

# The Highland Council

## Planning, Environment and Development Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the **Tourism Project Group** held in Committee Room 2, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Tuesday, 24 June 2008 at 2.00 p.m.

### Present

Mr D Hendry  
Mr R Pedersen

Ms J Douglas

### Officials in attendance:

Mr S Black, Director of Planning and Development  
Mr G Robson, Head of Environment and Development, Planning and Development Service  
Mr C Simpson, Tourism Co-ordinator, Planning and Development Service  
Mr G Ireland, Tourism Officer, Planning and Development Service  
Mr I Murray, Head of Community Learning and Leisure, Education, Culture and Sport Services  
Mrs F Hampton, Director Highland 2007, Education Culture and Sport Services  
Mrs C Nicoll, Administrative Assistant, Chief Executive's Office

### Mr D Hendry in the Chair

#### 1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mrs I McCallum.

#### 2. Minutes of Previous Meeting

There had been circulated Minutes of the Tourism Project Group held on Tuesday 8 April 2008, previously approved by the Planning, Environment and Development Committee on 28 May 2008.

In relation to the proposed review of the Highland Area Tourism Partnership's Area Strategy and Action Plan to be undertaken later in the year (item 3 of the Minutes), the Tourism Co-ordinator advised that a report had been submitted to the Planning, Environment and Development Committee at its meeting on 28 May, when the Committee had agreed to advise the Area Tourism Partnership that it:

- seek a 50:50 balance between its public and private sector representatives
- resolve the geographic boundary and strategy coverage anomalies that existed with Moray and the Cairngorms National Park and have only the one strategy to deliver for its area
- appoint a chair and vice-chair, ideally from amongst the industry representatives, for a fixed term, ideally 2 years
- retain its Strategy and Action Plan monitoring role but prioritise the actions proposed and produce a concise and focussed annual Action Plan with a nominated champion for each priority.

The Tourism Co-ordinator advised that the next meeting of the Partnership was due to take place in September, when the above points would be raised for discussion.

Members **NOTED** the position.

### 3. Tourism Priorities in Highland

At its meeting held on 8 April 2008, the Project Group had agreed that a report be submitted to the next meeting of the Group outlining the aims of the Council in relation to tourism and suggesting the top tourism priorities on which the Council could focus, with a view to developing effective and efficient strategies taking account of the unique geographical area of the Highlands.

In this connection, there had been circulated Report No. TPG4/08 dated 26 May 2008 by the Director of Planning and Development describing how the Area Tourism Partnership would need to define tourism priorities for the Highland area later in the year and suggesting some areas of activity that could be considered as future tourism priorities.

In speaking to the report, the Tourism Co-ordinator explained that in 2005 the Scottish Government had set a target of increasing the value of tourism to Scotland by 50% by the year 2015. In early 2006 a national tourism strategy had been published outlining the changes that would need to take place for this to happen.

He reminded Members that the existing Tourism Action Plans for 2006-2008 were soon to be reviewed by the Area Tourism Partnership (ATP). The Action Plan was a lengthy document containing a large number of actions all competing for delivery and it had proven difficult to identify which actions were priorities. It was intended that the Council would therefore recommend to the ATP that it produce a more concise, target driven and focussed annual Action Plan. The review would provide the Council with an opportunity to contribute its views on what the main priorities should be. In the meantime, it would be useful for the Council to define its own priorities in terms of developing tourism.

Interestingly, both the national and Highland tourism strategies had grouped actions under four main headings:

- Knowing your market
- Exceeding visitors' expectations
- Marketing your product
- Being sustainable

The Tourism Co-ordinator advised that the suggested priorities relating to these above headings, as outlined in the report, would provide a link with the Single Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Government, the Highland Tourism Strategy and the Council's Programme for Administration. Discussion on the suggested priorities took place as follows:

#### Knowing your market

Members were advised that, at a national level, there had been a perception that there was a need for both businesses and the public sector to continue to carry out market research to further develop the industry in line with customer demands. The Council had previously been a partner involved in conducting a Highland visitor survey which had proved valuable in assessing the needs of the industry at the time. However, since that time the Council had had fairly minor input to subsequent research carried out by other organisations in the area.

Mention was made of Tourism Intelligence Scotland, a joint initiative established by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise and VisitScotland which was

working closely with the Scottish Government Tourism Unit and the Scottish tourism industry with a view to supporting the industry in achieving the 50% growth target set by the Scottish Government. VisitScotland had also applied for European funding to carry out a national survey, which would be implemented at a local level and which might provide an opportunity for the Council to contribute.

Members were of the opinion that it was not only important to address the current needs of the industry but also to predict future demands and challenges and suggested that the Council convey the message to other tourism organisations in the area that they would like to contribute to the design and planning process of future market research. It was also suggested that a representative from Tourism Intelligence Scotland be invited to make a presentation to a future meeting of the Group on the work of this initiative.

#### Exceeding visitor's expectations

Members were of the opinion that more and more visitors were now looking for the 'real' experience offered by the Highlands, rather than interpretation. Local communities had a lot to offer the tourism industry, but there was still a lot of work to be done to provide adequate guidance and support for community-led projects and also to address the provision of local services and infrastructure. It would be important for the Council to identify its own specific in-house priorities and consider how best to encourage Services to buy into the delivery of these priorities. A key aspect of successful tourism for the Highlands would not only be in the quality and selling of the products on offer but also in the promotion of the Highlands as a desirable destination.

#### Marketing your Product

The Project Group were keen to ensure that the Council's Partnership Agreement with VisitScotland addressed the specific needs of the Council in their campaign to improve and enhance tourism in the Highlands. Mention was made of the Council's Highland 2007 website, which had still been receiving 150,000 visits each month despite the fact that the year-long celebration of Highland culture had come to an end earlier in the year. Hi-arts, the cultural development agency for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, also had a very detailed proactive website promoting cultural events throughout the area. In light of the continued visits to the Highland 2007 website, it was intended that this website be upgraded and continue to be linked to the Hi-arts website, providing another useful portal for the promotion of Highland culture and allowing improved access to all countries and cultures.

The Director of Highland 2007 again drew Members' attention to the Homecoming 2009 event, a year long celebration of Scotland, which would provide an excellent opportunity to participate in a marketing campaign providing national exposure of not only Scotland as a whole as a tourist destination but also that of the Highland area. Members agreed that Homecoming 2009 was an important opportunity to put the Highlands firmly on the tourism map and that the Council should make every effort to maximise on the opportunity provided by this event to showcase what the Highlands could offer as a creditable tourist destination. Events should therefore be considered as one of the priorities in future tourism plans.

#### Being sustainable

In relation to sustainability, Members welcomed the priorities outlined in the report, which would assist in further developing a sustainable tourism industry, and recognised the important role the Council had to play in the provision of services such as waste recycling and energy advice. However, they were of the opinion that the Council also had a vital educational role to play in encouraging green business and the greater use

of local produce and services, which in turn would help to sustain local producers and communities. One important aspect still to be addressed was that of improving the sustainability of tourism businesses through tackling the problems of seasonality and encouraging further dispersal of visitors to the more peripheral areas of the Highlands, and it was hoped that improvements could be made in these areas by the Council attaining more influence through its Partnership Agreement with VisitScotland.

In the course of further discussion, it was recognised that there was still room for improvement in the provision and promotion of transport in the Highlands. Improvements in transport links had already been acknowledged at both a local and national level, and an opportunity existed for the Council to continue to look at how best it could assist in delivering the most efficient and sustainable transport service for the area. Although many of the visitors to the area were car borne, there was a need for a change in culture to provide more adequate facilities for cyclists on local buses and the train network and generally for improved links by way of air, rail and road to provide the best access and egress from the area. It was also acknowledged that improvements could also be made in the availability of travel information throughout the area and Members suggested it would be useful to identify those public buildings most accessed by tourists, to ensure that adequate travel information was made available at each of these locations.

Members were also of the opinion that there was scope to make more efficient use of the Tourism Information Centre Network and Council Service Points and that in-house training of staff also played a vital role in improving the visitor experience of the Highlands and raising awareness of the visitor attractions in the area. It was suggested that the Council consider the inclusion of tourism in its customer care training programme.

Following further discussion, Members **AGREED** to recommend that:

- i. the Council convey to other tourist organisations in the area that it wished to contribute to the planning and design stages of future market research;
- ii. a representative from Tourism Intelligence Scotland be invited to make a presentation to a future meeting of the Project Group on the work of this initiative;
- iii. every effort should be made to maximise on the opportunity provided by the forthcoming Highland 2009 event to showcase what the Highlands could offer as a creditable tourist destination; and
- iv. the Council consult with local transport companies with a view to providing a suitably enhanced and sustainable transport network for the Highlands.

#### **4. Highland 2007 Legacy**

There had been circulated Report No. TPG5/08 dated 17 June 2008 by the Director of Highland 2007 outlining the agreed legacy functions of Highland 2007 and examining how their undertaking could contribute to the work of the Tourism Project Group and to the aim of increasing the value of tourism to the Highlands by 50% by 2015. The report also presented a draft action plan to maximise on the opportunity for the legacy of Highland 2007 to contribute to the tourist aims for the region.

Members were advised that, at its meeting held on 22 May 2008, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee had agreed that the legacy functions should continue to be undertaken or co-ordinated by the remaining staff of Highland 2007, to begin the implementation of the legacy of Scotland's Year of Highland Culture.

The Director of Highland 2007 explained how the legacy functions could contribute by building on the success of Highland 2007 and providing a link with the work of the

Project Group. The legacy of Highland 2007 could assist by continuing to enhance and promote the programme of events, festivals and cultural activity of the region through a network of communication channels. Members' attention was drawn to the legacy function of an events strategy for the Highlands and it was suggested that the Council commence work on developing an events and festival strategy as early as possible. Mention was also made of the function of identifying opportunities to introduce events in order to enhance the events and festival programme for the Highlands and Members again expressed their view that the Council should give serious consideration to how it would wish to maximise on the opportunities afforded by Homecoming 2009.

The Director of Planning and Development reminded Members of the significant investment being made in the Partnership Agreement with VisitScotland and suggested that it would be useful for the Director of Highland 2007 to provide some input into the current negotiations with VisitScotland, to achieve best value from the Agreement. The Tourism Co-ordinator advised that negotiations with VisitScotland were at a key stage and there was still an opportunity for the Council to ensure that its needs were solidly built into the Agreement.

Following further discussion, Members **AGREED** to recommend that:

- i. the Council commence work on developing an events and festival strategy for the Highlands;
- ii. an update on this work be provided to the next meeting of the Project Group; and
- iii. a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Project Group providing an update on progress with the Partnership Agreement negotiations with VisitScotland.

## **5. Tourism Seminar 2008**

There had been circulated Report No. TPG6/08 dated 16 June 2008 by the Director of Planning and Development seeking Members views on the potential themes for the 2008 Highland Council Tourism Seminar.

In speaking to the report, the Tourism Officer advised that the Council had successfully staged an annual tourism seminar since 2002 and feedback from delegates had been consistently positive, with tourism operators rating it as a relevant and worthwhile event. The key to the event's success had been in the selection of topics of relevance to tourism operators and community tourism groups and in maintaining a focus on the Council's role in the development of tourism products and services for the area. Previous topics had included transport, planning and community tourism development. Although there were no obvious current issues facing the tourism industry that offered a leading topic for the 2008 seminar, the report outlined a number of topic suggestions including:

- i. the Highland Tourism Strategy and Action Plan;
- ii. extending an invitation to speakers from other Local Authorities;
- iii. Tourism Development Grant – guidance and best practice, potentially including guidance on the incorporation of Gaelic; and
- iv. the new LEADER Programme

During discussion, Members acknowledged the importance of such a seminar in the Highlands and agreed that it would be helpful to invite speakers from other Local Authorities, to share their experiences of how they work with various organisations in their own areas to develop the industry, and also key speakers from both the tourism industry and local businesses, with a view to identifying ways of achieving maximum

benefit for the area from the tourism market. Members also considered the following as useful topics for discussion at the Seminar:

- the need to encourage wider use of the Gaelic language throughout the area
- improved events signage
- how the public sector could assist in supporting tourism businesses in the Highlands.

Thereafter, the Project Group **AGREED** to recommend that the Council's 2008 Tourism Seminar take place in late November/early December and that the topics outlined in the discussions above be considered for inclusion in the programme of business.

## **6. VisitScotland Partnership Agreement 2007-08**

There was tabled Report No. TPG7/08 by the Director of Planning and Development completing the performance reporting for the financial year 2007/08, as a required outcome in the Partnership Agreement between the Highland Council and VisitScotland.

In speaking to the report, the Tourism Co-ordinator explained that, as part of the measurement of VisitScotland's performance, VisitScotland was required to report on five key Performance Indicators:

- proportion of the total network office income provided by the local authority
- Tourist Information Centre (TIC) costs per visitor
- TIC return on investment
- number of businesses in quality assurance schemes
- number of business units listed as entries on [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com) website

These Performance Indicators had provided a useful baseline as to where money had been spent in the area and Members noted that the TIC return on investment for the Highlands had amounted to £10.36 to the local economy for every £1.00 invested.

Attention was drawn to the number of businesses in quality assurance schemes, which had amounted to 1,874 (21% of the national total). However, given that not all quality assurance schemes required businesses to register, this figure did not truly reflect the number of local businesses currently working with VisitScotland. Members were of the opinion that VisitScotland should be encouraged to review their quality assurance scheme, which could include compulsory registration, thus providing more reliable data that would be more meaningful and relevant to the Highland area.

Following further discussion, Members **NOTED** the report.

## **7. Date of Next Meeting**

Members **AGREED** that the next meeting of the Project Group be held in Council Headquarters, Inverness, on Tuesday, 19 August 2008 at 2.00 p.m.

The meeting ended at 3.40 p.m.