

Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy

Tuesday 7th December 6-7:30pm

Sustainable rural tourism in a post-pandemic Scotland -
Minute

Present

MSPs

Finlay Carson MSP
Colin Smyth MSP
Edward Mountain MSP
Mercedes Villalba MSP

Speakers

Chris Taylor - VisitScotland
Rona Gibb - Paths for All
Kelly Clapperton - Balquhidder, Lochearnhead and Strathyre Community Trust
Esther Tacke - Galloway Cycling Holidays

Non-MSP Group Members

Abigail Williams – SRUC
Alan Bruce - SAC
Alexa Green – SRUC
Ann MacSween - Historic Environment Scotland
Ann Packard - RSA Fellows' R+EINS Network
Anne Hastie - Tyne Esk LEADER
Anne-Michelle Ketteridge – Stirling LEADER
Archie Stewart - Landmaps Ltd
Brady Stevens - SAC
Caitlin Murray - Cornwall Council
Carla Coghlan - SRUC
Catharine Idle - Fife LEADER
Caz Austen - Woodland Trust
Craig Adamson - SRUC
David Gass - Rural Matters
David Miller – James Hutton Institute
David Nicholson
David Wood – Planning Aid Scotland
Davy McCracken - SRUC
Douglas Scott – Scottish Borders Council
Eve Shulte - SRUC

Fiona Mackenzie – University of the Highlands and Islands
Frances Gunn – Up North community trust
Helen Lawrenson - Falkland Stewardship Trust
Jackie Brierton – GrowBiz Scotland
Jane Atterton - Rural Policy Centre, Scotland's Rural College
Janet Hunter
Janice Chalmers - Alva Development Trust
Jayne Glass – Rural Policy Centre, Scotland's Rural College
John Cairns
John Gilruth
Katy Ewing - Southern Uplands Partnership
Kay Paul -SRUC
Kelvin Thomson
Kenneth Hillock - SRUC
Kerry Hammond - SRUC
Leigh Mair – University of the Highlands and Islands
Lorna Philip - University of Aberdeen
Lorna Reid
Louise Pearson - Wester Ross Biosphere
Malina Modlich - University of Edinburgh/SRUC
Mathilde Delestre - PAS
Matt Herbst - SRUC
Michele Macdonald
Pamela Paton - SRUC
Peter Ross - Dumfries and Galloway Outdoor Access Trust
Pattanapong Tiwasing – Coventry University
Patricia Clark – Scottish Parliament
Rowena Arshad
Ruth Alexander
Sara Bradley - University of the Highlands and Islands
Sharon Flanigan - James Hutton Institute
Stan Green – The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA)
Stuart Douglas - Coalfields Regeneration Trust
Vanessa Halhead - Scottish Rural Action
Wendy Barrie – Scottish Food Guide

Apologies

Ariane Burgess MSP
Jenni Minto MSP
Nina Clancy – RSABI
Thomas Mulvey – MS Society Scotland
Wayne Grills – BALI
David Henderson Howatt – Care Farming Scotland
Karen Dobbie – Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
Steven Thomson – SRUC
Becky Crowther – Equality Network

Agenda item 1

Welcome, introductions and apologies

Edward Mountain MSP (chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting.

He noted the MSPs in attendance and explained Emma Harper MSP was in a parliamentary debate but intended to join the meeting as soon as it was finished.

It was noted that all participants had been emailed the agenda and the list of attendees and that the Rural Policy Centre (RPC) as Secretariat has a note of all apologies received and would list them in the meeting minutes as usual.

It was reiterated that speakers' presentations would be uploaded to the CPG webpage within the RPC website after the meeting along with the unapproved minutes. Group members were encouraged to send the RPC an email if amendments were required in the minutes. The minutes will be formally approved at the next meeting in March. It was noted that the Secretariat will include any action points, links etc. in the meeting minutes.

Agenda item 2

Approval of minutes and recap of action items

Edward Mountain MSP motioned to approve minutes of the previous meeting.

Jane Atterton from the RPC Secretariat gave a recap of the action items from the previous meeting.

- Susie Townend (Scotland's Climate Assembly) asked members to look out for the Scottish Government's response to the Climate Assembly report and to encourage Scottish Government action where there are commitments made to do so.
- Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action) offered to facilitate ongoing discussions around the 20-minute neighbourhood concept and how it applies (or not) to rural and island Scotland.
- Callum McLeod asked group members to review the letter from Community Land Scotland to the First Minister on the importance of having a community wealth fund.
- Murray Ferguson from the Cairngorms National Park Authority asked members to participate in a [consultation on the Park's partnership plan](#) which closes 20th December. The link to that partnership plan and the consultation is in the Minutes from the previous meeting.
- Finlay Carson MSP had noted that the work programme for the [Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee](#) was being finalised at the time of the last meeting and now is available online.
- Emma Harper MSP and the Secretariat have suggested setting up a communication platform to facilitate ongoing conversation in between meetings. More information on this will be available in due course. The

Secretariat will also be in touch with all members of the Group and those on the mailing list over the next couple of months in order to ensure our lists are up to date and GDPR etc. compliant.

Minutes were approved and action items agreed.

Agenda item 3

Presentations and discussion

Four speakers presented on the theme of sustainable rural tourism post-pandemic.

- **Chris Taylor**, Regional Leadership Director Highlands and Islands, VisitScotland: *A national perspective on sustainable tourism in rural Scotland*
 - Covered a range of issues including the future demographic of tourists in Scotland, the success of certain marketing campaigns, and recommendations to make domestic travel in Scotland more sustainable.
 - He noted that the tourism economy is a strong sector supporting the Scottish economy. In March 2020 the industry went from 11 billion to nothing overnight. At this point Scotland is far from out of the woods and still struggling to get international visitors.
 - Different marketing campaigns have been launched to get the sector back up and running including the establishment of task groups and recovery programmes.
 - VisitScotland has worked with influencers as well as using other more traditional methods of advertising to get information to visitors about e.g. proper camping techniques. Over 80% of Scottish adults have seen those messages at least once and over 50% have seen these messages three times. Feedback towards the end of the summer was positive in that visitors were being more respectful.
 - Visitors are increasingly looking for sustainable travel sources. Domestic markets will be very important for tourism, but international travel may take longer to get back. Last minute decisions around holiday plans are likely to continue. Housing for staffing will need improvements. Scotland is well placed as a country and tourism industry to come out of the pandemic.

- **Rona Gibb**, Manager, Paths for All: *Paths, Visitors and Covid19 – reflections on recent trends*
 - Covered a range of issues including how people have used green spaces during the pandemic, the increase in active travel during the pandemic, and the inequalities that have been brought to life regarding active travel as a result of the pandemic.
 - The pandemic has been a challenging period for everyone. However, with the recommendation for people to go out for one hour a day to walk there were more opportunities to get key messages out to people. Many communities discovered new paths they did not know were there.

- Visits to urban green spaces have soared during the pandemic. Moreover, many people have gone into rural areas for more recreation during the pandemic which has put pressures on busy areas. It was noted that there is an issue with a lack of signage of information and a long-term decline in resources for path repair and maintenance. Access legislation needs resourcing.
 - Surveys during the lockdown period revealed that 77% of people took outdoor visits at least once a week. Walking has been the most common activity through all of the lockdowns. The range of activities and numbers doing them has increased across the board, however. Despite travel opening, local parks and green spaces are still very widely used.
 - The pandemic has brought inequalities into focus, primarily differences in health, financial impacts, and inequalities in access to green spaces and gardens. More people are understanding the benefits of being outdoors and in nature – especially in local areas.
 - There is a [Walkipedia website](#) with up-to-date information around walking. This is a useful resource e.g. for organisations preparing funding applications.
- **Kelly Clapperton**, Development Officer, Balquhidder, Lochearnhead and Strathyre Community Trust: *The Tourism Paradox: Managing Visitors from a Community Perspective*
 - Covered a range of issues including using community assets to manage visitors and the paradox that confronts most rural communities which is reliance on tourism but a need to mitigate their negative impacts.
 - Balquhidder, Lochearnhead and Strathyre Community Trust (BLST) has purchased the Broch Field in Strathyre and plans on using it as a visitor stop over but with a focus on what the community needs. Covid-19 brought with it a flood of visitors as well as a massive upsurge in littering and human waste. Better visitor management is important to the BLST area including having better infrastructure for toilets and camping.
 - BLST understands that tourism is essential to their economy and social well-being so working with Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) proper planning, hiring more park officers, and providing appropriate services for tourists will hopefully improve visitor behaviours and keep the community in better condition.
 - Rural Scotland needs more public toilets, money, and support to employ people and provide information and educate visitors, and stakeholder partnerships.
 - **Esther Tacke**, Galloway Cycling Holidays: *Trials and Tribulations - a case study of a small start-up company in an under-marketed region. A 100% increase in tourism means 2 people on the beach*
 - Covered a range of issues including active travel, public transport, and tourism capacities and a need for rebranding and marketing in the Dumfries and Galloway area.

- She noted that the bicycle is an important vehicle for sustainable transport and travel. In Dumfries and Galloway there is plenty of space, beauty, and authenticity making it a hidden gem of a tourist destination. However, the Dumfries and Galloway area is undermarketed and does not have a strong brand.
 - There are not good public transport connections within the region as there is no train or regular buses; travelling both north to south and east to west across the region can be challenging. Historically, there is a focus on points of interest, but Dumfries and Galloway is somewhat behind in marketing these locations.
 - Specifically, there are challenges around accommodation and food for cyclists, the balance between prices and quality of services, and the lack of a unified platform regarding cycling routes and cycling maps.
 - During the Covid-19 pandemic there were many challenges including lack of main customer base (international travellers), difficulties breaking through to the staycation market, and finding hotels and restaurants that were open and on top of Covid-19 regulations.
 - Gravel cycling will become a competitive market which Dumfries and Galloway can investigate; the region needs to be better at taking advantage of new opportunities as they arise. The UNESCO Trail plans to put Dumfries and Galloway on the market.
- **Janice Chalmers**, Alva Development Trust: *Perspectives on speakers from the Trust's experience.*
 - It was noted that the common denominator amongst these presenters' concerns is lack of facilities, infrastructure, funding, and rangers.
 - Tourists are going to come through and to rural Scotland and there must be facilities to accommodate them.
 - Communities have a role to play in the provision of these facilities but they need to be more engaged in planning and decision-making.

Key issues raised in the discussion included:

- **Infrastructure and investment required:** One participant raised concerns regarding the negative impacts of tourism on the Black Isle, and argued that community-led tourism is what should be promoted meaning that tourism is on the terms that the community sets. It was suggested that money should be allocated properly to ensure a rapid response before the next tourist season. It was noted that there is quite a lot that VisitScotland can do in terms of messaging. Chris Taylor suggested that Scotland needs to be mindful of messaging, for example in relation to negative feelings towards the North Coast 500, because many local businesses rely on the route and it has brought significant benefits to some. There is a need to carefully manage how visitors experience rural Scotland and how communities benefit from the tourism economy and explore ways to enhance the latter. Rona Gibb explained that as a former ranger, her feeling is that there needs to be more full-time rangers. Although funding might be short term, planning should consider long term infrastructure work and goals. There is a need for a public education programme focusing on younger people now to ensure more appropriate behaviour in adults in relation to visiting rural areas. Another

participant requested additional marketing of the Young Scot Scottish Outdoor Access Code linking up with NFUS and RHET.

Kelly Clapperton agreed that rangers have been helpful and are necessary, but funding schemes and agencies are too rigid. It was suggested that investment is needed in place if Scotland is to continue to be marketed as a desirable destination.

- ***Creative solutions & investment:*** There appeared to be consensus around the need for outdoor education and rangers but the perception from the public of who should pay for these services is contentious. The need for flexible funding and the potential for alternative funding through Windfarm Community Benefit Funds and [Landscape Enterprise Networks](#) for example, could relieve pressure on local authority funds and agencies' budgets.
- ***Suggestions for improvements to the North Coast 500:*** One participant argued that the North Coast 500 needs smaller campervan and motorhome stopovers and more chemical disposal points. Different campers need different facilities. Kelly Clapperton agreed that this is necessary, however communities need to be consulted so that they have a say in the impact management efforts. Another participant suggested that drivers need more training before operating large vehicles such as motor homes or minibuses. Chris Taylor mentioned that there are some new laybys being introduced. He also wanted to point out that visitors are much more inclined to stay longer in an area which means that communities might derive more benefits from tourists.
- ***Questions on community-led approaches:*** One member wanted to understand how community-led projects can inform nationwide policy on tourism. Kelly Clapperton explained they had recently completed their local place plan which should then feed into regional place plan and then feed into national government policy. The priorities and issues raised at local level should feed into national policy but this is currently being tested. In addition, being able to speak at events such as this CPG forum might help inspire national policies. However, it is not easy, particularly for very small communities to get engaged and to organise, so linking up communities and sharing experiences can be helpful. This topic of community led approaches was also discussed in the Scottish Rural Parliament in 2021 and [further information can be accessed here.](#)

Agenda item 4

Actions from this meeting are:

- Edward Mountain MSP suggested writing to NatureScot to summarise some of the key issues raised in the meeting and to ask about recent levels of investment in training and education on the Scottish Outdoor Code.
- It was agreed that the Secretariat would draft a letter from the Group to NatureScot highlighting key points made in this CPG on Rural Policy, particularly the investment required for education, rangers and parking/toilet facilities.

AOB

- The Secretariat (Abi Williams) raised the idea of encouraging ongoing discussion between CPG meetings via an online platform. Participants were asked to reach out to rpc@sruc.ac.uk if they have any suggestions for which platforms might be helpful or for general comments on this proposal.
- Abi also reminded group members that the CPG group needs to update its mailing list. Group members will receive an email from the Secretariat shortly in relation to this.

Edward Mountain MSP concluded the meeting by thanking the speakers and the audience for their contributions.

Next Meeting: Tuesday 8th March 2022 – more information to follow