

Celtic Fringe AGM 2009

Ledgowan Lodge Hotel, April 22nd

Present:

Fran Cree, Douglas Gibson, James Mould, Chris White, Jenny White, Anne Gray, Alex Gray, Susan Plowman, Steve Plowman, Rita Sykes

Apologies:

Apologies were received from 9 separate businesses (*well, at least people read their e-mails – there's nothing worse than NO apologies and a small turnout!*)

Chairman's Report: **Fran Cree**

Fran gave an overview of the last year's Activities. This included mentions of the Wester Ross Brand Logo, the various projects that we have been involved with, and some of the organisations that we feed into through attendance at meetings or other means of contact. She also described some of the projects we have been developing and working on during the year.

Treasurers Report: **James Mould**

Total balance at the 31st of March was £4247.27, spread across two accounts (membership fees & project work). Memberships have increased by 18 compared to two years ago. However, it was commented that actually "running" the organisation in 2008 has cost more than the income from membership fees. This is almost wholly accounted for by the fact that we have a significant number of members with "text only" entries on the website, at a cost of £25 per annum. This is due mainly to entries that have been on the site unchanged for several years now, when the membership fee was £25, but did NOT include a photograph - in those days we didn't all have digital cameras, and pre - broadband websites took far longer to download - so photos were an option. For the last few years now, every new member has had a photo included, and the joining fee is now £35 as standard. Therefore it has been decided to undertake a drive to encourage all the entries to be brought up to date, all with photos, and all at £35. It will not be compulsory - but photo entries don't just look better, they produce far better results, more visitors to the site and more to your accommodation. **When was the last time you checked your entry?**

Alex Gray also commented that since there was a relatively small difference between income and expenses, could the expenses be trimmed? It was agreed that this could be looked at as well, though at the possible cost of cutting back representation and other "hidden" services we provide.

A brief discussion then took place comparing Celtic Fringe with NHTOG - standing for North Highland Tourism Organisation Group, they cover the whole of Caithness, Sutherland, and Assynt. (*They also claim to represent Wester Ross, but since neither ourselves, the UTBA, nor LADBA agree with this perception, I'm just mentioning that in passing!*)

NHTOG cover a larger area, have slightly more members than Celtic Fringe alone, but charge an introductory fee of £57.50 (typically, this is for **each** self catering unit, rising to £230 for a 12 room hotel). Their fees are larger, but their costs are way in excess of ours as well - as an example, their own "brand logo" project reportedly swallowed up about £60,000, whereas our own Wester Ross - Live the Highlands exercise was no more than £10,000 all in.

The bottom line was that we must take steps to bring our membership fees in line and with a standardised format, including photographs - BUT no membership increase as such.

A full breakdown of the figures is available by emailing contact@celticfringe.org.uk

Co-Ordinators report: **Douglas Gibson**

A full Annual report will be available on the website during May 2009. Therefore (*and on the assumption that all members eagerly devour regular news updates from me!*) a summarised report was presented to the meeting.

Brief Summary of Current and past Projects:

- The Brand image: Wester Ross – Live the Highlands. Douglas commented that possession and development of a brand image is taking on an increasingly important role in virtually all the upcoming tourism initiatives from HIE / Visit Scotland, and is regarded as an important sign that the area in question is getting its house in order regarding quality of services and welcome to the visitor. Equally so, organisations such as the Highland Council, SNH , and other potential supporters of local initiatives increasingly see this as a necessary tool for promotion and development. We currently have 62 businesses signed up to this, mainly from the Lochalsh – Dundonnell areas. Douglas said that the response from Ullapool had been disappointing so far, but that it was hoped that this would change with the help of the UTBA
- The Wester Ross website: (Although cautious about giving out the address prior to this going “live”, the site can be found at <http://new.visitwester-ross.com> Any feedback on the site appearance or content would be very welcome indeed, but PLEASE bear in mind there is still material to go on this, and that it is NOT a site that features lists of accommodation providers - it is about Wester Ross as an area.) Alex Gray asked about how this was to be maintained in future – Douglas replied saying that this was a joint project for UTBA / LADBA / CF to pursue, and that separate funding would be sourced for this purpose, along with the Wester Ross events site. CF’s remit was always to develop these, but not necessarily to operate them as its own. It was clarified that this aspect of these sites was running behind schedule due to events surrounding [T@WR](#) over the last year ([T@WR](#) being the joint CF/UTBA/LADBA organisation. Alex then asked about a facility for photographs / images to be put on site by visitors anxious to show the sites and scenery of their holiday – this led directly to the most recent project.
- We have applied to Visit Scotland for “Growth Funding”. This will allow a 50% grant towards the costs of a 32 page A5 booklet that will be circulated across much of Scotland by Landmark. This will be a free publication, and will carry details of the area from Lochalsh to Achiltibuie in a similar format to our previous “Slow Down” publication. The application also allows for an E-Version of this book for websites, an Image Library (as per Alex G’s query), and a stand at the Caravan and Camping show in 2010 in Glasgow. The result of that application should be with us by this Friday, upon which we start the task of gathering in the other 50%!

For the next year:

- As well as developing the Growth Fund project, we propose to hold a series of organised B2B meetings, similar to those that were successfully held on a somewhat ad – hoc basis a couple of years ago
- Training sessions on Web 2.0 (If you don’t know what that is, and you use the Internet for advertising – then you need to come to those!
- A new info and accommodation pack for 2010

Election of Committee for 2009

This was comparatively painless...Fran Cree will stay as Chairman, James will carry on as Treasurer. We welcomed Steve Plowman (The Studio, Achnasheen) on as a new committee member. All others as before.

It was also agreed that we would seek a new committee member in the Aultbea - Dundonnell area.

Meeting closed at 4.10pm

Thanks to the opulent surroundings of the ever welcoming Ledgowan Lodge Hotel, and to Chris and family for their continued support.

Report from Fran Cree, Chair, Celtic Fringe (*Yellow items all involve partnership organisations that we work with on a regular basis*)

Welcome to what must be around our 12th AGM. I hope your 2008 season was good and 2009 bookings are shaping up despite these uncertain financial times.

The past year has seen The Launch of the **Wester Ross Brand** which was very well received. CF has over 100 members and continues to work with partners **UTBA, LADBA, and GBA** in projects relevant to the whole Wester Ross area although Tourism@ Wester Ross is no longer. We also represent the Tourism Industry on **WR Environment Network** and on **Wester Ross Alliance**, the organisation charged with handling LEADER funding in our area.

I sit on the **Highlands of Scotland Area Tourism Partnership** representing the industry in the NW Highlands. This group consists of representatives of **VS, HC, HIE, SNH, Forest Enterprise**, to name but a few. The main aims of the forum are to monitor the **Highland Tourism Strategy** to ensure targets are being met. Copies of the final draft targets are available. Just ask. One of the main targets is to improve communication between industry and the agencies – we are looking at web forums particularly but if anyone has any ideas, thoughts please let me know. I believe it is vital the agencies know how it is on at the ‘sharp end’ and discuss strategies with us!

The Visitor Folder produced 15 months ago has proved a great success and it is hoped to produce a new and better one next winter. We also intend to hold more business to business events for operators to find out more about what is available in their area for visitors. CF continues to work with VS as much as we can. They are in the middle of a big review of their Visitor Services operation which includes TIC services. The purpose of Tic’s has changed completely over the years from a bed booking office to a service charged with ‘exceeding visitor expectations’ providing both printed information and face to face local knowledge on what there is to ‘see & do’ to improve the value of their visit and even tempt the visitor to stay in the area longer. CF enhances this policy with past and ongoing projects which was why I was extremely disappointed that the present organisation holding the official VS TIC contract in Gairloch, GALE, made no effort to consult with CF or the trade over their proposed plans for a large new TIC building in Gairloch. Hardly a good example of working in partnership or consulting the industry!

CF continues to promote and work to **National and Area Tourism strategies** and has some exciting new projects being developed for next year. Douglas will fill you in with his report so it only remains to me to thank Douglas hugely for his continued dedication to WR tourism. Without him we would not achieve a quarter of what we do! Thanks must also go to James Mould for the firm hand he keeps on the financial side of the association.

Presentation from Maren Ebeling, SNH (Scottish Natural Heritage)

We had asked Maren along to let us know some of the details surrounding SNH involvement with tourism, both on a practical and strategic level. She presented an interesting set of statistics which clearly showed that tourism is one of the main industry drivers in the Highlands these days, supporting 17,000 full time jobs in the area. At government level, it is classed as one of six key sectors that contribute towards the areas economy. It has an agreed target of 50% growth by 2015, as outlined in a number of reports and papers that have been circulated over the last few years. SNH are engaged in a variety of tourism related items, not least of all being a current drive to engage more with the industry and the community sector. They are also responsible for a wide ranging network of National Nature Reserves, including the Wester Ross based reserves at Beinn Eighe and Knockan. **Beinn Eighe, as an example, attracts nearly 30,000 people each year to the Visitor Centre and to the various trails that are included on the reserve** – it is a very important part of the Wester Ross tourism scene. The organisation is also responsible for funding a variety of projects related to tourism and the environment, this being one of the principal reasons why many visitors come to this area of the Highlands.

Strategically, SNH feed into almost all the major initiatives that are currently ongoing, and are a major player in decisions and policies that directly affect our industry.

Future involvement may well include assisting with the development of a Biosphere Reserve in Wester Ross, significantly increased promotion of the National Nature Reserve network, developing the Wester Ross Environmental Network, and ongoing work with groups such as Celtic Fringe.