



Thursday 12 October 2017

Leading Highland agencies unite to back Better Conversations Bus Tour

Public events and workshops planned for communities across north and west of Scotland

A new project which aims to help rural businesses and communities to tackle difficult issues and decisions will be launched with a programme of meetings across communities in the north and west Highlands this month.

Collaborative Scotland, an independent not for profit initiative promoting better dialogue in political and other decision-making, will travel some of the route of the well-known North Coast 500 in a specially-commissioned 'Better Conversations Bus', provided by Rabbie's Tours.

The tour will facilitate a series of free open meetings and workshops in partnership with some of the region's most prominent civic organisations, including the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), the North Highlands Initiative (NHI), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Crown Estate Scotland (CES) and North Coast 500 (NC500).

Events along the way are intended to enable constructive dialogue that encourages people to consider what vision they have for their community and the country as a whole. Public meetings will focus on "***Brexit and Other Challenges***" and ask "***What sort of community do we want to be?***" It will also offer meetings for local businesses to consider how to reduce unhelpful disputes and have more effective business arrangements, and for school pupils to learn about respectful dialogue.

Meetings will include business breakfasts, lunchtime seminars, workshops for schools and public meetings.

John Sturrock QC, Senior Mediator at Core Solutions Group and founder of Collaborative Scotland, commented:

"Over the past few years, I've had the privilege of leading Collaborative Scotland and encouraging respectful dialogue on constitutional issues and the future of the country.

"So often communities, especially those in rural areas, can face divisions about their future direction – often in response to developments like wind farms, proposed land reform, new initiatives and losses anticipated from Brexit. Those issues can become polarising and adversarial. Yet in my role as a professional mediator I've seen so often how much benefit there is when people are able to sit down and talk constructively about important issues, especially where they might have different perspectives, and when they can really begin to understand each other's viewpoints. Time and again they go on to explore ways to move forward and find common ground that improves the situation for everyone.

"We realise that there is so much to be gained, in personal, local and business relationships, when folk find common ground. Our bus tour will explore how local communities and businesses in areas of Scotland, that face unique socio-economic challenges and opportunities, can achieve even more by working together.

"We'll ask questions like: "What vision do we have for our community? And for our country? What matters most to us? What concerns us?" We'll be promoting Collaborative Scotland's Commitment to Respectful Dialogue as we go."

The Better Conversations Bus will start out in Dornoch on Monday 23 October, and visit communities including Lairg, Brora, Wick, Thurso, Tongue, Durness, Kinlochbervie, Lochinver, Ullapool and Gairloch. It will conclude in Dingwall on Saturday 28 October.

Fiona Larg MBE, Secretary of UHI, commented:

“The key thing in the learning is how to tackle difficult questions. Empowering people from all sorts of backgrounds in communities to engage with dignity and confidence in conversations about difficult topics on which they might hold quite diverse views can be just as important as the decision reached.

“Empowering local businesses to become more effective handlers of differences, disputes and other problems is a worthwhile aim in itself.

“This is about championing the potential of the North and West in an innovative way, testing longer term potential for business and community growth.”

Roy Kirk, HIE area manager for HIE in Caithness and Sutherland, commented:

“This welcome initiative complements the Government’s initiatives to enhance community participation with the various local agencies operating on their behalf and the objectives of The Community Empowerment Act which is designed to empower communities by strengthening their voices in the decisions that matter to them.”

David Whiteford OBE, Chair of NHI, said:

“This is the first experimental step in what could be a strategic initiative in the area over several years. Skills, empowerment, better decision-making, growing the Highlands economy in a sustainable way, is what NHI is all about. We welcome and support the Better Conversations Bus Tour with enthusiasm.

“This initiative could be an important contribution to enabling communities and other groups to work more effectively together as they face all sorts of challenges in the twenty first century with reduced public spending and yet with great opportunities to create a flourishing future for the Highlands.”