



**VISITSCOTLAND AND GAELIC TOURISM STRATEGY UPDATE**

Report by Deputy Chief Executive

**PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to update members on developments within VisitScotland and the launch of the Gaelic Tourism Strategy.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 The Comhairle enjoys a productive relationship with VisitScotland locally and nationally to support the development and sustainability of the visitor economy for people to 'live, work and visit' the islands. This is especially important as the tourism sector is one of the largest in the Outer Hebrides through the income generated from the volume of visitors and the employment and business opportunities it provides throughout the islands.
- 2.2 It is therefore essential to preserve the local cultural heritage and language and therefore through being a member of VisitScotland's Gaelic Tourism Strategy Steering Group the Comhairle supported the development of the new '[Gaelic Tourism Strategy for Scotland 2024-2029](#)'. This strategy aims to provide a '*framework for the development of Gaelic's tourism potential, recognising its economic value to the Scottish economy.*' It builds on previous strategies through active collaboration to increase the focus on the language, its culture and heritage, whilst also supporting the communities, people and businesses within them. The Comhairle has noted its support through the delivery of a number of Actions which are aligned to the [Comhairle's Gaelic Language Plan](#).
- 2.3 Following a Strategic Review, and diminished resources, VisitScotland has announced a number of forthcoming restructuring and corporate changes including the withdrawal of its Quality Assurance schemes from 31 March including the start grading, Taste Our Best, and Welcome Schemes, and also the phased closure of all the Visitor Information Centres, including Stornoway. Instead they will '*focus on delivering a free-to-access programme of business advice that will continue to inspire quality in the tourism industry.*' The Comhairle will continue to work and liaise with VisitScotland on these changes, and the resulting challenges, to ensure the local communities and visitor economy are not detrimentally impacted.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:
- (a) note the Report; and
  - (b) support the delivery of the Gaelic Tourism Strategy for Scotland 2024-29.

Contact Officer: Kathlene Morrison, Economic Development Officer - Innovation  
Background Papers: [Gaelic Tourism Strategy – Working in Partnership](#)  
[Gaelic Tourism Strategy Action Plan](#)  
[Motorhome, Campervan and camping research](#)

## IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	Tourism is vital to the local economy and its preservation and sustainability is imperative due to its value, levels of employment generated and communities supported.
Equalities/Child Rights	None
Corporate Strategy	<b>Support caring and resilient communities and quality of life:</b> Support and promote the Gàidhlig language, natural and cultural heritage of the islands. <b>Deliver Community Leadership:</b> Ensure that local people and communities are empowered and are at the heart of our decision making
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	VisitScotland will begin consulting with stakeholders on the impending changes and impacts.

## BACKGROUND

5.1 The Comhairle enjoys a productive relationship with the local tourism and visitor agencies, including VisitScotland, to support the development and sustainability of the visitor economy for people to 'live, work and visit'. This is crucial as tourism sector is one of the largest in the Outer Hebrides through both the income generated from the volume of visitors, and the employment and business opportunities it provides throughout the islands.

## Gaelic Tourism Strategy for Scotland 2024-2029

6.1 With the local tourism sector being so valuable it is therefore essential to preserve and protect the local cultural heritage and language for both local communities and also the visitor experience. With Gaelic being intrinsically woven into the islands communities and economy then the Comhairle was invited to be a member of VisitScotland's Gaelic Tourism Strategy Steering Group to support the development of the new ['Gaelic Tourism Strategy for Scotland 2024-2029'](#).

6.2 The strategy aims to:  
*- support the national ambition for Scotland to be the world leader in 21st century tourism by supporting the industry and Gaelic communities to deliver more visitor experiences that are more authentic and more memorable across Scotland, celebrating the rich and diverse Gaelic culture, heritage and language.*

6.3 This will be achieved through focussing on five strategic priorities:

- Drive industry understanding of opportunities and benefits associated with Gaelic and seek out opportunities to strengthen the connections between Gaelic and tourism in relevant destination, community and sector plans.
- Support the creation of memorable Gaelic experiences through improved access to Gaelic resources, skills and training for the tourism industry.

- iii. Increase visitor awareness of Gaelic and maximise opportunities to promote the language, culture and heritage.
- iv. Establish connections between tourism and other sectors, identifying opportunities for collaboration.
- v. Develop research and insights.

6.4 It builds on previous strategies through active agency collaboration to increase the focus on the language, its culture and heritage to support and uphold the communities, its people and businesses within them. The Comhairle has noted its support through the delivery of a number of Actions contained within the [Gaelic Tourism Strategy Action Plan](#), which reflect relevant actions within the [Comhairle's Gaelic Plan 2023-28](#) including:

- A' cur air adhart agus a' toirt taic do phròiseactan far a bheil a' Ghàidhlig agus a' cultar gan cur air adhart agus gan cleachdadh. / *Promote and support projects involving the use and promotion of Gaelic culture and language.*
- A' dèanamh sanasachd air Ro-innleachd Turasachd na Gàidhlig am measg buill Co-chruinneachadh na Gàidhealtachd is nan Eilean (CGE), ag innse do luchd-compàirt mu na cothroman is mun obair a tha a' dol air adhart. / *Raise the profile of the Gaelic Tourism Strategy with Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI), making partners aware of the opportunities and ongoing activity.*
- A' toirt seachad comhairle is taic ionmhasail, tron t-seirbheis Business Gateway, do phròiseactan a bhios a' cur taic ri ath-nuadhachadh is adhartachadh cultar na Gàidhlig. / *Provide, through the Business Gateway Service, business advice and financial support for projects which promote Gaelic cultural regeneration and development.*
- Ag amas air dòighean-obrach ro-innleachdail aonaichte is eadar-cheangailte a stèidheachadh eadar roinnean nan ealain is an dualchais, agus na roinnean poblach is prìobhaideach, gus taic a chur ri pròiseactan cruthachail is cultarach a tha fo stiùir na coimhearsnachd. / *Focus on developing a cohesive and interlinked strategic approach between arts and heritage, and the public and private sector, to provide support to creative and cultural projects led by the community.*

## **MOTORHOME, CAMPERVAN AND CAMPING TRIPS IN SCOTLAND RESEARCH**

7.1 The Comhairle was also a member of in the Steering Group which explored the motivations, behaviours and facility needs of motorhome, campervan and camping users to gain a better understanding of this visitor market. This culminated in the research study '[Motorhome and Camping Trips in Scotland \(2023\): An insight into visitor motivation, behaviour and need](#)' was published in February 2023.

7.2 The research found that:

- most of the visitors travelling and staying in this type of accommodation were from the UK, with 54% from Scotland.
- Most people owned their vehicles rather than rented them.
- Access to facilities influences their decision-making on where to stay but that more want to stay in more 'rural and less formal locations.'
- Visitors are willing to pay for basic facilities, and;
- Whilst they are well-informed on how to be a responsible visitor there was evidence to show that work needs to be done to improve this.
- 75% of respondents took part in some form of paid activity in the area and included visiting attractions, local eateries/a pub or outdoor activities.

- 7.3 The research shows that there is a demand for the provision of more facilities to meet the needs of this market and also a need to inform and educate visitors on responsible tourism. Whilst the new Urgha Aire site outside of Tarbert in Harris - funded by the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund which is managed locally by the Comhairle - is a notable example of the community proactively finding a solution to assist in tackling a local issue, there is more that can be done should funding become available.

## **VISITSCOTLAND RESTRUCTURING**

- 8.1 Following a Strategic Review, and diminished resources, VisitScotland (VS) has announced a number of forthcoming restructuring and corporate changes including the withdrawal of its Quality Assurance schemes from 31 March 2025 and the phased closure of all the Visitor Information Centres, including Stornoway. Instead they will *'focus on delivering a free-to-access programme of business advice that will continue to inspire quality in the tourism industry.'*
- 8.2 VS have stated that since the pandemic consumer behaviour and business needs have evolved and to reflect this they will be following a 'Digital First Approach' to business support and advice, whilst remaining committed to supporting the sustainability and development of the Scottish visitor economy.

## **RETIRAL OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SCHEMES**

- 9.1 VS have now begun to wind down their Quality Assurance (QA) schemes with a view to retire them on the 31 March 2025. Instead VS will focus on delivering a programme of business tourism advice. The QS schemes being retired include:
- Quality Assurance Star Grading
  - Taste Our Best
  - Welcome Schemes
  - iKnow Partner Programme
- 9.2 In its place they will deliver advice and support through a digital-first approach – though they have stated they will ensure not all support will only be provided by digital means. VS hope that this will guarantee that they have maximum reach and can also signpost to the wider support services and products being delivered by partners, with the ability to provide one-to-one support when it is needed most. VS will be liaising with partners, including Local Authorities, to discuss the development of these programmes and the retiral of the QS schemes, including the future delivery of the brown signposts.
- 9.3 VS believe that by focusing quality as part of a business advice programme, more businesses will get the free-to-access advice that they need to offer a strong end-to-end customer experience. They also see this as an efficient and effective method to provide crucial support at a time when the cost of doing business is causing challenges for the industry.

## **VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES**

- 10.1 The restructuring also involves a two-year planned phased closure all the VS Visitor Information Centres (VICs), including the Stornoway VIC. Staff have been informed and VS have stated that there will not be any compulsory redundancies, however they will continue to offer voluntary redundancy opportunities.

- 10.2 Phase 1 will see closures by the end of 2024/25 and Phase 2 – which includes Stornoway – will see their closure by the end of 2025/26. However, these timeframes may change should staff leave their posts earlier.
- 10.3 VS will continue to engage with the Comhairle, HIE, Outer Hebrides Tourism and other local sectoral stakeholders to identify an exit strategy and any potential solutions to support the local visitor sector. This is particularly crucial given the impending increase in cruise ship passengers disembarking in Stornoway and seeking advice during their visit.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 11.1 Whilst resource constraints have resulted in VisitScotland requiring to have a major restructuring of their services, the Comhairle will liaise with all stakeholders to ensure that the local visitor economy does not suffer from the impending changes in grading accommodation and in-person information provision to visitors.
- 11.2 Both the Gaelic Tourism Strategy and the Motorhome, Campervan and camping research will also be taken into consideration when undertaking future related planning and development projects.