

Public Petitions Committee: Petition PE1015 - visitscotland.com February 2007

Introduction

The Federation of Small Businesses is Scotland's largest direct-member business organisation, representing over 19,000 members. The FSB campaigns for an economic and social environment which allows small businesses to prosper.

FSB Scotland welcomes this opportunity to comment on Petition PE1015, which calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to return the national tourism website, call centre and booking system to public ownership. The services offered by the public/private partnership visitscotland.com are of particular interest to our members, many of whom are small tourism businesses.

Throughout 2006 FSB Scotland held a series of focus group meetings across Scotland with varied small tourism businesses, from accommodation providers to visitor attractions. Our members raised a number of issues concerning the operation of, and services offered by, visitscotland.com. The research findings of this exercise were published in an FSB Scotland policy paper on Tourism in January 2007.

Overview

FSB Scotland is aware of a general level of dissatisfaction with visitscotland.com, particularly among small tourism businesses. We have highlighted some of the reasons given by our members for this dissatisfaction. While we do not believe that the actions proposed in this Petition are the most appropriate way to solve these issues, we do stress that it is important that these problems are addressed by visitscotland.com. Continued disillusionment has implications not just for visitscotland.com, but also Visitscotland. Many tourism businesses do not clearly distinguish between the two organisations, partly because they share the same branding – which causes confusion.

Operation of visitscotland.com

It is fair to say that a large number of small tourism businesses are highly dissatisfied with the current operation of visitscotland.com. This dissatisfaction stems primarily from a number of common complaints about the practical operation of visitscotland.com, and the corresponding impact on small tourism businesses.

Firstly, our members have concerns about the accessibility of contact information for individual tourism businesses on the visitscotland.com website. Many accommodation providers believe there has been a deliberate attempt to dissuade visitors from contacting businesses directly, by obscuring their contact details, and guiding visitors towards visitscotland.com's commission-based centralised booking system.

Secondly, our members also express dissatisfaction with visitscotland.com's cancellation policy, which can be particularly disruptive and costly to small businesses, in the form of empty rooms and having to chase customers for deposits. There appears to be poor communication links between visitscotland.com, visitors and accommodation providers in this regard.

Our members also report numerous incidents of visitors being told by visitscotland.com that certain locations are 'full'. Visitors contacting visitscotland.com's call centre have been told that there were no rooms left in certain areas of Scotland (including Edinburgh and Glasgow), when in reality visitscotland.com merely had no more rooms available through its booking system. This is potentially extremely damaging to Scotland's tourism industry, because visitors could be deterred from making a planned journey based on this inaccurate information.

Our members firmly believe that the primary function of Scotland's official tourism website should be promoting Scotland to potential visitors, and that the booking function should be secondary. FSB Scotland believes that this balance between marketing Scotland and operating a booking service is not being achieved by visitscotland.com's website.

However, our members are concerned, not just at the service visitscotland.com offers to individual businesses, but also the level of service provided to the wider tourism industry from visitscotland.com. As visitscotland.com operates Scotland's official tourism website, and in part funded from the public purse, FSB Scotland believes that it has a duty to serve the wider tourism industry; not just those businesses who sign up to its booking service, and not just its own profit margins.

There are also high levels of confusion among tourism businesses about the distinction between VisitScotland and visitscotland.com, and the duty each is perceived to have to Scotland's tourism businesses. This naturally has implications for the expectations of service from visitscotland.com, and this may go some way to explaining the levels of dissatisfaction with visitscotland.com.

While we are aware that changes to the operation of visitscotland.com are coming on-stream, we feel that significant improvements to the level and standard of communication between visitscotland.com and businesses will be required, if we are to begin to build some trust in the system.

FSB Scotland Recommendations

We believe that visitscotland.com's duty to serve the wider interests of the Scottish tourism industry should be clearly reflected in the contractual agreement between Visitscotland and visitscotland.com. visitscotland.com's duty to offer a high quality service to all its customers should also be integral to this agreement. We believe this should take the form of a new code of practice for visitscotland.com, under which the following recommendations could be implemented.

1. The code of practice should, first of all, instruct visitscotland.com to enhance communications with small businesses.
2. It should also instruct visitscotland.com to be more flexible in dealing with small businesses, to reflect the particular challenges faced by this sector. For example, small businesses require greater flexibility in a booking system and in matters such as cancellation policy.
3. The code of practice should also instruct visitscotland.com to inform potential visitors of the availability of alternative channels to find accommodation and visitor attractions to those listed by visitscotland.com.
4. FSB Scotland also believes that the visitscotland.com website should be required to give greater prominence, than it does at present, to marketing Scotland than it gives to the booking service.
5. Given the high levels of confusion about the distinction between Visitscotland and visitscotland.com, and the implications of this confusion, the branding of visitscotland.com should also be given some consideration.

Conclusion

FSB Scotland has outlined a number of challenges that visitscotland.com will have to meet to gain the confidence of many small tourism businesses. We have also outlined a number of potential solutions to some of these issues. We believe these issues should be the focus of any changes made to the operation of visitscotland.com, and therefore the priority for action. We are not convinced that, at this time, these challenges would necessarily be addressed simply by a change in status of visitscotland.com. However, regardless of the outcome of the Petition, the frustrations and problems outlined in this submission must be addressed.

For further information on any of the points raised in this submission, please contact Julie Hepburn, Policy Officer, on julie.hepburn@fsb.org.uk or 0141 221 0775.