

**THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

**INVERNESS CITY COMMITTEE – 8 JUNE 2009**

Agenda Item	<b>13.2</b>
Report No	<b>ICC 45/09</b>

**COMMON GOOD FUND - INVERNESS TOWN HOUSE TOURS**

**Joint Report by Director of Planning and Development and the Inverness City Manager**

**SUMMARY**

This paper summarises the results of the pilot tours of Inverness Town House carried out in winter 2008-09 and recommends a way forward for running tours during summer 2009.

**1. Background**

1.1 At the City Committee meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008 Members considered a paper on public tours of the Town House and approved the running of a pilot scheme. This pilot took place in winter 2008-09 utilising professional guides from the Highlands of Scotland Tour Guides Association (HOSTGA) with the costs of the pilot covered by the Council's Tourism Development budget.

**2. Pilot tours**

2.1 In autumn 2008 a number of discussions were held with committee members from HOSTGA and an agreement reached for them to run pilot tours. The prospective guides paid a number of visits to the Town House and were provided with information and guide books to allow them to create an itinerary for the pilot tours.

2.2 Two pilot tours were held in December 2008 with invited participants from within the Council and from partners such as VisitScotland who were expected to (and did) provide feedback to the guides on the tours.

2.3 In early January a further meeting was held with the guides to consider the issues that had arisen from the pilot tours. Some of the issues raised related to the content of the tours and these points have been taken on board by the guides in a revised itinerary. This included recognising that there will be times when a certain part or parts of the Town House cannot be visited on a tour. Other points related to more practical issues including:-

- agreeing an appropriate length for the tour that would suit a fairly broad audience.
- the need for a booking system that allowed visitors to make a booking for a tour at as wide a range of times as possible e.g. at weekends. The system would also have to allow entry without the need for all participants to sign in individually and receive a visitor badge at the commencement of the tour.
- the need to allow visitors the opportunity to purchase the Town House guide book recently published by the Council.
- could any links be made with the Council run Inverness Museum and Art Gallery?
- the need for a system of payment for the guides that recognised their time commitment irrespective of whether there were large or small numbers of tour

participants - or indeed none at all.

### **3. Proposals for formal tours**

- 3.1 In order to allow a reasonable amount of the Town House to be visited and to provide an experience visitors feel offers good value for money without being so long as to only appeal to those with a specialist interest it is recommended that tours last approximately one hour.
- 3.2 In view of its proximity, longer opening hours and existing ticket sale systems it is recommended that bookings be made through the neighbouring VisitScotland Information Centre. Although this would incur a cost in terms of commission this would be incorporated into the price recommended for the tour and would avoid the need for the Council to set up a separate cash handling and booking system. Tour guides would pick up a list of those booked for each tour from the VIC and could leave this with the Town House reception staff so that individual visitors did not need to sign in.
- 3.3 The itinerary discussed with the HOSTGA guides would see the tour commence from the public entrance on Castle Street before visiting key areas of the Town House and exiting by the main door. This allows the tour to conclude with coverage of external features of the Town House and neighbouring buildings before finishing at Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. As well as there being related exhibits in the museum e.g. historic photographs, the museum would have Town House guide books for sale. The museum has also suggested they could offer tour participants a discount on food and drink from the museum café on presentation of their ticket. As well as offering an improved service to visitors this could increase footfall for the museum.
- 3.4 The HOSTGA guides are all professional, qualified guides and as such make a charge for their services and would expect payment any time their services are booked. The rates charged can vary depending on the individual guide and the type and length of tour being undertaken but as an association HOSTGA have agreed set rates for common tours such as cruise ship passenger excursions. It is recommended that the Council take a similar approach and agree a fixed payment to the guides for each tour undertaken.
- 3.5 In order to offer a good quality service to visitors it is recommended that the Council commit to the guides offering a tour irrespective of how many people are booked. Not only does this give the programme of tours time to become established but it also prevents any disappointment caused by cancellations due to low booking numbers.
- 3.6 Paying a fixed amount per tour gives the guides the degree of security they require when committing to guide a Town House tour and potentially turning down other business for that time. However it does carry a financial risk in that the numbers attending any given tour would not necessarily cover the costs involved in running that tour. To minimise the financial risk it is therefore important that the Council sets a price for tours and a rate of payment for the guides that should as much as possible balance losses from some tours with profits from others. It is also important that the price is seen by visitors as offering good value otherwise the uptake is likely to be limited. To a degree the risk can also be managed by limiting the number of tours per week at least in the early weeks which should encourage greater levels of attendance on each tour. It is recommended that two tours per week are run at least initially until demand can be measured.
- 3.7 Using the normal rates charged for day or half day tours by the guides and allowing one

and a half hours for the tour and extra time for bookings related work prior to the tour it is recommended each guide is paid a rate of £30 per tour guided. Analysis of visitor attraction entry charges or tour charges locally suggests a price of £4.50 per tour would be reasonable. A discounted price is common for concessions such as students and senior citizens and £3.00 (2/3 of the full price) is recommended for these groups. As an incentive to families children under 16 could be included free and this can be an effective way of boosting numbers of full paying visitors. When the costs of ticket sales are taken into account this would mean an average of 8 - 9 adults would be required for tours to break even. This excludes any additional income that may be derived from sales of the Town House guide book to those participating in the tours.

#### **4. Resource Implications**

- 4.1 The programme of tours of the Town House could break even but particularly in the early days when as a new service it is not so well known there are likely to be losses on some tours. However establishing the tours and giving the degree of certainty that is required for them to be successful means that it is worth accepting a level of commercial risk at least in the first season.
- 4.2 If tours were run twice a week for 20 weeks (e.g. mid June to the end of the October holidays) the total cost for the guides would be £1200 and there would be additional costs involved in printing tickets and publicity materials. Set against this would be any income from the tours so any shortfall is unlikely to exceed £2000. If tours were particularly poorly supported the programme could be adjusted to limit losses and equally more tours could be run in high season if there is demand and this could cross subsidise quieter tours.

#### **5. Recommendation**

- 5.1 The Committee is invited to:
  - a) approve the running of twice weekly tours of Inverness Town House commencing in June 2009 and continuing until autumn 2009 with any adjustments to the frequency of tours and an exact end date to be set depending on business levels.
  - b) approve funding of up to £2000 from the Inverness Common Good Fund to underwrite any financial shortfall arising from the running of a programme of tours of the Inverness Town House.

Designation: Director of Planning & Development

Designation: Inverness City Manager

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