

Meetings between Wester Ross Tourism / Business groupings: *November 2009*

Progress to date:

As agreed with HIE / Highland Council, Celtic Fringe have now met up with people in Ullapool, Strathcarron, and Applecross. We have also spoken with those in Achnasheen and Lochalsh.

All discussions were open and enthusiastic. There is a strong feeling that Wester Ross needs to address its geographical fragmentation, and create a fresh approach to promoting and developing itself as a single entity as a prime visitor destination on the world stage. Not only that, but we need to create a representative organisation that can address regional matters of transport, tourism, and identity.

Present Situation:

The existing organisation - Tourism@ Wester Ross - has a relatively weak constitution, and suffers slightly (in these days of increasing Internet usage) from having a name with the “@” sign contained within this. Aside from that, it has tended to run out of steam of late due to being funding led, being totally reliant on voluntary work, and having no obvious income stream bar project based funds.

Tourism @ has nevertheless achieved a number of successes during its lifespan, particularly the **5 year marketing plan**. Yet despite being very well received when it was produced, the fact is that most organisations then opened the filing cabinet, put the plan in a drawer..... and left it to gather dust!

The other main achievement has been the **Wester Ross brand**, launched in November 2008, and now with over 70 members. This is driven by its own set of criteria, is a membership grouping, and is widely regarded as a first step in what could be a new Destination organisation.

Points discussed:

There was widespread agreement that these two items can be the bedrock for future development of the region. There was also considerable discussion about the various benefits of working together, such as :

- Developing of activity and attraction itineraries, aimed at keeping visitors here longer
- Improving transport links @ infrastructure
- Developing the brand
- Networking
- Regional Festivals, such as the “Annan Wildlife Festival” in the Dumfries area
- Stronger marketing of the area
- Assisting Development of the proposed Biosphere Reserve
- Working towards achieving business growth & developing community potential

How to achieve this?

There were several options and suggestions put forward for this. In an overall sense, it is felt that the area must develop a “Destination Organisation” to effectively manage its future development – although it is not necessarily clear to everybody involved what a DO actually does. Nevertheless, DO structures are becoming regarded as the way forward for regions such as ours, and those that have already been set up have achieved great things for their areas.

It was also felt that a small network of pro active regional contacts will be required in order to effectively develop a DO for Wester Ross. This would be based around a full time “Wester Ross Manager” backed by at least four part time local co-ordinators. We feel that the local co-ordination is absolutely essential due to the geography of the area, and an integral part of giving the communities here a sense that they have ownership of the DO.

Co-incidentally, a number of us were at the recent Highland Tourism Seminar in Inverness, where we listened to a presentation on the Loch Ness DO (Destination Loch Ness) – we were very impressed with this, and feel that this should be seriously regarded as pointing the way for Wester Ross.

Timescale, funding and way forward?

As a first step, and subject to funding, we would like to look at the possibilities of producing a Development Organisation plan. Having spoken to at least one consultant, we know that this would take around 3 months, at a cost of approximately £6k. In order to effectively develop this initiative, we also feel that each of the groups involved should be able to access limited funding to assist with this plan. This would cover meetings and expenses, and reflect the fact that the geography of the area means that there will be significant deal of time and travel incurred in creating a successful outcome for this first step.

We also require to come away from Ledgowan with an agreed set of action points – clear support from the agencies involved – and an appreciation from all present that this is a long term proposal.

In terms of funding, we absolutely recognise that sustainability and industry support for this will be required in the long term. In the short term, however, we are aware that there are several funding sources that we should be applying to such as LEADER and SRDP, and feel this would be a good time to move with our proposals.

Ledgowan itself:

There will be approximately 20 individuals from the various communities in attendance + a representative from Highland Council, Visit Scotland, HIE, and SNH. Proposed start time is 10am, and we have the use of a room for the day. Refreshments / Lunch etc will be supplied. **Agenda will follow.**