

Minutes: Cross Party Group on Tourism

Monday 19 May 2025 at 12:00-13:00 (online)

MSPs attending

- Murdo Fraser (Deputy Convenor)
- Emma Harper
- Audrey Nicoll

Presenters

- Nick Thomas, Historic Environment Scotland
- Alison Bell, Inverness Castle Experience

Attending

- Jane Ali-Knight
- Andrew Hope
- Andrew McKean
- Calum Ross
- Charlie Reith
- Clare Winskill
- Dave Kerr
- David Hope-Jones
- David Weston
- Claire Dutton
- Heather Trench
- Janice Hogarth
- Kirk Norbury
- Gillian Barrett
- Anna Leask
- Margo Paterson
- Michael Golding
- Phil Smith
- Joanna Rankin
- Ross Pollock
- Sarah Allanson
- Sheila Gilmore
- Claire Wallace
- Graham Morrison
- Beth Thoms
- Gavin Mowat

Welcome and minutes from previous meeting

- Murdo Fraser MSP welcomed attendees to the meeting.
- Minutes from previous meeting approved without comment.

Presentations

Nick Thomas (NT), Historic Environment Scotland set out an overview of the organisations strategic underpinning, the overall impact of heritage tourism within Scotland and managing a large estate of heritage visitor attractions. Key points covered were:

Overview of HES

- Purpose – lead public body, set up in 2014 to investigate, care for and promote Scotland's Historic Environment.
- Vision – Heritage for All, a new corporate plan.
 - 300+ properties currently in their care.
 - The largest operator of visitor attractions in Scotland, with circa 70 staffed properties, each with a unique story.

Support for national outcomes and policies

- The National Performance Framework which sets the vision for Scotland's collective wellbeing.
- Our Past Our Future sets a national mission for Scotland's historic environment – to sustain and enhance the benefits for people and communities now and into the future.
- Their Operating Plan details what HES will work to achieve over the next three years, with defined measurable outcomes.
- All of these shape strategies and plans and set the following priorities:
 - Delivering the transition to net zero.
 - Empowering resilient and inclusive communities and places.
 - Building a wellbeing economy.

Plan at a Glance

- Tourism features throughout the HES Corporate Plan, in particular through the following outcomes:
 - By 2028, we will have provided inspiring and memorable visitor experiences.
 - By 2028, we will have increased the economic and community benefits from Scotland's historic environment.
 - By 2028, we will have increased our income and invested it in Scotland's heritage.

Heritage Tourism and HES

- Key stats – 48% of visitors to Scotland are motivated by history and culture and 59% visit a castle or fort.
- £2.1bn is attributable to heritage tourism.
- Approx. 16m visitors per year.
- 53,000 full time equivalent jobs supported.

- HES operate 336 properties, 60+ of which are staffed sites.
- They welcome 5m visitors per year to their staffed sites alone.
- Each site has its own unique story to tell, that comes with challenges. Historically, many of the sites were designed to keep people out, rather than welcome them in.
- Visitor profiles vary across the sites, with Edinburgh Castle having a large international audience, but somewhere like Tantallon being domestic for the most part.
- Visitor numbers are not quite back at 2019 levels yet. However, this is in part due to a rethink of their operational plan. Measures have included capping daily visitor numbers to 8,000 at Edinburgh Castle to improve the visitor experience, with previous highs reaching 12,000. They are also seeking to develop enhanced products to drive more revenue.

HES Responsible Tourism Framework

- HES work to a Responsible Tourism Framework, which has influenced their work on projects with Good Journey and their travel trade offering, which seeks to move visitors away from honey pot areas and into less visited properties and areas.

Providing value for visitors

- Membership target for the year is 195,000. Provides value across Scotland, as members are more likely to explore less visited sites.
- Historic Sundays initiative provided an option to visit their sites for free throughout the winter months. Improving engagement with their sites from communities across Scotland.
- They implemented a £1 offer for children to visit their sites.
- They also have a well utilised free education programme for schools.

Visitor Experience Strategy

- The approach cuts across seven priorities:
 - Authentic
 - Inclusive
 - Memorable
 - People-focus
 - Experiential
 - Quality
 - Sustainable

Prioritisation and investment

- The new ASVA QA scheme will have an influence on upcoming programme.

- With 300+ properties in their care, it is tough to balance and target where it is most beneficial. In some cases, there are challenges with wear and tear, in others this can be to do with presentation or maintenance.
- Some of the sites in line for improvements include Stirling Castle, Urquhart Castle and Skara Brae, but the list of those they would like to do is much longer.
- They are aware of their impact on regional economic growth and are conscious as to how investment decisions impact.

Challenges

- The high-level masonry work has been the biggest challenge and fortunately the vast majority of sites are now reopened.

Summary

- They are delivering to a clear strategic framework.
- Their offering for tourists is strong and varied.
- They take a strategic approach to planning and development.

Alison Bell (AB), Inverness Castle Experience then joined the meeting to present the transformation of Inverness Castle into a visitor attraction. Key points covered included:

Overview of the Inverness Castle Experience

- Transformation of former courthouse and jail to become a visitor attraction.
- A must-see celebration of the spirit of the Highlands' past, present & future.
- Located in the centre of the City of Inverness.
- Gateway to the Highlands, inspiring visitors to explore all parts of the area.
- Estimated footfall of 500,000 per annum, 50% overseas visitors, 50% Scotland and the UK.

Walkthrough of the experience

- The garden represents a welcoming public space for visitors, with Gaelic stories incorporated throughout.
- The entrance features pages fluttering above visitors, each taken from one of the 600 stories submitted by the public that have informed the experience.
- The roof terrace provides spectacular views onto the River Ness, down to Loch Ness.
- At the rose window, visitors meet the Seanchaidh, telling the stories of the highlands and guiding them into the multi-sensory experience.
- The social gathering room celebrates Scotland's intangible cultural heritage, with focus on arts and sports, with the tartan room celebrating the cultural aspects of the fabric.

- The advocates library shares local stories and provides reading spaces for children, as part of a wider family experience.
- The south tower experiences closes with an immersive sound and light show, taking visitors from the bottom of Loch Ness to the Aurora Borealis, providing a spectacular finale to the experience.
- The west tower features the Salt Bistro, open to non-ticket holders too, as well as a retail space and a Spirit of the Highlands whisky exhibition, as well as additional restaurant space.
- The north tower houses the highland tapestry exhibition and Highland music bar.

Partnership with VisitScotland

- Working closely with VisitScotland in the development of the experience, across a number of areas including:
 - Business support
 - Travel trade
 - Market development
 - Content planning
 - Communications
- Focus so far has been quality of visitor experience and raising awareness among long lead markets. In the coming months the focus will be on driving visits to maximise the impact for Inverness and for the Highlands.

Marketing and development

- The castle's own proactive activity has focused on the following:
 - Travel trade – including the creation of a virtual fam trip.
 - Campaign planning – with focus on ticket sales, using content and paid social.
 - Collateral – leaflets available for display in sites across Scotland.
 - Partnership – fam trips for key operators and liaison across sectors.
 - Website – content development and user testing occurred prior to launch.
 - Ticketing – user testing has been key and there will be trade rates available.
 - Accreditation – Have applied to have Green Tourism Award in place as soon as possible and will also join the ASVA QA scheme.

Questions

Murdo Fraser MSP opened the Q&A with a couple of questions of his own regarding HES. Firstly, noting that a number of properties have still not reopened following the high-level masonry works, St Andrews Cathedral for example and secondly what HES is doing to encourage visitor spread, given there are some areas of the country that would be delighted to welcome more visitors.

NT responded to highlight the scale of the works required at particular sites to ensure they are safe for the public. Linlithgow and Tantallon are large scale multi-year, multi-million-pound projects. At St Andrews there are particular challenges related to the museum area, and they are looking to get resource in place to support.

On spread, the Explorer Pass is a significant method of driving visitors to explore more of their sites that may be less visited. Their work with trade operators also seeks to drive international visitors to alternative locations, through strong relationship building. Local authority partnership marketing activity also promotes the sites that they want to drive visitors to.

David Weston highlighted the role of local businesses, particularly B&Bs in promoting the local offering to visitors. A reminder to both organisations to include owners and operators in fam trip programme and ensure they are working in partnership to build packages that drive ticket sales.

NT responded that HES are always looking to work in partnership locally and appreciates the suggestions put forward.

AB echoed these comments, adding that they were in touch with local trade associations in the Highlands and that they look forward to working with them more closely.

Professor Claire Wallace highlighted that it was great to see Inverness Castle integrate Scotland's intangible cultural heritage into the experience and asked what HES is doing to incorporate this into their own visitor experiences.

NT indicated that their work is all about the unique locations and stories at each of their properties and how they bring those to life for the visitor. They ensure that site campaigns and investment plans involve the local communities and ensure that the stories are a core part of the information provision.

Andrew Hope (AH) from Historic Houses Scotland highlighted his organisation's close partnership working with HES and NTS on initiatives such as the Blackness annual walk and indicated he would like that to continue and grow. He also extended an invitation to Murdo Fraser MSP to engage with his organisation.

NW thanked AH for their partnership working. Noting that Blackness is a site with almost too much success and that the infrastructure will continue to develop and improve. Happy to continue working with AH to achieve even more for the sector.

Gillian Abbot from STGA noted that she will share the info presented with the guides. She flagged concerns regarding coach drop offs at Edinburgh Castle, with Lawnmarket closed. This proves particularly challenging from an accessibility point of view and notes ageing demographics among tourists to Scotland.

NT responded that HES share the concerns and they are responding to the information provided by the council but are often responding to quick changes. They

provide the mobility vehicle from the Castle Esplanade but appreciate that doesn't resolve the situation described.

David Hope-Jones noted the incredible storytelling throughout AB's presentation and asked that with significant budget challenges in mind, how HES will look to improve their own visitor experience and what is possible for them.

NT said that although they can look on to high investment sites with a degree of envy, the key is to return to the core theme of authenticity. They consider how they use their staff to bring the sites to life. Examples of sites due for redevelopment include Edinburgh Castle (likely to take place in small-scale projects to deliver something big overall). Melrose Abbey and Caerlaverock Castle are also in line for improvements.

Sheila Gilmore spoke to her work with international visitors coming to Arran, indicating that there is often confusion between HES and NTS sites and which pass/membership offers access to which sites.

NT notes that HES do what they can to empower staff to explain the differences. Ruins vs. roofs being among the main distinguishing features. Key effort is thorough information provision wherever possible. NT notes that there was previously a Scottish Explorer Pass available through the travel trade that incorporated both organisations, however it proved challenging to manage.

AOB and Close

Murdo Fraser MSP noted there was no other business and closed the meeting.