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Big plans for isles tourism

Gavin Morgan

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AN ENTIRELY new business hopes to create six jobs in Shetland within the next 12 months bringing up to 15,000 extra tourists to the islands every year.

Shetland Inbound Ltd wants to build up "premium value tourism products and packages" for travellers in Scandinavia, Japan, Europe and America.

The company is the brainchild of managing director Jurgen Scharkosi, who said: "We want to fill those cups that are empty just now and make money all year round by concentrating on marketing the culture, history and wildlife that Shetland provides as an attractive destination for travellers."

Local investment agency Shetland Development Trust is supporting the venture by purchasing a 49 per cent stake worth £98,000, backed up with a £75,000 loan to help with setting up costs.

The trust's financial controller Neil McDougall said Shetland Inbound would help local businesses to work together to create new holiday packages for visitors and expand tourism in local communities.

Mr McDougall said: "The idea is to become proactive in marketing Shetland as an inward destination, offering specific, non generic packages. Every small business in Shetland could benefit from this. We hope to lengthen the tourist season and we see Shetland Inbound as a catalyst for that.

But he warned: "Everyone will have to lift their game. Lots of issues rest on this. To generate enough activity year round we may have to be creative."

Mr Scharkosi has a five year history with tourism in Shetland and Orkney. Having helped to open up the Northlink ferry service, he was then involved in hotel management for Smyril Line within the tourism sector. Recently he owned the Shetland and Orkney Touring Company, but has given it up to concentrate all his energies on Shetland Inbound.

"Taking part in the further development of tourism in Shetland is an exciting and challenging project. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to develop Shetland's incoming agency and to have the Shetland Development Trust as a shareholder."

Shetland Inbound aims to complement the marketing activities of VisitShetland, by creating many more varied streams of income instead of relying on the more traditional tourist areas such as Up Helly Aa, the folk festival and the summer peak season.

Andy Steven, VisitShetland's chief executive, said: "The Shetland experience must be easier to buy as new markets present themselves through improved transport links.

"Shetland Inbound has already been working alongside VisitShetland at recent industry exhibitions to make sure those interested in Shetland can get what they want easily and for it to be joined up at every stage.

"Destination marketing can only go so far, but it is our tourism industry developing product through destination management that will ensure our promise is kept."

Hospitality businesses are being encouraged to offer something new besides the standard ways of attracting visitors to Shetland. Ideas that have been floated so far include hotels offering a full travel, accommodation and activity packages.

These activities may be, for example, otter spotting and visits to archaeological digs. The type of visitors that are going to be targeted are those that are not looking for good weather but specific, rugged attractions that are exclusive to the islands.

Shetland Inbound will also be in a strong position to offer a service to incoming transport operators, something that should boost the annual volume of visitors from all over the world.

Neil Grant, former general manager of the development trust, said: "The main function of Shetland Inbound is to sell the services of Shetland's tourism suppliers, to organise conferences, exhibitions and fairs and to explore different markets in addition to those already present. Travel companies, from overseas especially, require a one-stop-shop for all business they want to do in Shetland and we will specialise in providing this service.

"The company's business plan is very much in keeping with a requirement outlined in the Shetland Tourism Plan 2006 to 2009. The plan, which was drawn up following consultation with a large section of the Shetland tourism industry, identified the development of an incoming agency as a priority to improve travel trade business in Shetland by enabling visitor supply and demand to meet."

Anyone who is interested in finding out more about Shetland Inbound is invited to Room 16 at the Islesburgh Centre on 30 October for a company presentation. The number to call for information on this is 0845 094 14 15 or e-mail welcome@shetlandinbound.com.

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