

The Highland Council Tourism Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the Tourism Committee held remotely on Wednesday, 17 March 2021 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr G Adam	Mr A MacInnes
Mr R Bremner	Mr S Mackie
Mr J Bruce	Mr D Macpherson
Dr I Cockburn	Mr H Morrison
Mr C Fraser	Mrs M Paterson
Mr J Gordon	Mr D Rixson
Mr A Henderson	Ms M Smith

Non-Members also Present:

Mrs J Barclay	Mr B Lobban
Mrs I Campbell	Mr G Mackenzie
Mrs H Carmichael	Mr C Munro
Mr K Gowans	Mrs T Robertson
Mr A Graham	Mr P Saggars
Mr J Finlayson	Mr B Thompson

Officials in attendance:

Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive
Mr M MacLeod, Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment
Ms C McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place
Mr C Simpson, Principal Officer – Europe, Tourism & Film, Infrastructure & Environment
Mr P Waite, Countryside Team Leader, Infrastructure & Environment
Mr A McKinnie, Senior Waste Manager, Communities and Place
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, Performance and Governance
Ms F MacBain, Committee Administrator, Performance and Governance

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

Mr Gordon Adam in the Chair

Preliminaries

The Scottish Government had announced, the previous day, earlier than expected lifting, from 26 April 2021, of Covid-19 restrictions in relation to tourism and travel.

- * Given the need to prepare for this, the Committee **AGREED** to recommend to the Council that a special meeting of the Committee be held on either 21 or 22 April 2021, or the previous week, depending on the ability of officers to prepare the required reports in adequate time, this to be decided outwith the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were no apologies for absence.

2. **Declarations of Interest** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

Item 4 – Mr D Rixson (Non-financial)

Item 5 – Mr D Rixson (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 interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion:

Financial interests applicable to all items:

Mr G Adam - part owner of two self-catering units

Mr J Gordon – Air BnB provider

Mr A Henderson – B&B provider

Mr H Morrison – Hotel owner

Ms M Smith – director of Thistle Excursion (not trading this year)

Mr R Bremner - provider of AirBnB but has been closed since summer last year and is still closed due to current restriction

Non-financial interests applicable to all items:

Mr G Adam – Director of a glamping business

Mr J Gordon – Council Representative of Skye Connect

3. **Storr Car Park/Toilets** **Pàirc-chàraichean/Taighean-beaga an Stòir**

There had been circulated TC/01/21 dated 3 March 2021 Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- the Tourism Team, Ward Manager, and local Members were thanked for their work on the project which would transform the area for the benefit of local residents and visitors;
- the importance of local engagement and deploying local contractors was also highlighted and there was a need for this approach to be incorporated into an ambitious programme to deliver visitor management improvements across the Highlands; and
- reference was made to the importance of the project given the problems that had been experienced in previous years, such as traffic congestion, lack of public conveniences and proper paths. It was hoped the project would encourage business opportunities for locals and income generation for the Council.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the good progress on this particular site; and
- ii. **AGREED** that further opportunities for the delivery of new visitor management related car park improvements are moved forward at pace as part of The Highland Council's agreed process for car park charging roll-out.

4. Visitor Management Plan Plana Stiùiridh Luchd-tadhail

Mr D Rixson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Council's representative on the Isle of Rum Community Trust and as the Secretary of the Mallaig Heritage Centre 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 discussion.

There had been circulated TC/02/21 dated 4 March 2021 Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

A presentation was provided on key issues affecting visitor management, lessons learnt from previous years, and plans for future improvements. A summary was provided of the Council's role in visitor management, including roads and parking management, outdoor access, public toilets, waste management, motor homes, public transport, working with partners and the planned next steps.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- the Convener pointed out that the absence of a map showing parking provision in Ward 20 was not acceptable. The map should be issued to all Council Members, to include Ward 20;
- attention was drawn to the problems faced when popular sites of interest were on private land where land-owners were discouraging visitors and blocking visitor management solutions. This would be discussed with the Council's Legal Services;
- concern was expressed that some information had been provided to Community Councils and not to local Members and it was requested that proposals should be considered at ward business meetings as a general rule. Specifically, the car park proposals should be discussed at ward business meetings within the coming two weeks if possible, prior to proposals being presented at the next meeting of the Committee, which it was hoped would be in mid to late April 2021;
- assurance was sought and provided that car park meters would have cashless payment options;
- the trial of bus services to visitor sites on Skye during the three peak tourist season months was welcomed and it was hoped this might be expanded elsewhere, with Fort-William to Glenfinnan provided as an example of somewhere that would benefit from a visitor bus service. In addition to longer term solutions such as the bid to the Strategic Bus Infrastructure Fund, consideration should also be given to more immediate solutions;
- attention was drawn to the problem of potholes on many Highland roads, exacerbated by the recent severe winter weather, and likely to be further affected by large numbers of motor homes;
- the usefulness of having someone directing traffic at busy visitor attraction car parks during peak times was highlighted and it was suggested community volunteers could be trained to assist during busy periods;
- the importance of liaison with the police and other partners should be strengthened in the Plan. A weekly update from the police on issues at tourist hotspots would be helpful and the public should be provided with information on the depth and breadth of the role of the police in visitor-related matters to avoid unrealistic expectations from the public;

- work should be undertaken in partnership with the private sector to support commercial provision;
- it was important that dates were added to the Plan, and attention was drawn to the tight timescales required to avoid repeating the problems experienced the previous summer, and also to the additional budget available this year to tackle some of the problems. It was confirmed that detailed action plans would be developed and that while not everything would be in place by 26 April, it was hoped they would be in place before peak tourist season. The announcement of the lifting of restrictions on travel and tourism on 26 April had been unexpected;
- the team were commended for their work on the Plan to date;
- the visibility and identifiability of rangers or other visitor-related staff was important;
- partnership working with communities was vital;
- it would be helpful if all rangers were trained to a similar level as the Council rangers;
- the Tourism Committee had only been in operation since mid-2020, with one aim being to attract funding from the Scottish Government and other organisations, and that tourism was not a statutory requirement of the Council but was nevertheless being undertaken. Attention was drawn to staff pressure in this area and the improvements which had already been undertaken;
- attention was drawn to the number of people and businesses affected economically by the Covid crisis and the need to find a balance between opening up the economy while still caring for communities. The Highlands was a bolt hole for many people from urban areas in Scotland and beyond and it was important awareness of this was raised with the Scottish government to ensure they understood the challenges being faced in the Highlands and the need for flexibility on how rules were applied given the unique situation;
- ward business meetings would be key to obtaining Members' feedback on the issues contained in the Plan; and
- the need to develop 'aires' for motor homes was emphasised and it was important they could be established with minimum bureaucracy to encourage people to set them up. An appropriate Scottish name was required, and suggestions would be emailed to Members of the Committee to vote on. Gaelic options would be verified with the Gaelic Translation Officer.

The Committee **AGREED:**

- i. the immediate implementation of The Highland Council Visitor Management Plan for 2021 subject to incorporating any proposed further alterations;
- ii. the ongoing modification of the Plan to consider longer term requirements in a 5-year Visitor Management Plan;
- iii. the continuation of the cross-service officer group to monitor progress of the Plan and liaise with other agencies involved in visitor management;
- iv. to discuss legal issues around visitor attractions being on private land with the Council's legal services;
- v. to issue the map showing Council Visitor Facilities and Car Parks to all Council Members;
- vi. the car park proposals be taken in the first instance to ward business meetings for discussion, ideally within two weeks of the 17 March 2021, prior to proposals being taken to the next meeting of the Tourism Committee;
- vii. to strengthen reference to increasing liaison with the police and other partners in the Plan;

- viii. to consider, outwith the meeting, alternative short term solutions to traffic congestion at popular visitor attractions, such as the Glenfinnan monument, pending longer term solutions being finalised (such as the bid to the Strategic Bus Infrastructure Fund); and
- ix. that Committee members be invited to vote on options for naming the proposed motor home 'aires' by email.

5. Tourism Infrastructure Bun-structair Turasachd

Mr D Rixson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Council's representative on the Isle of Rum Community Trust and as the Secretary of the Mallaig Heritage Centre 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 discussion.

There had been circulated TC/03/21 dated 3 March 2021 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- it was hoped there would shortly be an announcement on the outcome of the five waitlist projects detailed in the report;
- the Tourism Team were thanked for their work;
- it was important, going forward, to collect adequate data, for example on parking or waste disposal pressure points, which could be used for future funding and resourcing decisions. The employment of seasonal ranger / wardens would help with this and reference was made to the piloting of an app that could be used to gather data and that might, in future, be able to provide real-time information on pressure points etc;
- the seasonal ranger posts would be advertised through MyJobScotland and through social media. Members' assistance with publicity at local level was encouraged; and
- the helpfulness of using volunteer litter pickers was raised, along with the issues of insurance and liability, especially near roads. This would be further investigated outwith the meeting. A brief summary was provided of the intended work of the additional seasonal waste management staff.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the current position with the production of a Highland Tourism Infrastructure Plan;
- ii. **NOTED** the current situation with tourism infrastructure projects that are under way; and
- iii. **AGREED** to investigate issues around the use of volunteers for litter picking, particularly in the vicinity of roads.

The meeting ended at 12.30pm