisations did not close during Winter months to help facilitate this;
- as well as tracking visitor sentiment, it was important to monitor host sentiment, noting that many business owners were nervous of opening and local residents anxious about the influx of visitors. Clear messages about the risk levels, which were low, were required, and a summary was provided of the contact that had been made with Highland businesses about risk levels and Covid-19 precautions such as hygiene, masks, and distancing;
- in relation to wild camping, it was suggested there was a difference between traditional ‘wild’ campers who had been coming to the Highlands for years, and ‘informal’ campers who were using laybys etc because campsites were closed. Some Members considered that the nuisance from informal campers and motorcaravans outweighed their economic value, while others emphasised that visitors who behaved inappropriately were in a minority, with many being forced to use layby etc because campsites were closed. It was important the reputation of the Highlands as a welcoming place was not damaged by negative attitudes against a minority of visitors, given the circumstances. There was an onus on the Council to collect rubbish that was left at litter/recycling points;
- attention was drawn to the increasing costs of PPE for business use;
- it was estimated that around 75% of current visitors were from Scotland or even from the Highlands;
- the reduction in VAT for tourist businesses was welcomed although the financial benefits might be retained by the businesses rather than passed on to the customers. Information was sought on whether the VAT benefits applied to smaller operators with annual income below £70k;

- the negative economic consequences of any downturn in tourism were highlighted;
- there was likely to be fewer tourists from abroad on expensive trips, with local and UK visitors tending to spend less. With Highland holidays being comparatively more expensive than some cheaper foreign holidays, local businesses should reconsider their pricing strategy, although it was pointed out that in the current times, informal feedback was that customers were not trying to negotiate on price;
- it was disappointing that so many smaller tourist information points on the NC500 route had closed, although it was explained this had been because they were not being used, with visitors preferring online information in advance of their trips;
- local businesses were encouraged to register with VisitScotland;
- attention was drawn to the diversity of attractions, geography and facilities across the Highlands and to the importance of localised approaches and strategies in addition to Highland-wide policies. Some areas were more experienced in marketing themselves, such as Lochaber's Outdoor Capital designation, and similar types of straplines and signage might benefit other areas;
- the increase in average length of stays across the Highlands was welcomed;
- reference was made to the complexities in developing local byelaws;
- various improvements to rural infrastructure were suggested, noting that small investments could bring significant benefits. The lack of public convenience facilities might be alleviated by installing cheaper, more temporary facilities;
- consideration should be given to allowing people such as crofters to open their gardens and home facilities to campers, similar to the Air BnB system;
- the 'leave no trace' message required constant reinforcement;
- concern was expressed that the report stated there were no implications for Gaelic, and the economic benefits of Gaelic to the tourist industry were outlined; and
- tourist businesses should be encouraged to open as soon as possible to aid the Highland's economic recovery.

The Regional Director, VisitScotland, responded briefly to the points made during discussion and, given the lack of time, offered to discuss any issues in more detail outwith the meeting.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** the Regional Director, VisitScotland, be invited regularly to the Committee, e.g. alternate meetings.

6. Future Tourism Strategy

Ro-innleachd airson Turasachd na Gàidhealtachd san Àm ri Teachd

Declarations of Interest – Dr I Cockburn declared a non-financial interest in this item in terms of being on the Board of Wester Ross Biosphere, 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 his involvement in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No TC/01/20 dated 3 July 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure and Environment.

A summary was provided of the situation regarding Scotland's new National Tourism Strategy and outlined the current proposals in Highland that included a suite of Destination Management Plans that identified the tourism priorities across the different areas of Highland.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- noting the need to work with a wider range of local partners at local level, it was suggested the Area Committee be used to progress local tourism strategies and these be used as a basis to develop an overarching Tourism Strategy for the Highlands;
- the important role of all local organisations, not only the Council, was emphasised. However, the challenges around actioning all local suggestions was highlighted, with particular reference to finding solutions that were not excessively bureaucratic and time-consuming. A working group for urgent work was suggested and the need for a method of prioritisation of potential projects was required;
- it was suggested the clarity of the Council's communication structure could be improved;
- the significant Gaelic implications of tourism should be listed in future reports;
- an update on the Council's progress with the Transient Visitor Levy should be provided at the next Committee;
- the use of a digital platform to promote the cultural and historical heritage of the Highlands should be investigated;
- many seasonal workers had not yet been in employment at the start of lockdown and had therefore not been furloughed, and many external workers had left the Highlands as a result;
- the difference between 'destination plans' and 'destination management plans' was highlighted, with reference to paragraph 6.7 of the report, which it was considered lacked the word 'management'; and
- at a strategic level, a multi-agency approach to tourism was essential in Highland. It would be useful for the Committee to start analysing data around visitor numbers, length of stay and average spend, and to consider how best to support businesses, communities, tourists and the workforce. In February 2020, information on 2019 data had been commissioned and it was hoped this would be available in the next 5-6 weeks. The Recovery Board would be seeking marketing plans for tourism at a local, national and international level to rebuild demand. Mitigation was required for the unemployment that had resulted from Covid-19, and it would be helpful to invite the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy to the next meeting to raise his awareness of the unique issues and opportunities facing the Highlands.

The Committee:

NOTED:

- i. the current situation regarding the National Tourism Strategy;
- ii. the proposals for strategies and destination plans that would identify tourism priorities in Highland;

AGREED:

- iii. an update on the Council's position on the Transient Visitor Levy proposal and progress to date be brought to next meeting of the Committee;
- iv. the use of a digital platform to promote the cultural and historical heritage of the Highlands be investigated; and
- v. Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, or a representative, be invited to the next meeting of the Committee.

**7. Tourism Infrastructure
Pròiseactan Bun-structair Turasachd**

Declarations of Interest – Mr A Baxter declared a non-financial interest in this item in terms of being a Director of Nevis Landscape Partnership and trustee of Ardnamurchan Lighthouse Trust, 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 his involvement in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No TC/02/20 dated 3 July 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- of the 31 rural tourism infrastructure projects listed, only one had been completed. In addition, 17 of 31 related to public conveniences and 18 of 31 related to motor homes demonstrating the pressure points/demands;
- the installation of vehicle charging points at public facilities should be standard as part of the green agenda and details were provided on work ongoing on this; and
- the Tourism Infrastructure Plan should be presented to the Committee as soon as possible, and it was hoped this would be possible by late summer 2020.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. current position with the production of a Highland Tourism Infrastructure Plan;
- ii. current situation with tourism infrastructure projects that were underway;
- iii. anticipated range of projects likely to form applications to the third round of the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund; and

AGREED the Tourism Infrastructure Plan be brought to Committee as soon as possible.

The meeting concluded at 1.05pm.