

## **The Highland Council Tourism Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Tourism Committee held REMOTELY on Wednesday, 14 October 2020 at 10.30am.

### **Present:**

Mr Gordon Adam	Mr Hugh Morrison
Mr Raymond Bremner	Mr Duncan Macpherson
Dr Ian Cockburn	Mr Struan Mackie
Mr Alex MacInnes (sub for Mr C Fraser)	Mrs Margaret Paterson
Mr John Gordon	Mr Denis Rixson
Mr Allan Henderson	Ms Maxine Smith
Mr Bill Lobban	

### **Non Members also Present:**

Mr Andrew Baxter	Mr Jim McGillivray
Mr Alasdair Christie	Mr Willie Mackay
Mrs Margaret Davidson	Mrs Trish Robertson
Mr John Finlayson	

### **Officials in attendance:**

Ms D Manson, Chief Executive  
Ms K Lackie, Executive Chief Officer, Performance and Governance  
Ms A MacNeil, Senior Public Relations Officer  
Mr A Maguire, Head of Development & Regeneration  
Mr C Simpson, Principal Officer – Europe, Tourism & Film  
Miss J MacLennan, Democratic Services Manager  
Ms F MacBain, Committee Administrator

**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. Apology for Absence Leisgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr Craig Fraser.

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

Item 3 – Mr D Rixson (Non-financial)  
Item 4 – Mr D Rixson (Non-financial)  
Item 6 – 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 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 A Henderson – B&B provider

Mr B Lobban - Director of Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd

Mr R Bremner – B&B owner

Mr J Gordon – Air BnB owner

Mr A Baxter – freelance Tour Guide.

**Non-financial interests applicable to all items:**

Mr G Adam – Director of a glamping business

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

Mr J Gordon - Director of Skye Connect

Following a discussion about the number of Members with an interest in tourism, and which interests required to be declared, the Chair proposed and the Committee **AGREED** that an explanatory note be put on future agendas to clarify the situation.

**3. Tourism Infrastructure Plan  
Plana Bun-structair Turasachd**

**Declaration of Interest: 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 Report No TC/03/20 dated 18 September 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Member feedback on the Plan should be sought via Ward meetings, these to be arranged for each Ward, ideally before the end of December 2020;
- Ward Managers should provide Community Councils with the opportunity to express their views on the Tourism Infrastructure Plan, including raising their awareness of what the Council was responsible for and in due course the Plan should be considered by Area Committees;
- engagement should be undertaken with other agencies and partner organisations in relation to tourism infrastructure requirements, ideally by inviting them to participate in Member Workshops;
- it would be helpful if aspirational facilities could be indicated in the Plan, these to be established through local consultation, with a 'bottom-up' approach;
- control and ownership of infrastructure assets could be a potential challenge in some areas;
- problems with excessive numbers of motorhomes were more acute in certain popular hotspots with too little parking. Whilst the majority of visitors were welcomed, some Members considered a stricter approach should be taken in relation to those who behaved inappropriately, such as parking in inappropriate places or leaving litter and toilet waste. Reference was also

made to the potential for implementation and enforcement of Road Traffic Orders and By-laws. Members also spoke of the value of tourism to the Highlands and the importance of continuing to welcome visitors and promote the unique attractions of the Highlands;

- ferry terminal car parks and waiting areas could be considered as possible electric vehicle charging points;
- there was an increasing problem with informal action against poor visitor behaviour, such as locked gates, roadside blockages which could be dangerous, and inappropriate signage;
- it was likely that 'staycations' and motorhome usage would increase in 2021 and therefore prompt action to find solutions to the challenges faced in 2020 was required. Suggestions included allowing landowners and local communities to make land available for overnight stays for a small fee and it was suggested that the Council could facilitate this where possible by identifying and possibly helping to mitigate requirements such as planning, licensing and establishing from SEPA and Scottish Water what the regulations were around the use of chemical toilets and other similar issues. Commercial opportunities should be welcomed, particularly in areas experiencing high visitor numbers and it was noted that this would be further considered at Item 5 on the agenda and also at the planned Ward meetings, and advice would be sought by the Chair from the relevant planning managers on what permissions and/or licences might be required for landowners or private home owners to charge motorhomes for the use of their private land and facilities overnight;
- the importance of consultation with local communities, even on relatively small issues such as signage location, was emphasised;
- in relation to the provision of signage seeking visitor co-operation with issues such as no overnight parking in laybys, it was suggested that a bid could be made for Crown Estate funds to assist with this provision;
- it was also suggested that by-laws or Road Traffic Orders were required to facilitate the enforcement of No Overnight Parking and/or the prohibition of alcohol consumption in certain locations, with examples provided of visitors parking overnight in single track road passing places and other similar anti-social behaviour. Consideration should be given to the introduction of such by-laws, either at a local level, pan-Highland or nationally. It was pointed out that such by-laws would apply to locals as well as to visitors and the Chair, Vice Chair and Principal Traffic Officer would discuss this further in the first instance;
- the challenges around the provision of public conveniences and waste management were highlighted. Local initiatives should be encouraged, noting the capital and revenue funding requirements could be significant;
- the importance of localism was also emphasised;
- there were many types of motorhomes, with some visitors preferring to stay in official caravan parks, while others preferred to park independently, possibly to avoid paying additional charges. Reference was also made to the considerable amounts of money spent by some visitors in the Highlands;
- the importance of engagement with landowners was emphasised;
- the merits of developing a system of 'Aires' (locations designed for short overnight stays) were explained, noting that they ideally needed to be as close as possible to local facilities or attractions;
- work should be undertaken at local level to identify how to extend the tourist season;

- work required to be undertaken with the private sector in relation to the provision of public conveniences and to increase the capacity of camping and caravan parks;
- given the importance of tourism to the Highland economy, it was disappointing that no specific Council budget was allocated to it and there was a need for this and also dedicated staff in this area;
- the problem of visitors parking overnight in cemetery car parks was highlighted;
- the electric charging point in Durness had been out of order for over two years and assistance was requested to facilitate its repair;
- reference was made to the infrastructure improvement work already undertaken on Skye to reduce roadside parking;
- in addition to the need to find short term solutions to ease the immediate problems being faced, a long-term strategy was required and should be developed as locally as possible;
- with regard to capacity, it was pointed out that if 30-40 motor homes were moved on from one area of the Highlands, they would need to find somewhere else to park;
- local community warden schemes would be helpful if funding could be sourced; and
- it was suggested that consideration should be given to adopting a business-like approach to projects, taking calculated risks to raise income and borrow money for required infrastructure in order to reap future rewards.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the range of tourism infrastructure that was already provided in Highland;
- ii. the initial observations of where there might be considered to be gaps in provision;
- iii. and the comments made on how further gaps might be identified and who else might be involved in the process;

and **AGREED**:-

- iv. to consider adding aspirational facilities to the Tourism Infrastructure Plan, these to be established through local consultation;
- v. Ward Managers should provide Community Councils with the opportunity to express their views on the Tourism Infrastructure Plan;
- vi. consideration be given to inviting partner organisations and other relevant agencies to participate in Member Workshops on infrastructure requirements;
- vii. to consider submitting a bid for funding for signage to the Crown Estate;
- viii. to arrange Ward Meetings with Local Members to discuss local facility provision, both current and aspirational, with these to be held in all Wards ideally before the end of December 2020;
- ix. discussion to take place between the Chair, Vice Chair and Principal Traffic Officer on the usefulness and/or drawbacks of Road Traffic Orders, either locally, Highland-wide or nationally; and
- x. that discussions should be undertaken with Planning Managers as to what permissions and/or licences might be required by landowners or private home owners in relation to charging the owners of motorhomes for the use of their private land and facilities overnight.

#### 4. **Visitor Management Plan Plana Stiùiridh Luchd-tadhail**

**Declaration of Interest: 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 Report No TC/04/20 dated 23 September 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was vital that the Visitor Management Plan (VMP) was taken forward at a local level and in this regard attention was drawn to the localism being achieved in Lochaber, with solution-focused community engagement and recognition of the long-term approach required;
- the pros and cons of Road Traffic Orders were discussed and in this regard it was highlighted that there were often objectors and previous attempts had not been taken forward by the Procurator Fiscal. In this respect, the Leader suggested that she would discuss this and similar issues with the Chief Executive before taking them forward to the Procurator Fiscal;
- the input from non-Members of the Committee was valued and helped to implement localism, especially in light of the diverse needs of different areas across the Highlands. It was confirmed that local tourism plans were being taken forward to link into the tourism strategy;
- it was important that the public were given information on the extent of the Council's responsibilities and the agencies with whom they were shared;
- it was also important not to alienate the majority of well-behaved visitors in tackling the minority who did not behave respectfully;
- infrastructure improvement and funding plans should be worked on while VMPs were being developed;
- details of the wide variety of tourist attractions in the Highlands should be incorporated in tourism plans;
- transport into and around the Highlands was a key issue;
- lessons should be learned from good practice in other areas of the Highlands and further afield;
- in relation to lists of facilities and infrastructure, it was important to identify gaps and aspirations;
- key words going forward were robustness and goodwill;
- the need to lobby for additional funding to implement the VMP was vital, noting that tourism brought in tax revenue for the Government, some of which should be re-invested in the Highlands;
- efforts to reduce the bureaucracy around change and improvements, and to improve cross-service working, were welcomed;
- it was felt that the issue of tourism had been neglected by the Council for many years;
- reorganisation of the Council's budget in relation to tourism was urged, including giving consideration to income from parking being retained at a

local level to incentivise local communities to implement parking charges and use the funds to improve their infrastructure and/or facilities;

- additional enforcement officers in relation to parking would be useful;
- a strategic and seasonal approach to preparation for the main tourism season was suggested, similar to the approach to winter preparations;
- the need for local ideas to extend the tourist season should be added to the agenda for the Ward Meetings agreed at Item 3;
- information should be sought on Destination Management Plans in use in Highland as well as those being used by other countries, such as New Zealand and Iceland, and on marketing undertaken in relation to the Outdoor Capital of the UK designation in Fort William;
- it was vital to reconsider the Council's policy in relation to public conveniences and to enhance rather than reduce provision;
- while acknowledging that now was not the time to introduce the Transient Visitor Levy given the problems faced by the tourist industry as a result of Covid-19, it remained something that required implementation in future years and it was noted that an update would be provided at Item 7;
- although some Members were in favour of implementing by-laws in relation to traffic and / or alcohol consumption, it was also suggested that there were other ways of dealing with these issues;
- the Council needed supportive policies, local power and enough staff to implement all the requirements for tourism to thrive. As such, it was suggested that increased staffing levels for tourism could be recouped through the Transient Visitor Levy in due course as a 'pay it forward' initiative;
- it was important for the Council to not put unnecessarily bureaucratic obstacles in the way of progress;
- a review of the Community Services budget priorities to ensure funds were allocated to essential facilities, such as public conveniences, was suggested;
- the Highland tourist industry was providing services and taxation income for the entire country; and
- attention was drawn to the merits of Gaelic culture and music as a tourist attraction, with particular mention of Fèis Rois, the Royal National Mod and Plockton Music School.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the issues identified by each Service in the appendices to the report and **AGREED**:-

- i. the continuation of the cross-Service Officer Group to identify possible solutions and make recommendations on how to address the issues identified;
- ii. the production of a Visitor Management Plan for 2021 to be presented to the Committee at the earliest opportunity;
- iii. modification of the immediate Plan to consider longer term requirements in a 5-year Visitor Management Plan
- iv. to add to the agenda of the Ward Meetings, as agreed at Item 3, to seek ideas from Local Members on ways to extend the usual tourist season in their areas;
- v. that the Tourism Co-ordinator should seek information on current Destination Management Plans in use in Highland as well as those being used by other countries, such as New Zealand and Iceland, and on

- marketing undertaken in relation to the Outdoor Capital of the UK designation in Fort William;
- vi. that the Chief Executive and Leader should discuss contacting the Procurator Fiscal in relation to support for the Council's aspirations for the future; and
  - vii. to consider a review of the Community Services budget priorities to ensure funds were allocated to essential facilities such as public conveniences.

## **5. Motorhomes and Wild Camping Dachaighean-motair agus Campachadh Fiadhaich**

There had been circulated Report No TC/05/20 dated 23 September 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- a summary was provided of the history and current situation with regard to the creation of an 'Aire' (a short-stay overnight parking area) at North Kessock. A detailed planning application had been made to facilitate 28-30 motorhomes and it was hoped that this model might be useful for other areas of the Highlands experiencing similar issues, many having been highlighted during earlier items on the agenda. It was suggested the communications team should also publicise the Council's desire to receive expressions of interest from landowners in relation to the creation of more Aires;
- information should be sought from SEPA and Scottish Water on their requirements in relation to the use of chemical toilets on private land in order to advise any private landowners interested in allowing motorhomes to use their land overnight for a small charge;
- while the responsible use of wildfires was permitted under Outdoor Access legislation, it was disappointing that, in some popular beauty spots, unsightly debris was being left behind as a result of irresponsible wildfires whereby there were reports of people cutting down trees or removing fence posts to burn. A code of conduct would be helpful but enforcement was challenging;
- examples were provided of poor behaviour (inappropriate parking, use of alcohol, and littering) observed in known beauty spots, including Glen Etive, Glen Nevis and Applecross, and it was suggested that by-laws were required to assist in tackling this issue. It was also pointed out that by-laws would apply to local people as well as visitors;
- information on the number of motorhomes visiting the Highlands would be helpful and it was hoped that this information might be included in VisitScotland's end of year report, which would be reported in due course;
- in relation to roadside parking, clearway regulations could be helpful but needed to cover grass verges as well; and
- the difference between genuine wild camping and the more recent 'dirty' camping by the roadside was highlighted.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the range of problems reported during Summer 2020 related to informal or “freedom camping” in motorhomes and wild camping in tents;
- ii. the differing legal positions related to these two activities and how this would necessitate differing approaches to identifying solutions;
- iii. proposals for working with partners to find ways of addressing these issues in advance of the 2021 season;

and **AGREED**:-

- iv. to issue communication that the Council was keen to hear from landowners who might be interested in creating an Aire;
- v. to obtain from SEPA and Scottish Water what their requirements would be in relation to the use of chemical toilets on private land in order to advise any private landowners interested in allowing motorhomes to use their land overnight for a small charge; and
- vi. to report VisitScotland’s end of year figures in due course and to note the extent of motorhome usage, if included.

## **6. Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund Maoin Bun-structair Turasachd Dùthchail**

**Declaration of Interest: Mr A Baxter declared a non-financial interest in this item as a trustee of the 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 discussion.**

A verbal update was undertaken by the Principal Officer – Europe, Tourism & Film as follows:

- from the first two rounds of applications to the Fund, one was complete (Bla Bheinn) and five were expected to complete in the next month or so (Bealach na Ba, Portree car/ motorhome parking and waste unit, Glenfinnan Car park, Cromarty slipways, and Mallaig / Traigh – 2-part project - Traigh element complete, Mallaig due to start late 2020);
- other projects with work taking place on site were:-
  - Storr car park / toilets (Council led)
  - Lochinver
  - Glenfinnan - bridge / footpath work was out to tender and would commence as soon as the car park was finished
  - Cromarty motorhome site – planning decision expected this week
  - Storr paths – work under way
- further projects included Eigg (with tenders well over budget, further discussions on resolution were under way) and Glen Nevis (with the lease of land to Nevis Partnership still to be concluded). Planning issues for the reserve project in Helmsdale still required to be addressed; and
- full applications for Round Three were due by 5pm on 14 October 2020, with 16 Highland submissions expected (66 nationally) and approval likely to be in mid-December 2020.



The Committee **NOTED** the verbal update and **AGREED** to distribute to Members the list of Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund applications submitted on 14 October 2020.

## 7. Transient Visitor Levy Update

At the request of the Chair, the Committee **AGREED** to consider this item of additional business.

It was confirmed that progress with the Transient Visitor Levy (TVL) Scottish Government Bill had been paused in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 crisis and it had not been mentioned in the recently published Scottish Government Programme.

In this regard, the Chair emphasised that while there was no intention of trying to introduce the TVL during the Covid-19 crisis or its recovery period, it was proposed that, in order to plan for future years, a letter be sent to the Scottish Government First Minister, copying the Tourism Minister and Finance Secretary, asking for assurance that the TVL would be taken forward within the coming five years or that the Council be provided with an alternative fund with which to raise the required funds.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was imperative that no additional financial burden be placed on the tourist industry in the immediate future given its fragility, although support was voiced for the TVL in a few years' time, noting that it would be passed on to visitors and not paid for by businesses;
- the VAT reduction to 5% for the industry was valuable and it was proposed that the UK Government should be lobbied to make this permanent; and
- support was voiced for the proposal from the Chair in relation to the process for the TVL but it was requested that the draft letter be circulated to the Committee for input in the first instance.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the update and **AGREED**:-

- i. to lobby the UK Government for a permanent reduction in VAT for tourism businesses; and
- i. to draft a letter to the Scottish Government in relation to the future implementation of a Transient Visitor Levy and to circulate the draft letter to the Committee for comment in the first instance.

The meeting concluded at 2.10pm, having adjourned for lunch from 12.50pm to 1.20pm.