

Visitors need the right kind of memorable experiences



Mike Smith, manager, Inverness Business Improvement District

Business Comment

THERE has been a noticeable influx of tourists in Inverness city centre over the past few weeks. The ash cloud and tail end of a recession are both expected to contribute to more people holidaying at home in the UK.

So it is encouraging to see that Inverness is still attracting many foreign tourists.

Tourism is one of the Highlands' most important industries and is identified as one of Scotland's key growth sectors in the Government's economic strategy. Last week

VisitScotland reported to Highland Council that the Highlands' tourism was responsible for nearly £750 million of direct expenditure and it supports an estimated 21,000 jobs.

Estimates have put Inverness's contribution as being £100 million-plus.

Thus Inverness is a destination in its own right as much as being a hub to the wider Highlands.

The growth in visitors to the Highlands in 2009 was expected to have exceeded the 3 per cent growth for Scotland as a whole —

good news at a time when other business sectors are suffering.

Atmosphere and visitor experience is so important to encourage repeat visits by tourists.

VisitScotland reported that visitors are increasingly demanding and looking for authentic experiences. Thus we cannot rest on our laurels — we must always be striving to improve what we offer.

Part of that experience is going to come from visiting a city centre which is vibrant and entertaining.

It was great to see this happening as so many people soaked up the atmosphere at the recent Vintage Car Show organised by the Inverness BID.

The range of music, street entertainment along with the vintage cars on the streets of the city centre created an atmosphere in Church Street akin to the Ramblas in Barcelona.

Importantly, as well as entertaining people, this event met the business criteria set down by BID. Events form part of our

marketing mix by bringing people into the city centre, creating new business for our members and moving people to areas that they don't normally visit. All of which was demonstrated by the on-day market research.

We all recognise that along with public sector revenue budget cuts there is going to be a substantial reduction in the capital available for major projects in the Highlands in the next few years.

Whilst there will be many worthy claims for project funding, the city

centre businesses should not be shy in pushing for the highest priority for completion of the streetscape schemes in Academy Street and Riverside in Huntly Street.

Yes, there were issues during the original streetscape works but everybody now acknowledges what an improvement they have made to the fabric of the city centre.

To keep ahead of the game with the tourists let us complete the job and get these high profile areas upgraded.

Inverness Courier Tuesday 8th June 2010