Venture North
Growth Fund Case Study

Venture North
Discovery Series
Venture North is a voluntary group founded in 2013 to promote the tourist offer of Caithness and Sutherland, with a grassroots collaborative ethos. The £20,000 project comprised a £10,000 Growth Fund grant with match funding from SSE and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA). The project – the Discovery Series – was designed to showcase Caithness & Sutherland using a series of short films, which were promoted through a multi touch point campaign.

The rationale for the project was the view that Caithness & Sutherland had previously been under-represented in terms of its tourism offer. The campaign highlighted the attractions on offer and focused on the shoulder months around the summer season to help reduce seasonality.

This was the first project of this type for the group as they had not previously undertaken any marketing activity, so it was a steep learning curve. The campaign included video production, development of social media platforms, email marketing, vlog and blog, online advertising, familiarisation trips, website development and launch events.

The key economic objectives were to raise the profile of the area thus increasing the number of visitors, overnight stays, dwell time and expenditure. Additional objectives were to increase the membership of Venture North and local awareness of what the area has to offer.

The project involved the creation of three videos (summer, autumn and winter) promoted through a multi touch point campaign. This included Vimeo and YouTube views of 6,875 (target: 2,000), Facebook likes of 10,984 (target: 1,000) and Twitter followers of 1,096 (target: 1,000).

A ‘Discovery’ specific blog series was developed (with a number of local and national writers and personalities donating their time for free) that generated over 2,300 website sessions and a Mailchimp list has been created with 383 subscribers.

There were familiarisation trips from a French blogger & influencer and a photographer (in conjunction with the North Coast 500). The latter resulted in a spread in Sogo photography magazine and content has been licenced to Venture North to use in future Discovery related work.

A business launch event was held which was attended by key funding partners and 30 local businesses. Regular newsletters have been instigated sharing member and area news, as well as pertinent news relating to partner organisations (Visit Dornoch, Heart of Sutherland, Discover Assynt, Cycle in the Straths, Caithness Broch Project and NC500).

The group has learned a lot about marketing, particularly digital. They now have a much greater understanding of different aspects of digital marketing such as SEO, Google AdWords, Facebook Adverts and that there are a lot of things to consider in fine tuning it to get the best results.

It was difficult to arrange press familiarisation trips due to lead in times. Also there was a lot of the focus on the North Coast 500 (NC500) but they were able to piggyback onto this. They now have a much clearer understanding of what is required to be able to improve upon this aspect in future projects.
Wider Benefits

The content of the films surpassed their expectations and they have had strong engagement from local businesses and people using and sharing the films. They have also had strong endorsement of the content from the project partners with SSE using the project for promotional purposes as a successful funding initiative. Lord Thurso (Chairman of VisitScotland) has supported the project and Highland Council have also been involved in promoting it. Businesses in the area with screening capabilities have already taken or are in discussion about taking the films for projection (Wick John O’Groats Airport, Nucleus Archive – NDA, Northlink Ferries, Carnegie Library) whilst others have accessed the Vimeo link to use the film on their own websites.

The business profile for the organisation has increased as a result of the Growth Fund project. Venture North was invited to join the Highland Regional Marketing Partnership and their work and collaboration potential with fellow DMOs has increased. Membership of Venture North has increased from 70 to 80.

Whilst they have been able to measure economic impact directly, there are a number of indicators and feedback which has been very positive. This includes very positive feedback from Highland Council, Northlink Ferries, VisitScotland and SSE and the fact that they have been using the content produced by the project. There has been strong engagement from local businesses and the community, with a willingness to interact with and share the content. The films have helped to create a sense of pride in the local area and what it has to offer. People are still interacting with the films online and they can see the numbers going up on social media when they do. They feel that they have developed something that has ‘struck a chord’ and has longevity. Also rather than competing with NC500, the films provide a strong complementary link in making people aware of what is on offer in the area.

The Growth Fund allowed for investment in a project that they would otherwise not been able to undertake. It also allowed for considerable innovation in their organisation and promotion of the area through contemporary filming techniques and digital channels.

The project has a high level of additionality. Whilst the group knew that they could access 25% of the costs from NDA, the fact that Growth Fund could provide 50% of the funding meant that the project was possible. They then only had to find 25% which they accessed through SSE. The project would not have gone ahead without the Growth Fund.

Growth Fund Experience

A monitoring process was put in place so that they could report back to VisitScotland and SSE. The rigorousness of the monitoring process whilst challenging, on reflection, was good for them. Particularly as they are a voluntary group, as it meant that people had to stick to deadlines rather than letting things drift whilst they attended to their own business. Also tracking the digital analytics provided them with an understanding of what was working and changes they needed to make. Members of the group have also gained a number of skills from the administration and monitoring processes of the project.

Venture North now have a much closer and stronger relationship with VisitScotland as a result of the project. They are now part of the Highland Regional Marketing Partnership and attended Expo, where VisitScotland made use of the films. They also supply content to VisitScotland to promote the local area e.g. for VisitScotland’s Hidden Gems marketing campaign.
The films are assets that they can continue to use in the future. To a certain extent the content is ‘future-proofed’ so will not date quickly, allowing them to continue to use it beyond the life of the project. They can also manipulate the film content in the future to suit different mediums e.g. snippets, screenshots, so as technology changes they can use elements of the films. People are still viewing and interacting with the films even after project completion. They have also learned a lot from the project around the areas of administration, digital advertising, arranging familiarisation trips, lead times, that they can use to inform future work.

The project has allowed the group to demonstrate that they are capable of undertaking these types of projects and this has created greater belief in the organisation and its aims from local businesses and the community. It has elevated the status and positioning of the group.
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VisitScotland, Ocean Point One
94 Ocean Drive, Edinburgh, EH6 6JH
businesscommunications@visitscotland.com

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