key notes & actions

1. business support update

- the first four visitScotland top up funds to launch, (coach operators, day tour operators, hostels and inbound tour operators) are now complete. Almost all businesses who were entitled to £6,800 received £6,800.

- the visitor attractions fund and the outdoor / marine fund are making steady progress and should be concluded by the end of next week.

- the inbound tour operators fund is now open and all businesses, (c.190), should receive offer letters by tomorrow (10th March). Businesses have two weeks to respond.

- a small discretionary fund will open for a limited window targeted at those businesses who were not eligible for the original funds, for example startup businesses or businesses who may have been closed temporarily. this is not expected to apply to many businesses. the fund is likely to open w/c 21st March and must be completed by 31st March.

- the destination & sector marketing top up fund is up and running. All offer letters have been sent.

2. forward outlook – update

- RD advised that recent feedback from businesses is generally positive about the season ahead.

- it was noted that in the golf sector there are grounds for optimism - five major golf tournaments are taking place in Scotland this year (including the 150th open) – operator are very positive about the outlook for the summer.

- some concern has been expressed about the impact of the conflict in Ukraine however there is no hard evidence yet. this will be monitored.
Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG)

- STERG continue to discuss the evolution of STERG – from response, through recovery, and into future leadership. It was noted that there is value in developing the current model to ensure it plays a role in the future leadership of the tourism sector in the coming months and years. Further discussions are required to shape the remit and the model moving forward.

3. Sector Feedback and Comments

Scottish Guest House and B&B Alliance, Sinclair Williamson

- SGHBBA is delighted with the Destination & Sector Marketing Fund top up and are currently working on the paperwork.
- Some businesses are reporting that they are not seeing many advance bookings coming through, possibly due to uncertainty around household budgets going forward. It is hoped that the sector will pick up last minute bookings.
- Concern is being expressed about international visitors particularly from Europe due to the uncertainty about what’s happening in Ukraine.
- The golf resorts in St Andrews seem to be seeing plenty of bookings however there is a worry that the US market may start to cancel depending on the situation in Ukraine.
- Increased costs are one of the biggest issues.
- It is estimated that c.10% of Guest Houses and B&B’s have closed since the pandemic.

Scottish Tourist Guides Association, Kenneth Bramham

- STGA were pleased to receive the top up from the Destination & Sector Marketing Fund.
- As part of the STGA recovery planning, KB, on behalf of STGA will attend a VisitBritain familiarisation trip in Edinburgh next week. In addition, KB featured on VS.org explaining the working life of a tour guide in celebration of the year of stories.
- Feedback from tour guide colleagues would suggest that bookings are starting to increase, and overall things are looking better.
- There is concern about the impact of the Ukraine situation on international visitors who are critical to this sector.

Historic Houses, Andrew Hopetoun

- Optimistic about the domestic market this year, more uncertainty around the international market.
- Domestic events such as weddings and celebrations are looking ok.
- Corporate business remains nervous. Many positive enquiries are being taken but there is a reluctance to commit.
- It is very hard for members to build a business solely through domestic tourism, weddings and private events.
- It is hoped that this will be a better year than last year but there is still concern as to whether businesses will make money this year or just lose less money than last year.
- On the last STERG Sector call, and at the last STERG meeting, it was noted that there was an action to build consumer confidence and encourage people to get out and about through increased positive messaging from Scottish Government and improved visibility of government ministers at destinations or visitor attractions. An update on the progress of this was requested.

Action: RD advised that VS and SGov were working on a plan for STM2022. RD to follow up with VS colleagues for an update.

Action: JF to follow up with SGov colleagues to see what opportunities there may be for Mr McKee.
Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG)

Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group, Chloe Forbes

- SCSTG are delighted to have received the Destination & Sector Marketing Fund top up.
- At a Scottish Committee meeting last week, concern was raised that the rising cost of gas could impact some game keepers, for example those who rear pheasants where gas is used a lot - potentially some summer shoots may not be able to operate this season due to these rising costs.
- The new Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Bill was recently introduced to Parliament, this bill raises concern from keepers about the management of fox control, although this is not directly linked to tourism it is a worry from a management perspective.
- Some estates in Scotland are Russian owned - is there any advice from Scottish Government / VisitScotland on how the organisation should proceed?

RD noted that this was a difficult issue and suggested an offline discussion.

**Action: RD to set up a meeting with CF to discuss.**

Scottish Agritourism, Caroline Millar

- Scottish Agritourism are delighted with the top up fund and commented that the timing of the activity (Easter and summer) will really help a lot of businesses.
- CM requested further clarity on eligibility for the new discretionary fund.

RD advised that anyone who had not previously received public sector funding, and would have qualified for the VisitScotland funds, but couldn’t at the time due to certain circumstances, should be eligible for the £6,800 payment.

- Rising costs continue to impact the sector, particularly utility costs.
- The Tourism sector needs to be aware of the significant changes taking place within agriculture in Scotland and the impact that these changes may have on the ability to supply food to tourism and hospitality businesses.

There are many factors affecting the agriculture sector right now, these include for example, the situation in Ukraine, the ongoing labour crisis and rising costs – particularly red diesel costs, and in farming circles the impact of this is being seen, for example the production of soft fruit and vegetables is likely to be down 25%-30%. Other areas of agriculture under threat are the Scottish pig sector and the poultry sector, this will impact the produce that will be available for hotels and restaurants.

If Scotland is to become a nation known for food tourism and providing visitor experiences centred on Scottish produce then there is a need for agriculture, food & drink and tourism to be more joined up.

**Action: RD to ensure this issue is raised at STERG**

- The agritourism monitor farm programme will end on 31st March. An evaluation of the programme is underway, and a final report will be produced.
- A consultant is now in place to develop a costed, short, medium and long term action plan, to deliver the Scottish Agritourism growth strategy which was launched in November 2021.
- A request was made to share conference dates / industry events at this forum and on other platforms such as vs.org to avoid double booking but also to allow people to attend different conferences.

The STA website is capturing events for Scottish Tourism Month 2022 but also other industry events: [https://scottishtourismalliance.co.uk/staevents/](https://scottishtourismalliance.co.uk/staevents/)

An events calendar also exists on vs.org: [https://www.visitscotland.org/events/industry-events/events-training](https://www.visitscotland.org/events/industry-events/events-training)
Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG)

Hostelling Scotland, Margo Paterson
- The volume of interest is encouraging, and summer bookings are coming through.
- Rural properties continue to be the most popular.
- City properties still have a long way to go – they are still missing international visitors.
- Recruitment continues to be a challenge.
- Escalating costs are worrying, some contracts which are ending and need to be renewed (e.g., utilities) are seeing a 60%-100% increase in cost, this can’t be passed on to the visitor, so the organisation is having to absorb it.
- Concern over Ukraine and the impact this situation will have on European visitors.

Scottish Hostels, Gregor Barclay
- Scottish Hostels are grateful for the top up marketing fund.
- A recent members forum did not raise anything unexpected. The following was noted:
  - Overall, there is a good interest from the domestic market, but this is not yet translating to summer bookings.
  - International bookings remain light.
  - There is concern over running costs, particularly utilities – most members are in rural locations and dependent on heating oil and the cost of this is going through the roof.
  - Generally, there is a positive outlook, however uncertainty continues.

Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions, Gordon Morrison
- The latest wave of visitor sentiment research, commissioned by ALVA has just been published. This is a UK wide survey aimed at establishing how the public is feeling about visiting attractions. Key highlights are:
  - Small minorities of visitors (around 10% for indoor attractions) have anxieties strong enough to prevent them from visiting an attraction – a very positive shift since summer 2021. There is now an overriding sense that the time has come to return to visiting attractions.
  - Ongoing consumer nervousness is still apparent however, with around 40% still expressing concerns about visiting attractions – mainly centred upon continued anxiety about crowds.
  - Many caveat a desire to return with a need (and sometimes, expectation) for some safety measures to be retained. Indeed, over 40% of the market still disagrees that all COVID safety measures should be removed.
  - There is however a growing proportion of consumers pushing back against some of the more onerous measures (pre-booking, mask wearing and proof of vaccination status) to the extent that these are a barrier to them visiting.
  - General encouragement of pre-booking, or perhaps compulsory pre-booking during busy periods, now appears a more sustainable strategy than blanket compulsory pre-booking.
  - It feels like the market still needs the ‘safety blanket’ of some overt COVID measures, even if these are primarily signals to demonstrate that an attraction has the best interests of its visitors at heart, and messaging around respecting fellow visitors.
  - In deciding upon measures to retain and remove, we perhaps now need to change the question from ‘which measures keep our visitors safest?’ to ‘which measures least impact upon the experience?’

- The Association for Cultural Enterprises (ACE) conference was held in Glasgow last week. General comments would suggest that many visitor attractions are going to retain mitigating measures beyond 21st March. Ukraine was mentioned on several occasions at the conference however, at the moment, it is just a general fear about what could happen. Concern was raised about the impact on visitors from both European markets and the US market.
There remains a need for positive messaging to give the public reassurance that visiting a visitor attraction is safe.

The ASVA Board questioned whether VisitScotland could do more marketing for the sector, for example, an Instagram post every week about a different visitor attraction.

A second round of the Days Out scheme would be warmly welcomed by the sector.

RD advised that discussions are ongoing about re-running the Days Out Scheme.

4. Meeting Close
- RD noted that the outlook for 2022 was generally looking more positive however it was highlighted that the impact of current uncertainties cannot be underestimated.
- RD thanked everyone for joining and for their valued contributions.

Next Meeting
The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 23rd March, 9.00am-9.30am.