

**Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland**

**Implementation Steering Group**

**Extraordinary Meeting – COVID-19**

**Monday, 4 May 2020, 11.00 – 12.30, Skype**

**Minutes of the meeting**

| Item | Topic   |                             |
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|      | <p><b>Attendees:</b></p> <p>Chris Brodie, Andrea Glass, Katie Fox, Stephen Sheridan, Gerry McBride, Lawrence Durden, Andrew Docherty - Skills Development Scotland (SDS)<br/>Henry Graham - Chair<br/>Karen MacNee, Muriel Mackenzie, Jane McCormack – Scottish Government (SG)<br/>Derek McDonald – Aberdeenshire Council<br/>Jackie Brierton – GrowBiz<br/>Stuart McKenna – Scottish Training Federation<br/>Angela Cox – Borders College<br/>Graeme Ligertwood – SRUC<br/>David Reid – Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)<br/>Donna Fordyce – Scottish Seafood<br/>David Richardson – Federation of Small Businesses<br/>Liz Barron-Majerik – Lantra Scotland<br/>Ken Rutherford, Seamus Spencer – Scottish Funding Council (SFC)<br/>Eddie Abbott-Halpin – Orkney College<br/>George Jamieson – NFU Scotland<br/>Tom Hall – Colleges Scotland</p> <p>Apologies – Klaus Mayer (Education Scotland), Julia Latto (SE), Riddell Graham (Visit Scotland), Marc Crothall (Scottish Tourism Alliance)</p> |                             |
| 1.   | <p><b>Welcome, Introductions and Apologies</b></p> <p>The chair introduced the meeting and thanked guests for attending.</p>  | Chair,<br>Katie Fox<br>(KF) |

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|    | <p>The chair set out that whilst the original intention was for this meeting to be used as an opportunity to bridge the gap between the March meeting and the meeting scheduled for June 12th to discuss the ongoing work in relation to the actions set out in the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland, the extent of the COVID-19 impact was too great, and it was felt that it would be more relevant to hold this as an extraordinary meeting focussing on the impact of, and response to COVID-19.</p> <p>As such, the format of the meeting was slightly altered (i.e. not reviewing minutes of last meeting, no sectoral insight, etc.), instead looking at some of the ways COVID-19 is having an impact, and some of the initial responses. We will look to revert to a more 'traditional' format for the next call on June 12th.</p>  |                           |
| 2. | <p><b>COVID-19 Impact</b></p> <p>Chris Brodie (CB) delivered a presentation on the impact of COVID-19, outlining that it is an unprecedented situation with significant impacts on public health, way of life, and the economy and working life.</p> <p>Chris highlighted the uncertainty which exists across these various fields (e.g. social distancing, counter-measures against the virus) and how this uncertainty makes it difficult to forecast when and how the economy will recover.</p> <p>CB also outlined some of SDS' work across a number of fronts to understand the impact of COVID-19, including – tracking economic forecast and commentary; tracking and communicating Govt support; and industry engagement to develop Labour Market Intelligence and establishing the impacts on certain sectors.</p> <p>He spoke of the likely phased lifting of lockdown restrictions and some of the challenges that these will bring – and that they will be uneven across sectors and regions.</p> <p>In closing, Chris spoke of the need to ensure that employers continue to invest in skills now, to avoid encountering skills shortages in future, and that all partners should think about some training and Return to Work programmes to help counter increasing unemployment.</p> | <p>SDS</p> <p>GrowBiz</p> |

Jackie Brierton (JB) then delivered a presentation on some emerging findings from GrowBiz's client survey, monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on small and rural businesses.

Key findings include that:

- 64% of businesses had halted entirely, whilst a further 18% were still trading but at reduced scale / income levels.
- Respondents had been quick to engage with UK/Scottish Government support schemes, but gaps remained around timescales to access the support (particularly at this time where seasonality is of utmost importance) and eligibility criteria;
- Some people in rural areas have been especially hard-hit – they often rely on a mixture of employment and self-employment; as such some are ineligible for support or only for limited support;
- There are issues with rural businesses accessing support – it is trickier to persuade them to take on debt or loans through the Government schemes, however for some businesses, it is a necessity for survival.
- Respondents were largely pessimistic about business survival – almost half of all respondents indicated concern for business survival, or that it would be at a reduced scale than previous.

JB also mentioned some of opportunities and positives which had been shared – respondents were keen to engage with learning in social media, digital and online skills, and in how to be more creative in business. JB also told of good practice around innovation, digitalisation and e-commerce which some businesses have become more engaged with – all of which are important strands of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland.

### **Group Discussion**

There then followed a Q&A on the two presentations to this point.

Q – Stuart McKenna: How do we encourage employers to invest in skills at this stage?

A – CB: Timing is crucial – is now the correct time to discuss skills with employers when many are focused on survival? COVID will change how businesses operate, however, existing challenges such as demographics, Brexit, and talent attraction still remain. To assist with this, CB suggested that partners work to ensure existing support is promoted widely and recognised, allowing

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|    | <p>employers to retain their workforce, and that where possible, skills development and training activity is delivered online. Whilst moves towards greater online delivery were already in place, COVID-19 expedites this process.</p> <p>Q – Karen MacNee: How do we position the Action Plan in informing recovery and next steps?</p> <p>A – CB: Road to recovery is still uncertain, but all ISG members should work with the group and their own networks to identify opportunities and areas to inform.</p> <p>Q – Angela Cox: Any indication of the length of the crisis and how far Colleges should plan ?</p> <p>A – CB: Unsure how long it will last; SDS working to try to scope out impacts and opportunities for sectors and regions and will be in a position to share this over the coming weeks</p> <p>Q – Donna Fordyce: The food &amp; drink industry has been severely impacted, lower productivity, exports have suffered, manufacturing has been impacted etc; how does the sector reset, restart and recover? How do we ensure firms have the skills (and access to skills and learning) to reopen when the time comes?</p> <p>A – Gerry McBride: Gerry has been working with Donna and across the sector to recover, and there have been some good examples of employer flexibility – extra shifts, extra lines, social distancing practices implemented etc. SDS will continue to work with employers across all sectors to ensure they are well equipped and can access learning and training opportunities to recover as lockdown eases.</p> <p>Ken Rutherford also called for a greater collegiate approach in the training and education field over the coming months and years; life will change dramatically, and he called on all partners to work more collaboratively to capitalise on the new opportunities arising. This was met with agreement.</p> |        |
| 3. | <p><b>COVID-19 Response</b></p> <p>Liz Barron-Majerik (LB-M) then presented on the Skills Matching Service (SMS) which Lantra has developed, noting that they have also set up an online careers service where people can use telephone or video calls to speak with staff.</p> <p>The SMS was set up to ensure that during the pandemic rural and land-based businesses across Scotland were able to access key</p>   | Lantra |

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|  | <p>workers and could continue operating with relatively little impact on their access to skilled people.</p> <p>The SMS has been created with extensive support from the Scottish Government and Lantra colleagues in Wales, as well as key partners, and has now been live for a number of weeks, with over 1,000 visits and 350 completions from across the UK.</p> <p>The platform allows both employers and applicants to access and complete an online form, connecting business with individuals with relevant skills and experience. Applicants are matched by their key skills with those required by the businesses, making it easier for both employers and employees to find each other.</p> <p>There have been 11 vacancies posted to date, however, Lantra is currently working with c.60 employers and so expect this number of vacancies to increase over the coming weeks, boosted by seasonality, improved weather conditions, etc.</p> <p>Stephen Sheridan then delivered a presentation on SDS COVID-19 response. SDS has maintained its services, however, the method of delivery has changed, with a shift to online delivery where possible. Stephen summarised SDS' activity across a number of fronts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG): This has moved from a face-to-face service to online and telephone delivery, and SDS careers advisors continue to provide targeted support, which will soon be expanded to broader groups whose employment has been impacted by COVID-19;</li> <li>• My World of Work (MyWoW) Job Hub recently launched to help employers quickly advertise job opportunities to a wide audience;</li> <li>• Development of an Online Learning Portal which brings together free online resources from training providers to furloughed workers or those who have been made redundant. It is likely to be expanded over the coming weeks;</li> <li>• Employment and Redundancy Support, where SDS have partnered with local authorities to promote support around finance, employability, wellbeing, and medium to long term support around what comes next.</li> </ul> <p>SDS has also worked with partners in a Team Scotland approach to deliver the following:</p> | <p>SDS</p> |
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|    | <p>engaged with the Programme last year, and another 40 have enrolled for the next cohort, due to commence in June of this year.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> Tom Hall to circulate a Colleges Scotland YouTube video discussing their response in additional detail.</p>  |           |
| 4. | <p>Another question followed from David Richardson:</p> <p>Q – David Richardson: Will businesses survive the aftermath, and what are the long-term prospects for sectors (e.g. tourism) which have been hardest hit and may take longest to recover?</p> <p>A – Lawrence Durden (LD): These issues are high on the agenda for his sector [tourism] partners and bodies; however, until the state of the sector and the impacts become clearer, it is difficult to know the size and scale of the challenge.</p> <p>SDS is working with a number of organisations (e.g. Springboard, Age Scotland, STA, Visit Scotland) to encourage more people into the sector. LD sits on the Tourism Skills Emergency Response Group (TSEERG) with a number of other public agencies and Scottish Government, which is looking to identify the implications for the sector which is likely to be one of the last to open.</p> <p>The challenge for this – and most other sectors – is that the scale and nature of the challenge is still unclear.</p> <p>AOB – Henry asked that all partners continue to work with their communications departments to promote the work of the ISG – particularly in terms of the response to the COVID-19 crisis.</p> <p><b>Action: Katie Fox to recall the communications group ahead of June’s ISG call to develop case studies and positive examples of how rural sectors and communities have responded to the pandemic.</b></p> | Katie Fox |