**Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland**

**Implementation Steering Group Meeting**

**Friday, 18 June 2021, 10.00 – 12.00pm, Teams**

#### AGENDA

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| **Item** | **Topic** | **Lead** |
| 1. | **Welcome, Introductions and Apologies**  The chair welcomed attendees to the call, thanked everyone for joining, and listed apologies.  **In Attendance:**   |  | | --- | | Andrea Glass (AG) | | Andrew Docherty (AD) | | Andy Leitch (AL) | | Claudia Rowse (CR) | | Colleen MacLean (CM) | | David Richardson (DR) | | David Reid (D Reid) | | George Jamieson (GJ) | | Graeme Ligertwood (GL) | | Henry Graham (Chair) | | Jackie Brierton (JB) | | Julia Latto (JL) | | Katie Fox (KF) | | Klaus Mayer (KM) | | Lawrence Durden (LD) | | Liz Barron-Majerik (LB-M) | | Lynne Gilchrist (LG) | | Marc Crothall (MC) | | Maria Roushias (MR) | | Muriel Mackenzie (MM) | | Seamus Spencer (SS) | | Tom Hall (TH) |   Apologies received from: – Amanda Fox, Eddie Abbott-Halpin, Riddell Graham, and Stuart McKenna.  The Chair outlined that the ISG represents a valuable and effective platform, offering continued engagement and buy-in from partners, and opportunities to work together in developing case studies and business activity. | Chair |
| 2. | **Minute of Last Meeting**  The Chair set out the Minutes from the last meeting and these were approved  Katie Fox (KF) set out two minor changes which she had made to the previous minute – a correction to Growbiz which had been named incorrectly, and Angela Cox was erroneously listed as having attended. These changes were agreed.  Klaus Mayer (KM) made an ask following his session at the previous ISG call that anyone who wants to get involved in his project approach him directly. He also again encouraged all partners to join him in sharing the materials on social media channels.  Claudia Rowse (CR) will engage directly with Klaus – Naturescot is currently signing off their action plan for nature based jobs and Klaus indicated he is happy to take suggestions for future activity.  KF had an action from the previous meeting to include an executive summary in her update report, and had asked ISG members to comment which a number have now done. KF currently working on addressing these comments and building a more condensed report which she hopes to bring to September’s ISG meeting. | Chair |
| 3. | **Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland – some recent progress**  KF then provided an update of key points from SDS and her role in supporting the implementation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland.  KF – There is a great level of ongoing communication with partners, which is encouraging to see.  The recent Lunch and Learn session was the third such session and it is great to see these taking off and would encourage suggestions on other areas people would like to find out more about.  There has been great progress on the news bulletin, which has 57 subscribers currently, demonstrating good progress – would love to see partners push this to their networks and contacts – anything they can do to share would be appreciated.  The next bulletin will be on digital, highlighting activity such as the Digital Skills Hub at Borders College, SDS’ ongoing activity around digital skills in rural areas. This focus will help demonstrate that the work of the group is not focusing just on land-based sectors, with a much broader remit.  We are continuing with sub-group meetings with research and communications sub-groups, and have a wide number of case studies across different themes from a range of partners. KF provided an update that the Case Study of the Month is starting from July onwards and invited suggestions from partners as to topics they would like to see included.  SDS have now finalised the Rural Employer’s Toolkit, and are currently working on launch options. KF indicated that partner support around the launch would be encouraged.  SDS will create and circulate a survey around ISG members to secure feedback on the first two years of the Plan and the ISG and identify any areas for improvement.  **ACTION:** SDS to complete update report, create and circulate survey, finalise and launch Rural Employer’s Toolkit.  **ACTION:** Katie made some ongoing asks of partners: around blogs and bulletins and contributing to those with any suggestions; supporting promotion of the Rural Employers Toolkit; forthcoming survey engagement; lunch and learn – suggestions or hosting of a session; case study topic of the month suggestions; ongoing use of the ruralskillsscotland hashtag etc. | Katie Fox, SDS |
| 4. | **National Transition Training Fund – Redesigning Rural**  Julia Latto (JL) than presented a session on the Redesigning Rural pilot scheme which Scottish Enterprise (SE) ran for leaders who have completed the SE Rural Leadership Programme.  Julia ran a short video before delivering some slides looking at:   * the background and rationale for the project; * Delivery method, key partners and businesses involved; * Key projects involved in the project; * Profile of the beneficiaries; and * key findings and feedback from the pilot.   The Chair then thanked JL for her presentation and asked what was likely to happen next.  JL – SE has applied for funding for Phase 2 as the first phase demonstrated quickly there are over 700 rural leaders across Scotland. The trial also showed that during challenges of COVID-19 and Brexit, most people involved in the pilot found it tough. As we rebuild and recover, it is hoped that Phase 2 will be more optimistic.  Muriel McKenzie – From a Scottish Government perspective, it is hoped they will have further information on Phase 2 in the coming weeks. | Julia Latto, SE |
| 5. | **Spotlight Session: Tourism**  Marc Crothall then delivered a session focusing on the tourism sector. He indicated that he was pleased to be given the opportunity to speak at the call, and to set out what is an especially busy time for the sector, with a lot of COVID-19 recovery activity at the minute.  The sector is characterised by a wide variety of stakeholders - beyond just core ‘tourism’ - and this has grown of interest during pandemic as the sector has been one of the hardest hit. The sector is vitally important for Scotland, in attracting international visitors (and spend), as well as the domestic market – where we are now seeing a boom in ‘staycations’.  The Scottish Tourism Alliance (STA) is the national body for the sector, responsible for developing and facilitating implementation of the national tourism strategy – [Scotland Outlook 2030.](https://scottishtourismalliance.co.uk/scotland-outlook-2030-overview/)  The launch of the strategy in 2020 was hampered by COVID-19, but it remains relevant. The STA have recently completed an exercise to determine how relevant and central it is to recovery, and it features prominently at the heart of recovery plans etc.  The ambition of the Strategy is for Scotland to be a world leading tourism destination, delivering the best for visitors, workers, people and our communities and environment. In supporting this, the STA want to attract the younger generation into the sector.  Everything will be done via the lens of sustainability, ensuring the sector has the correct policies, infrastructure, people, and marketing in place to have success and underpin the Strategy and COVID-19 recovery activity.  The Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG) was established last year and takes in extensive partnership working and collaboration in emerging and recovering from the pandemic. It has worked extensively to establish priorities and develop a route for the strategy.  MC then talked the group through the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. Pre-pandemic the sector accounted for around 1 in 12 of all jobs across Scotland, and up to one-quarter of employment in some rural areas, so the pandemic was a significant and unequal blow.  The response process has been a collective effort, the impact of the pandemic has been felt across the UK of course, and there has been a national and international response as we learn how to bounce back and re-adjust to life with and after COVID-19.  Diversification has been a success story – agri-tourism is a great example of this, some innovative examples which capture the imagination and are driving domestic holidays.  A lot of people are travelling to rural areas for holidays – small, self-catering stays have been important. Whilst there are opportunities in rural areas, urban areas have been hit hard; from an STA perspective, they need to strike a balance and are looking for additional support ahead of more challenging times to meet future demand in a competitive marketplace.  Adventure tourism is also a huge opportunity for Scotland and our rural areas – we need to grow and use our natural assets and this lends itself well to the sustainable agenda. Many businesses remain open but trading in non-profitable way which is unsustainable. Diversification and new ways of operating are one way of addressing this.  Many businesses are located in rural areas and reliant on footfall – especially from international visitors. Uncertainty around this will have impacts on future performance and sustainability, very few making profit currently, and domestic visitors alone will not make up the shortfall.  There are also recruitment challenges – social distancing for staff is having an impact, fewer people allowed in businesses (guests and staff) so not as easy to make profit. Tour guides less able to function, not as many visitors on tours, or tours able to be offered etc.  That said, he is optimistic of future recovery – the sector has strong and aspirational leaders out there who want to bounce back and recover.  Through STERG, the STA and partners have identified what the first phase of recovery will be and Scottish Government has provided £25m to the recovery effort.  Building back international demand is critical to the longer term piece, and maintaining a presence in the international space is their main priority. Underpinning this then is the need to then grow the destinations and sectors to develop in their area, and reposition themselves to remain active and attractive.  One method of doing this is a social tourism voucher scheme which will launch in autumn 2021, extending the tourism season to help businesses get more revenue.  There are still improvements of course, and the STA and partners must work to help overcome these. For instance, many people are new to camping or home-stays, and there have been issues with infrastructure, littering, unsocial behaviour etc. It is recognised that infrastructure may be limited in some areas, so funding will go here on car parks, rangers etc to improve the quality of destinations. Marc sees this type of domestic tourism as a growth area for future.  Marc went on to outline some success stories from the past year including the development of a tourism and hospitality leadership programme which allowed 1,000 people from across the sector to develop leadership, management and supervisory skills. This was a 10 week online programme, and was a great success across all parts of the sector – a forthcoming Phase 2 of the project will lead to further benefits.  The STA is also working closely with Interface on another project helping businesses to innovate and diversify, focusing on the transition to a net zero economy. This project will establish a tourism observatory for data – which is more important now than ever. This will give data and intelligence in a much timelier fashion to help people make more informed decisions.  Through investing in infrastructure, community- led, and world class outdoor tourism, we will help grow the international market again.  That said, the biggest challenge is recruitment – Brexit and Covid-19 are game changers in that respect. An international industry needs an international workforce – many businesses have the challenge of reopening with COVID-19 restrictions and fewer staff – they may struggle to service demand. Chefs especially lacking.  Marc outlined a new hospitality recruitment programme (with £100,000 funding) to help showcase the sector as one of choice and help businesses make it through the coming months.  The Chair thanked Marc for his contribution and opened the discussion to the group for questions.  CM – aware locally of businesses looking at different creative solutions for chefs in particular – what solutions is Marc aware of?  MC – We need the industry to be innovative and creative – every relief chef is already out working and so there is very little slack. Ultimately it takes time – how do you get young people engaged in culinary careers? In the short-term, we need creative ways of supporting one another – housing and staff accommodation huge issue here. Need affordable housing to encourage people to settle in rural areas. Need to encourage sharing best practice etc.  KM – We need to invest in young people. How much of £100,000 is going directly towards young people and a skilled pathway for them?  MC – The new £100,000 campaign is targeted at 18-30 year olds, responding to the immediate need. It is a Phase 1 campaign…building on a pre-COVID campaign of “Love What you Do”. The project will inspire young people that the sector represents an opportunity to be part of shaping their and Scotland’s future.  Schools are not being taught how rewarding and broad the sector can be – young people absolutely need to be at the heart of this recovery.  LD – a lot of focus on younger workers which is important, but increasingly looking at older workers, how do we retain them and their skills – fair work is crucial here around shift patterns, hours worked, working conditions and so on.  JB - Are there inherent conflicts in promoting conscious or 'mindful' tourism with the need to grow back the sector?  MC – Yes, very much aware of this. Previous strategy had a volume agenda, whereas this one has value at its heart and trying to spread tourism around. Appreciate the contradiction between net zero and having people fly into Scotland as well. The whole political and strategy landscape is much more aligned to net zero agenda at the minute as well, so he is confident that once people are here, they will be able to act sustainably.  MR – Is there an opportunity around the Apprenticeship agenda – could this be used more smartly? Home market is important, increasingly important is how we market and advertise Scotland.  MC – good point – about changing attitudes and showing the domestic population what is on offer. For instance, a lot of Scottish people will not have ben to the Highlands or Islands etc. It is important to try to change this. | Marc Crothall, STA |
| 6. | **Emerging Findings from Highland Tourism and Hospitality Research**  David Richardson (DR) then provided an overview of some research which had been undertaken into the tourism and hospitality sector in the Highlands.  Findings have been mixed, with businesses generally reporting a decrease in performance, but results vary across the Highlands.  Businesses reported concern about keeping up to date with government regulations, reporting them to be confusing and uneven to businesses and across sectors.  Concerns around recruitment were also prominent - employers are struggling to justify existing (or pre-Covid-19) staff levels, whilst many have had to make cuts to staff levels, services offered, or both.  Further, EU workers are really being missed; the wider political and economic landscape has impacted on this, but local challenges such as a lack of suitable or affordable accommodation are also problematic. Businesses are looking increasingly across the UK or internationally for their staff to attract them to Scotland  A number of businesses are pessimistic about the future, with one-quarter not optimistic about surviving to next year. Businesses need cash reserves to tide them through the winter…they need money to refurbish, undertake maintenance, upskill people, adapt to net zero etc. However, events of the last year make this uncertain.  It is important to have all people in rural areas and communities supporting a drive for tourism, with the potential economic benefits it can bring to these areas. | David Richardson, FSB |
| 7. | **MA Assessment Approaches**  Given time constraints, it was agreed to delay this session until the next ISG meeting in September 2021.  Tom Hall submitted a paper which KF has circulated – has asked for comments ahead of the next call in September when they will present.  **ACTION:** Partners to review the paper and feed in any question or comments ahead of September’s call. | Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland  Liz Barron-Majerik, Lantra |
| 8. | **Next meeting and AOB**  Muriel provided an update under AOB that the Scottish Government and SDS will be taking forward an evaluation of the Skills Action Plan and she / KF will be in touch with different people to facilitate this.  It was announced that the remaining two ISG calls this year will take place on Friday 3rd September and Friday 3rd December.  **ACTION:** AD to issue diary holds for forthcoming ISG calls. | Chair  All |
| 9. | **Meeting close**  The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and participation, and the meeting was closed. | Chair |