

ARGYLL, LOCH LOMOND & FORTH VALLEY TOURISM PARTNERSHIP
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 21st SEPTEMBER, 2006
DUCK BAY MARINA, ARDEN

Present:

Cllr Billy Petrie (Chair)	Argyll & Bute Council
Ian Cleaver (Vice-Chair)	Argyll & the Islands Enterprise
Cllr Bob Spears	Falkirk Council
Cllr John Paterson	Stirling Council
Rowena Groves	Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire
John Urquhart	Trade Representative
Sue Fink	Trade Representative
Steve Bleasby	Mid Argyll, Kintyre & Islay
Cllr Len Scoullar	Argyll & Bute Council

In Attendance:

Iain Close	Area Director
Aileen Miller	Customer Relations Manager
Neil MacFarlane	Business Marketing and Relationship Manager
Barbara Rogers	Office Co-ordinator

1. Welcome & Apologies

The Chairman introduced Iain Close, the new Area Director, to members of the Partnership. The Chairman gave members a resume of his career to date, mentioning that he had previously been in charge of 250 regional branches of Post Office outlets with 2,000 staff under his control.

The Chairman also welcomed John Urquhart, the new representative of Loch Lomond & Clyde and Steve Bleasby, member for Mid Argyll, Kintyre & Islay.

Apologies were received from Cllr Eddie Carrick, Anne Craig, Cllr Paul Nelson, Ronald Peebles, Provost Alistair Macdonald, John Cross, Cllr Gillie Thomson, Dan McKirgan and Ray Welham.

2. Minutes

The minutes were proposed by the Chairman and seconded by Cllr Bob Spears.

3. Matters Arising

It was proposed to invite Dr Mike Cantlay, new Chair of the National Park to the next meeting.

4. Funding Update

The Area Director gave an update on the funding position. He disclosed there had been problematic audit issues and a Local Authority working party had been set up to

produce a template for VisitScotland in order to provide visitor spend and other relevant information in a standard format.

5. VisitScotland Activities Update

Statistics

Rowena Groves remarked about statistics showing enquiries were down in August and asked members for their opinion. The Area Director reported that the topic had been widely discussed and it was thought to be the effect of the World Cup and the hot summer weather. However, Autumn figures both spend and enquiries had increased, especially in the North of the country, and the overall figures should have recovered by the end of the year.

Challenge Fund

Sue Fink enquired about the Challenge Fund's progress and Neil MacFarlane reported that the procedure had been simplified for applications under £6,500 which made for a faster turnaround. The maximum amount which may be applied for has now risen to £65,000 and the Business Relationship Managers are trained to assist with more complex applications.

Visitor Services

The Area Director told members that the Mill Trail Visitor Centre was having financial difficulties, not least because the Mill Trail no longer existed. Talks were taking place with Clackmannanshire Council regarding possible relocation of the centre in the future.

It was reported that Bo'ness TIC had been successfully opened within the Bo'ness & Kinneil Railway visitor attraction and Cllr Bob Spears reported that the launch had been a success. It was noted that 6,000 visitors per day took part in the 'special train' days with 150% increase in the retail takings. Cllr Spears also reported that the Falkirk Wheel had increased turnover this year and the Area Director told members that European funding of £170,000 was in place to promote the area.

The Area Director informed members that it was unlikely the Stirling TIC would relocate from Dumbarton Road in the near future due to funding problems.

It was reported that due to lack of a formal contract with the Post Office at Pirnhall, VisitScotland were providing a free service. It is the intention of the Area Director to disengage from any non profitable business which is not giving a yield. It is intended to plan an exit strategy.

The Area Director informed members that Stirling District Tourism have decided to disengage from protracted discussions regarding the Rob Roy & Trossachs Visitor Centre after the National Park decided not to relocate to the upper floor. It was thought critical that a tourist information centre remain in Callander being the Gateway to the Trossachs and the West. Cllr John Paterson agreed that funding was secure until the end of March but further discussions would be necessary for the long term location of the centre which should be in a prime position. It was noted that the National Wallace Monument has been subsidising the centre for some time.

Tyndrum

The Area Director reported the sale of the tourist information centre was on hold. The joint partnership with House of Scotland has had a knock on effect regarding retail sales in the TIC. The sale of the property is on hold and this is affecting the relocation of Dumbarton Road TIC. It was noted that the business case looks strong and that the sale would be good for all parties concerned. Ian Cleaver felt that the existing design and lighting of the centre was wrong and suggested a mirrored lighting affect from the back to make it obvious the office was open. At present, he felt that the impact was uninspiring and didn't entice visitors inside. The Area Director thought that poor signage had an affect on visitor numbers but was concerned about the overall cost the proposed improvements. It was agreed that the staff were very efficient and helpful at Tyndrum.

Rothesay, Isle of Bute

It was noted that Mount Stuart drew visitors away from the town of Rothesay, despite the Castle and museum. Cllr Spears felt it was up to the residents and Councillors to improve the town which he felt looked tired. John Urquhart commented that the West Island Way was well promoted and was proving popular. The Area Director reported that a new Supervisor would shortly be formally appointed and that the Bistro had paid an outstanding debt in full recently.

Dunoon TIC

It was noted that the Dunoon TIC was in the wrong location and awkward for visitors to access but the staff were efficient and helpful.

National Park Gateway Centre

It was noted that the TV advertising campaign and the new Aquarium were drawing visitors into Loch Lomond Shores, especially local residents.

Craignure and Tobermory, Isle of Mull

Sue Fink reported that the Isle of Mull had enjoyed a good season and that all self catering properties had been filled. It was noted that Wildlife was the popular pastime of tourists and had taken over from the Balamory phase. She felt there was insufficient tourist accommodation on the island and that the roads wouldn't cope with any additional visitors. Ian Cleaver thought that a loop road round by Calgary would solve the problem and only one bridge prevented this being constructed. At present Argyll & Bute Council were seeking views on whether residents and tour operators wished this to happen. Cllr Spears thought it could come out of the £9 million transport budget available through the Scottish Executive.

Oban TIC

The Area Director reported that there was a strong opportunity to develop an excellent business outlet as the centre is one of the busiest in the Scottish network. Plans were being taken forward to update the telephone system and increase the advertising space in the foyer.

Tarbert TIC

Steve Bleasby felt it had been a successful season in Tarbert (Loch Fyne) with the recent Music Festival proving a great draw.

Bowmore TIC

Steve Bleasby queried why footfall was down in the Islay TIC and the Area Director said he was due to visit next week and would report back at the next meeting.

Ian Cleaver felt that the discerning traveller was making his own arrangements and arranging accommodation in advance on line.

Inveraray TIC

Down to two members of staff and Supervisor from Tyndrum looking after Inveraray also.

SDT

Chairman of SDT, Cllr John Paterson, said it was important the National Wallace Monument held its own as it had the best financial turnaround of all the visitor attractions operated by SDT. It was noted that funds had been transferred to enable the Rob Roy & Trossachs Visitor Centre to remain open. He also felt that SDT attractions should be dealt with separately rather than as part of the VisitScotland TIC network.

Marketing

The Area Director reported that the publication Great Days Out was being reviewed due to a loss of £9,000 incurred during production. He drew examples of poor advertising (2 responses per £6,000 spend) and good advertising (900 responses to £1800 spend). It was intended to review all advertising to ascertain the return and cease those with poor response. The Area Director also updated members on the Stirling Green Map - successful, the Area & Accommodation Guide – ongoing and press activity.

It was noted that Nadair had invited the Area Director to sit on the Board but as it was not in accordance with VisitScotland policy so he had suggested Diane MacLeod should engage fully with Nadair on consultative work. Cllr Bob Spears that Nadair was a good fit with cultural services and good location partners.

It was noted that work was continuing to attract the Solheim Cup back to the Loch Lomond area in 2011.

A discussion ensued regarding the 65,000 transparencies available through VisitScotland and at a local level in Stirling and it was noted that the majority of these are free to borrow and a large proportion are digital.

The Area Director said it was important that the Argyll, Forth Valley & Stirling area were well represented within the national arena, making sure that the area is marketed if there is a good fit with the activity or initiative. He reported that regular meetings were held to ensure the area was marketed appropriately.

6. Any Other Competent Business

Rowena Groves spoke about the recent administration move on Swallow Hotels and the Area Director told members that Flodrive and Crerar Hotels had put in a bid to aid the company. She also told members that the new Aquarium at Loch Lomond Shores was proving a great success with locals and visitors alike and Aileen Miller told members that the National Park Gateway Centre had increased performance accordingly. It was noted that signage could be improved and that there were competitive retail issues with Jenners on site.

Rowena Groves told members that David Anderson had moved from Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire to LILE and would be greatly missed. She updated members on the plans for West Riverside and plans for the A82 route which may impact on the 2007 season as the Stoneymollan roundabout had done in previous years and wondered if the committee could bring any influence to bear on the timing of the roadworks. She told members that the Loch Lomond Food Festival had been well attended and funding had been received from SED and Event Scotland which would enable the event to progress each year.

The Area Director said that applications for windfarms on the Cowal Peninsula and other beauty spots within the VisitScotland area would receive objections through the appropriate channels. It was noted that a public enquiry would take place in the future regarding the Beaully to Denny powerline. Cllr John Paterson felt the Area Tourism Partnership and Stirling District Tourism Ltd could put forward separate objections to the plan.

A discussion ensued regarding future venues for the Area Tourism Partnership meetings and it was decided that each Local Authority area could host a meeting at their individual Council buildings to save costs with add on visits to local attractions. This would allow Councillors to meet ATP representatives and showcase their individual locations and help to foster good relations. The Area Director agreed to put together a programme of dates and venues for the coming months.

It was agreed that emailing ATP papers in advance of the meeting with each member responsible for running of their own copies was acceptable.

John Urquhart informed members that the Helensburgh Blossom Festival would be renamed as the Lomond & Clyde Spring Festival and the event hoped to apply for Challenge funding. Neil MacFarlane said that the end of November 2006 would be the deadline for receiving applications for the next round. Steve Bleasby also asked if Tarbert Enterprise Company would be eligible and was told that Oban BRM's would advise him on procedures.

Rowena Groves asked what the general reaction was to VisitScotland at the present time and the Area Director said that the new company was still forming new partnerships for promotion and marketing but value for money was a key issue. It was the intention of the company to promote local trade and promote the area to the best advantage, ploughing back profits to enhance the visitor experience.

The Area Director said more work required to be undertaken on Service Level Agreements with Local Authorities to make tourism projects and objectivity clearer and find other ways of achieving funding. Forth Valley, Stirling & Loch Lomond covered a third of the total TIC national network and VisitScotland had some tough decisions to make in the longer term.

The meeting closed at 5.50pm.