

## **“How to best distribute information throughout a geographically difficult area such as Wester Ross”**

### **Background:**

As per discussions at the T@ meeting, dated 28 / 10 / 05.

*“Project 2: Establishment of a Distribution network throughout Wester Ross in pursuit of an effective method of information dispersment in remote areas”*

Previous attempts to effectively distribute leaflets and information within such a remote area have always fallen victim to the nature and geography of Wester Ross. Such distribution is invariably uneven, lacks impact, and requires a great deal of input over the lifespan of the item in terms of time and effort. This has a significant effect on information availability to the tourist, and leads to a situation where there is a great deal of information available, yet comparatively little is known about what resources there are. In tandem with this, there are repeated problems with storage of such items, and of how best to track where all the leaflets etc actually go.

T@ thus asked if Celtic Fringe can investigate the possibility of developing distribution channels for Wester Ross wide publications and information.

### **Research:**

The initial work involved first of all mapping the current range of accommodation providers across the area, in order to see if there was a possibility of setting up a network of individuals who might be available to take part in a distribution chain for ensuring that (for example) an information leaflet produced in Lochcarron can be easily obtained in Ullapool. Following this, exploratory talks took place with several organisations / businesses / individuals about the idea. Unfortunately, this turned out to be far more difficult a subject than expected. While most were interested in the idea, there were various issues:

- Available space: Even TIC units and organisations such as SNH are lacking in long term storage space in their premises – private businesses have none.
- Sourcing of pro – active individuals to actually participate in such a network. “We wouldn’t have the time” was a regular comment
- Existing businesses and advertisers were not confident that their leaflets *would* actually be handed out, preferring to do this themselves and to therefore *know* that the leaflet was on show in the appropriate location.

Leading on from this, a visit was undertaken to a selection of hotels, TIC units, and visitor centres in Wester Ross to see whose leaflets were available for browsing by the public, and where these were located. A representative selection of 45 leaflets, all belonging to Wester Ross based businesses, was then checked against the places that were displaying them. Rather than pick these up ourselves, we asked a third party to do this for us in each case, on the basis that this would be more akin to a casual visitor wandering around a TIC etc. The results were quite interesting:

- Only four out of the 45 leaflets were available in all three areas (Ullapool / Gairloch / Strathcarron). These belonged to Solas Gallery, the Hydroponicum, Highland Stoneware, and Inverewe Gardens.

- There was nevertheless a very even spread of leaflets from across the area: 16 from Ullapool & Strathcarron, 15 from Gairloch
- The best stocked TIC facility (by a margin) was the one at Strathcarron.

Conclusion:

*We are not on a level playing field regarding leaflet distribution across Wester Ross, which is still generally restricted to the actual location of the parent business. There is ample scope for more effort to be made by individual businesses in ensuring that their literature is spread across the area. It is difficult to see how we at T@ can actually help this at present, although the continuation of the B2B events are a clear way forward here. And more effort needs to be made in getting the message across that we are all in Wester Ross, and need to support each other.*

### **Information Distribution regarding events / activities etc:**

Following on from the “leaflet” side of the project, there was the problem of how to let visitors know everything that was going on in the area from the point of view of entertainment / guided walks / activities.

As at June 2006, the UTBA had an excellent “Events” section on their website – Celtic Fringe had a basic mention of major events only – LADBA had fairly basic information as well – GALE did not really have an events section at all, bar details about the weekly local market. Further investigation showed that Visit Scotland had limited information only, and there were no sources of information for visitors with a comprehensive coverage of the area.

As an experiment, for a two month period during July – September, information on events across the area was pulled together by Celtic Fringe from all of the above sites + feedback from individuals + the local papers. These results were put onto the Celtic Fringe website to be available to all site visitors (using a “Blogger” facility operated through Google) and also sent out to the entire CF membership, along with a copy to the contact email at UTBA / GALE / LADBA. The idea was that a fortnight’s worth of events would be sent at a time, and these could be downloaded and printed out by accommodation providers for guests. The “Blogger” format is simple to use, free, and can be interpreted by MS Word.

What was learned from this period? Several things:

- There is a dominance of Ullapool, principally through the fact that the Ceilidh Place and the Seaforth have frequent events. The Ullapool name therefore appears regularly on the events listing, perhaps giving an impression that little happens elsewhere.
- But this is not completely true - Existing promotion of events by the host business is actually quite poor. There were many instances where information about events in Gairloch / Strathcarron / Applecross only came to light accidentally. It is more of a case, therefore, that Ullapool does a far better job at promoting events and activities than elsewhere.
- Existing sources - incl VisitScotland - are poor: Again, apart from Ullapool’s “events” section (*which remember, ONLY promotes Ullapool*) there are no reliable sources covering the entire area.
- Alarmingly, existing websites often have misleading and wrong information on them. This was apparent on websites belonging to individual businesses, AND on sites which are run by community groups. Indeed, some of them stray into the area of having seriously misleading information on them.

Conclusion:

*The situation urgently needs to be addressed There is presently no obvious way in which a visitor staying in Lochcarron can get accurate information on what's on that night in either Gairloch or Ullapool. This does NOT mean that person will decide to stay the night somewhere that group "x" are playing:*

*Quote from Morag Walmsley, Gairloch:*

*A busy social scene isn't everything though - in our experience the majority of our visitors choose to come to Gairloch precisely because there is no noisy night life.*

*BUT it does mean they may well travel to see the attraction, adding to their enjoyment of the whole "Wester Ross" experience. And if there is a major draw appearing somewhere in the area then we have an obligation to let people know about it if at all possible!*

*Having subsequently discussed the issues with the T@ members, we suggest that the following actions are taken:*

- *Firstly, there is a co-ordinated and pro-active sourcing / listing of event details throughout the year: If not that, then certainly the period from April – October. This requires an active effort made in contacting venues for details, combing papers and media for listings, then making sure that everybody involved with T@ has those listings to hand for distribution to members.*
- *Secondly, that each T@ member develops that method of distribution in a way that is workable for their area*
- *Thirdly, we all make sure that our own websites carry ACCURATE information on events and activities for our local area*
- *And finally, about an average of two days per month funding is uncovered for these actions to be pursued.*

Over and above all this, venues and hotels / arts centres have to get into a frame of mind whereby one of the first things they do when confirming an artist or exhibition is to let others know about it! That will take time, but will be greatly assisted by a continuing effort through T@ letting others know what we are trying to achieve, and giving them access to the tools to assist all parties involved.

*D. Gibson, Celtic Fringe Tourism Association. September 2006.*

