



VENTURENORTH

TOURISM FOR CAITHNESS & SUTHERLAND

Caithness & Sutherland

Tourism Destination Recovery Strategy 2021-2024



“It gives me great pleasure to introduce the Tourism Destination Recovery Strategy 2021-2024. As the Regional Destination Management Organisation for Caithness and Sutherland, Venture North are fully committed to working with our local tourism businesses, communities and stakeholders from across the region to deliver an ambitious recovery plan for tourism, recognising the huge contribution the sector makes to the economy and communities of the region.

We want to ensure that our visitor economy is fully supported to both recover from the devastating impact of COVID-19, and that we become a more sustainable and responsible tourism sector, contributing fully to the Net Zero ambitions of Scotland, and offering an unforgettable visitor experience to our domestic and international visitors.

We are fortunate to live and work in one of the most unspoilt and beautiful areas of Scotland, with each part of the region bringing a unique experience for the visitor – and we are also fully aware of our duty to preserve our natural environment and cherish the communities and towns which make Caithness and Sutherland so special to our population and visitors alike.

Working with our partners and stakeholders, we believe the Tourism Destination Recovery Strategy we have set out will underpin the ambition for Caithness and Sutherland to become a sustainable and responsible year-round tourism destination of the highest quality. We look forward to working with you on this exciting journey over the next three years and beyond to realise this ambition.”

***Catherine Macleod
Chair of Venture North***

“The importance of tourism to the Caithness and Sutherland region cannot be overstated as it is central to our local economy and provides a vital source of employment. Unfortunately, it is also one of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. We recognise that bringing about recovery in the tourism industry will be challenging but look forward to working with Venture North, our partners and tourism businesses across Caithness and Sutherland achieve a sustainable future for the sector as set out in this strategy.”

Eann Sinclair
HIE



“DSRL, working in partnership with Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership, was delighted to support this important project. Tourism is recognised as part of the economic mix required for the area and the strategy developed is the first step in ensuring a long-term future for the tourism sector.”

June Love
DSRL

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Executive Summary

Tourism underpins the economy and communities of Caithness and Sutherland, and the negative economic impact of COVID-19 since the start of 2020 has been felt by all – across tourism businesses, communities, and the wider economy and supply chain. The immediate loss of the international visitor market has been to some extent offset by the influx of domestic visitors and the continuing success of the NC500, but this has also brought challenges particularly for the visitor infrastructure of the region, challenges around staff shortages across the sector and different visitor expectations, and in terms of community confidence and resilience as the region has emerged from lockdown.

Venture North, as the Destination Management Organisation for Caithness and Sutherland, will play a lead role in tourism recovery across the region, working with local partners, tourism businesses and communities to ensure Caithness and Sutherland continues to be a high-quality tourism destination offering a wide range of activities and experiences for visitors in a unique and stunning natural landscape and environment.

At the heart of this Destination Recovery Strategy for the region is a focus on sustainable and responsible tourism – delivering against the Net Zero ambitions set for Scotland, and in contributing to the National Tourism Strategy – Scotland Outlook 2030. This means working together to offer more sustainable ways and means to explore and experience the region, building the visitor experience and offering to encourage longer and richer visitor stays, opening up undiscovered parts of the region for the visitor to enjoy in a responsible manner, and working with our partners to improve the visitor infrastructure.

Hand in hand with the recovery of the visitor economy, is the ambition for Caithness and Sutherland, and its communities, to build a highly successful and sustainable tourism destination of the highest quality for visitors and residents alike – increasing year-round visitor numbers, spend and length of stay, spreading this more evenly across the region, and working collaboratively to identify new visitor markets, and the creation of added value services and experiences for visitors.

Through extensive consultation with our partners, businesses and communities, the Strategy sets out seven strategic aims over 2021-2024:

- Building the capacity across the tourism sector in the region
- Ensuring a strong regional and sector representative voice
- Raising the region's profile as a high-quality year-round tourism destination
- Better managing the visitor and community experience across the region
- Positioning tourism as a career of choice and helping to address staff shortages
- Establishing a tourism baseline for the region and measuring and reporting on progress
- Building the engagement of Venture North across the region

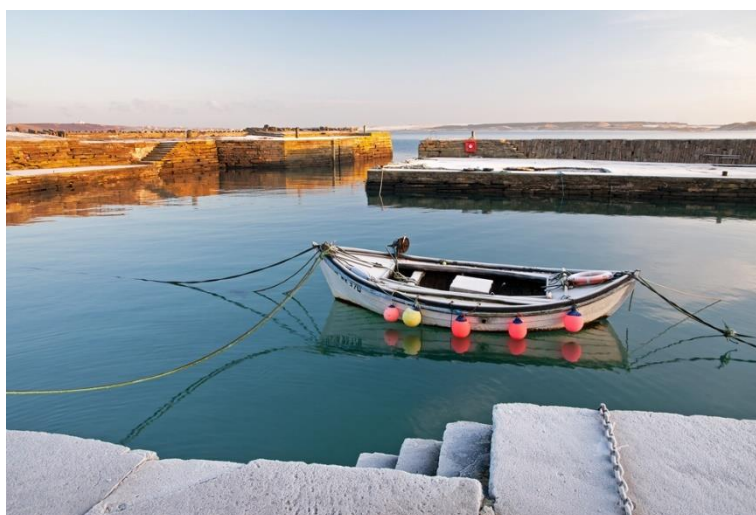
Whilst the Board of Venture North itself will represent across the geography and tourism sub-sectors of the region, and lead and measure progress against the Strategy, there is also an ambition to establish an Area Tourism Partnership for Caithness and Sutherland. This will bring together existing forums and bodies with tourism businesses and communities from across the region to unite behind a successful green recovery for the visitor economy, and to come together to collaborate and work together to ensure tourism continues to drive forward the region's economy, underpinning the vibrancy and employment of the communities of Caithness and Sutherland.

1. Introduction and Context

Caithness and Sutherland are the most northerly areas of the Scottish mainland - a region rich in dramatic coastlines, wild landscapes and seascapes, the vast open spaces of the Flow Country and stunning scenery, archaeology and history, with a variety of towns, villages and communities all expressing their own unique identity and character. The region is home to the North-West Highlands Geopark, world class golf courses, castles and monuments, beaches, outdoor activities and wildlife, fishing and crofting communities, and offers a warm welcome to all with something for everyone – resident and visitor, young and old.

Caithness and Sutherland has a resident population of c.38,000, but like many remote and rural areas this population is both ageing and declining in number, and population retention and attraction remains a key challenge for the area.

The tourism sector in Caithness and Sutherland underpins the area's economy and communities, providing a range of employment opportunities in tourism and across the wider supply chain which helps to maintain the population and vibrancy of the region. It provides an opportunity for future entrepreneurship, diversification and growth, whilst ensuring we preserve our special and unique landscape, natural environment and communities for the future, and move forward as a net-zero society, exploring more sustainable ways of travelling around to reveal and experience all that the region has to offer.



1.1 The Impact of COVID-19

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been sorely felt across the Caithness and Sutherland visitor and wider economy over the last year and a half. It is estimated that across the Highland Council area, turnover in the accommodation and food services sector decreased by £160.7 million over 2020, disproportionately impacting on Caithness and Sutherland as 15.6% of jobs in the area are reliant on accommodation and food services, compared to 11.8% at the Highland region level.

The international visitor market – with the area normally attracting a wide range of international visitors from Europe and USA – literally closed overnight as the country went into lockdown in March 2020, also closing down effectively for much of the last year to the domestic visitor market due to travel restrictions and regulations. Whilst specific figures for Caithness and Sutherland are not yet available, independent research for HIE estimates that visitor spend is likely to have declined across the Highlands & Islands region by between £370m -£584m in the financial year 2020-2021.

Alongside the headline figures, the impact of COVID-19 has been, and is still being, felt across the tourism sector and communities of the region – from the high percentage of staff placed on furlough over the period to previously profitable and growing businesses seeing their cash reserves reduced dramatically, or in some cases going out of business, despite the significant levels of Government financial support provided through the public agencies.

Many volunteer-led tourist attractions and organisations have struggled to survive, with volunteers exhausted, communities nervous, and businesses across the sector struggling to cope with changing regulations on social distancing, booking cancellations and the uncertainty of future trading conditions and demand week to week. The impending end to the furlough scheme and likely changes to VAT and business allowances brought in to alleviate the impact of the pandemic, will bring further significant challenge for many tourism businesses.

1.2 The Current Position

As the country has moved out of lockdown from April 2021, and the economy has gradually re-opened, primarily driven by the vaccination programme across the UK, there has been a slightly more positive outlook for the sector, although the loss of the international visitor market is still very challenging for many businesses, with international visitor numbers not expected to return to pre-Covid levels until 2022/23 at best. There is also limited opportunity for tourism businesses to take full advantage of the relaxation of most restrictions as the country moves beyond level zero from 9 August, with only weeks remaining of the main tourism season before the winter shoulder months.

The region has seen an influx of domestic visitors over the summer period, particularly given the success and continued attraction of the NC500 – but this in turn has brought significant challenges to the tourism infrastructure of the region, particularly for those smaller communities without the necessary visitor infrastructure to cope with the significant increase in motorhomes and campervans travelling around the region.

In the short term, Caithness and Sutherland is well placed to take advantage of the staycation market, and the growing demand for holidays, particularly self-catering holidays, in the natural outdoors, and the unique environment and landscape that the region offers to visitors. However, there are also challenges presented by domestic visitors who, on average, have lower spend profiles, shorter lengths of stay and different visitor expectations and behaviours which the tourism sector must adapt to.

As the economy re-opens, many tourism businesses in the region are also facing significant staff shortages due to both continuing local depopulation and the impact of Brexit which has seen many of the normal migrant workers not returning to the area, and a reluctance amongst many locals to see tourism as an attractive career option. The end result is that businesses are often not able to cope with the resurgent domestic tourism demand, and they are sometimes only able to open on a restricted basis or with limited services at a time when they need to maximise their income.

Indeed, the results of the recent FSB Highlands & Islands Tourism and Hospitality Survey (July 2021) showed:

- 45% of all tourism and hospitality businesses in the region were short-staffed;
- This was even higher at 64% for the hotel sector;
- 74% of tourism businesses in the Northern Highlands and 89% in the West Highlands found it difficult to attract local workers;
- 44% of employers in the Northern Highlands also highlighted the lack of affordable staff accommodation as a significant barrier.

Yet despite the fragility of the tourism sector in Caithness and Sutherland following the pandemic, there is resilience, and it is already starting to rebuild for the future. Many of the local Development Trusts and community organisations across the region have set out and are delivering ambitious plans for recovery, including local tourism strategies to develop both the visitor offer, and the community facilities and infrastructure available for residents and visitors.

NorthWest 2045 has set out an ambitious programme for infrastructure development and land re-use to reinvigorate the northwest Highlands for the local communities and visitors to the area. The ambitions for the Flow Country to become the world’s first peatland heritage site are well underway, adding to the regions unique and world class visitor offer, which also includes the existing North West Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark celebrating the unique geology and landscapes of the region stretching down into Wester Ross.

To support and address these significant challenges and opportunities, there is a strategically important role for Venture North, as the Destination Management Organisation for the region, to work with the important network of development trusts and communities on the ground, to provide a strong and representative voice for the tourism sector across Caithness and Sutherland, to build and support collaboration and capacity building across the region, to accelerate and add value to the tourism recovery and to create a more resilient, responsible and sustainable tourism sector for the future.



1.3 The National Strategic Context

The national tourism strategy, Scotland Outlook 2030, sets out the ambition for Scotland as a whole to be a leader in responsible tourism for a sustainable future, through a focus on:

- Our Thriving Places
- Our Memorable Experiences
- Our Passionate People
- Our Diverse Businesses

As Scotland transitions as a nation to a net-zero society, tourism as a key sector must maximise its contribution to this goal by differentiating Scotland as a responsible and sustainable destination, demonstrating its care of our destinations and environment and in our commitment to a green recovery.

Caithness and Sutherland are well-placed to both benefit from and contribute strongly to, this national strategy, with each area of the region able to offer a unique, rewarding, sustainable and memorable visitor experience rooted in the communities, landscapes and towns of the region.

In a similar fashion, the plans in place at local and regional level to develop the tourism offer and visitor experience, and to respond and address the infrastructure challenges which face the sector, mirror many of the key industry and green recovery priorities set out in the Scottish Tourism Emergency Response Group (STERG) COVID-19 National Action Plan.

The National Action Plan aligns to Scotland Outlook 2030 with responsible tourism embedded in the communities across Scotland at its heart, and in setting out the short- and medium-term actions that need to be taken to assist the sector to recover fully from the pandemic.

This recovery support across the Highlands & Islands area will primarily be led and delivered through the regional Destination Management Organisations such as Venture North, working closely with and across the Local Development Trusts and tourist bodies and communities on the ground, who are best placed and will continue to take the lead on the tourism priorities at a local level.

1.4 About Venture North

Venture North was established in 2013 as a cooperative body of tourism businesses and entrepreneurs primarily from Caithness and North Sutherland who sought to increase the tourism footfall to the area, and to support member businesses and communities across the region through effective collaboration to maximise the benefits of the visitor economy.

Since its inception, Venture North has developed a visitor facing website and active social media presence, highlighting the towns and communities across Caithness and Sutherland through area guides, and setting out the wide variety of attractions and experiences for the visitor across the region. Since 2015, Taste North has been an annual fixture on the events calendar for the region, celebrating and showcasing the local produce of the region.

More recent initiatives have included the development of a Heritage App for the region; the provision of annual digital workshops for the sector; the production of the Discovery Video series highlighting

the attraction of the different seasons of the region for the visitor, and the improvement of the tourism signage in towns; and representing and promoting the region, for example at VS Expo.

Venture North, as the Destination Management Organisation for Caithness and Sutherland, has now been tasked to lead the development and delivery of the Tourism Destination Recovery Strategy, alongside core funding support provided by HIE, DSRL and other funding partners over the next three years. In doing so, it will continue to work in partnership with the Local Development Trusts, communities and representative bodies and tourism businesses from across the region, to ensure a collective ownership and delivery of the Strategy at regional level.

Indeed, the Strategy has been developed through an extensive consultation throughout the region with contributions from over 130 tourism businesses, local organisations and communities, and key stakeholders as to the current tourism challenges and priorities across the area, and how best to rebuild the tourism sector in the aftermath of the pandemic.



The consultation also explored and developed the future ambition for Caithness and Sutherland as a leading sustainable and responsible tourism region, and how working together at regional and local level a green and sustainable recovery and contribution to Scotland’s net zero targets could best be delivered.

At this point it is appropriate to thank the many local organisations and communities who helped to facilitate the consultation at an extremely busy time for the sector, and to thank all the businesses and individuals who contributed their views.

A Venture North Destination Management Strategy Manager has now been appointed, supported by a small core staff team, to lead the coordination and delivery of the Destination Recovery Strategy, working closely with the towns and communities from across the region, to inspire, enable and deliver a successful and sustainable recovery of the visitor economy across Caithness and Sutherland.

2. The Recovery Priorities for Caithness and Sutherland

The consultation across the region highlighted a number of priority areas to be addressed to support the recovery of the tourism sector, and to lay the foundations to achieve the ambition for the tourism sector across Caithness and Sutherland set out by Venture North and the communities of the region.

The principal regional recovery priorities are:

- To provide support, advice, information and access to skills and knowledge to help the tourism businesses and organisations to rebuild their operations, to become more efficient and sustainable, to access new markets, and to gain in confidence and resilience.

- To ensure a **strong regional voice** feeding up to Highland region and national level which represents effectively the tourism concerns and priorities of the tourism sector and communities of Caithness and Sutherland.
- To **raise the profile and awareness of Caithness and Sutherland**, and all that it has to offer as a year-round sustainable tourism destination, to the domestic and international visitor markets – celebrating the diversity within the region, and the uniqueness of the region’s towns, landscapes and seascapes.
- To **better manage the visitor experience** across the region, benefitting both residents and visitors, and to ensure all parts of the region benefit from the recovery of the visitor economy.
- To **position tourism as a career of choice** for all ages, and to help to address staff shortages across the sector.
- To **establish a baseline** for the visitor economy, the contribution the tourism sector makes to the wider economy and communities of Caithness and Sutherland, and to establish a measurement framework to measure and report on the progress and impact of the Destination Recovery Strategy at the Caithness and Sutherland level, and where possible at locality level, on an annual basis.
- To **support the development** of the visitor product and experience through collaboration, new product development and innovation, and the sharing of best practice across the region

3. The Ambition for Venture North 2021-2024

Alongside the recovery priorities set out above, there was a clear ambition from the consultation undertaken to set out the ambition for tourism in the region, to ensure that the recovery priorities provided the platform for Caithness and Sutherland, and its communities, to build a highly successful and sustainable tourism destination of the highest quality for visitors and residents alike – an exemplar region for Scotland Outlook 2030 – Responsible tourism for a sustainable future.

Key to this ambition is:

- A **strong regional Destination Management Organisation**, representative of the region and adding value to the work of the local organisations and Development Trusts in place across the region, to ensure a successful and sustainable green recovery.
- **Tourism viewed by all as a positive contributor** across the economy and communities of the region – a strong and respected sector voice demonstrating its value in terms of income and employment, and the career and entrepreneurial opportunities it offers.
- **Increased year-round visitor numbers**, spend and length of stay, spread more evenly across the region and with the community and tourism infrastructure in place to support this.
- **Development** of collaborative working, identification of new market opportunities, and the creation of added value services and experiences for visitors across the region.



4. The Strategic Tourism Aims for Caithness and Sutherland 2021-2024

The strategic aims and ambition for tourism in the region over the next three years are set out in more detail below, combining short term recovery with the medium to long term ambition for tourism in the region.

These Strategic Aims will guide, prioritise and direct the work of the Venture North team and partners, and form the basis for an annual prioritised action plan to be developed for Venture North, with the Year 1 Action Plan, April 2021 to March 2022, attached as an appendix.

4.1 Strategic Aim 1: Effective capacity building for the tourism sector.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
1. Support the region's ambitions for a Green Tourism Recovery and contribution to Net Zero Targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised awareness across the sector of how tourism can contribute to the net zero target and a green recovery • Increased tourism business and community energy efficiency • A more sustainable tourism destination and travel options to and around the region
2. Create a knowledge base of market trends, funding opportunities, regulations and market knowledge, accessible to tourism businesses, communities and Development Trusts across the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger capacity of local businesses and community organisations • More funding directed into the sector effectively • Increased tourism entrepreneurship across communities
3. Work with Business Gateway and partners to research and develop training, workshops and information packages for use by the tourism sector – digital/ customer service/ local knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved digital awareness, skills and promotion of the tourism offer • Improved customer service • Development of authentic experiences for visitors
4. Establish forums for the exchange of best practice, new ideas and sub-sector regional initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise the quality of the visitor offer across the region • Increased entrepreneurship and community/volunteer capacity • Increased levels of innovation across the sector

4.2 Strategic Aim 2: Ensure a strong regional and sector representative voice.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
1. Gather regular intelligence and evidence of the key tourism issues and priorities from across the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to date knowledge and evidence of tourism issues and opportunities A focus on what's important for the region
2. With industry partners, define and agree the core regional messages, and the key audience for each	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent and strong representation of the issues most important to the sector and communities
3. Identify and ensure VN representation at key local, regional and national forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to effect positive change
4. Work with neighbouring DMOs on consistent messaging of common issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A stronger and respected voice Cross-regional collaboration opportunities

4.3 Strategic Aim 3: Raise the profile of Caithness and Sutherland as a high quality sustainable and responsible year-round tourism destination.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
1. Maintain and enhance VN website, social media and marketing channels, linking effectively through to the local destination websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual Venture North Marketing Plan in place, and development of key marketing messages/USP The variety and uniqueness of Caithness and Sutherland fully presented to the visitor, and easily found by the visitor
2. Maximise the current staycation market opportunity, and prepare for the returning international visitor market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted promotion of key visitor segments matching against the region offer New visitor offers based on market intelligence
3. Maximise the regional benefit from Scotland Theme years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased year-round visitor numbers Promotion of the C&S Authentic Experience
4. Work to increase the average length of stay/spend per visitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased economic and community contribution Increased value of tourism
5. Work to extend the tourism season to a more year-round offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More sustainable tourism Increase in year-round employment

4.4. Strategic Aim 4: Better manage the visitor and community experience across the region.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
1. Create new itineraries and collaborations which encourage longer stays and promote different destinations around the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread tourism benefits and volume of visitors across the region
2. Work with local partners to identify and map regional gaps in the visitor infrastructure, and provision of facilities/signage and public transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to date information fed into HC Tourism Infrastructure and Visitor Management Plans & Forums • Create new business opportunities – Aires for motorhome stopovers, accommodation and dining offers, electric charging points across the region • Improved visitor experience
3. Create and maintain consistent responsible tourism messaging on issues such as outdoor access and wild camping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitor education on how best to experience the area • Preservation of natural environment
4. Create Local Ambassador network with local memorable stories and insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of authentic and memorable tourism experiences and personal touches for visitors

4.5 Strategic Aim 5: Position tourism as a career of choice for all ages, and to help to address staff shortages across the sector.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
1. Develop recruitment plan for the industry working with local and national partners, aligned to the Tourism Skills Investment Plan, and piloting different approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced staff shortages • Enhanced career opportunities • Training opportunities for young people
2. Create a distinct Caithness & Sutherland tourism career information pack and tourism story template which can be used across the region by local employers & schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of tourism as an attractive career option • Reduced staff shortages
3. Work with the tourism sector to better understand and support the implementation of the Fair Work Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of tourism as an attractive career option • Increased staff retention and improved staff well-being

4.6 Strategic Aim 6: Establish a tourism baseline for the region and be able to measure and demonstrate progress and impact against this.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish a tourism baseline and Performance Measurement framework for the Region, and the Destination Recovery Strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate progress against the Strategic Aims on an on-going basis • Provide an evidence base of the positive impact tourism brings to the region • Better informed tourism business decisions and investments

4.7 Strategic Aim 7: Build the capacity and engagement of Venture North across the region.

Key Action Areas	Outputs and Deliverables
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building on what is in place already, establish an Area Tourism Partnership for the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the on-going engagement of tourism businesses, Development Trusts, communities and local tourism organisations • Ensure a collective ownership of the Tourism Destination Recovery Strategy for the region
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Ensure recognition of local tourism priorities within the Tourism Destination Recovery Annual Plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of responsibility for local and regional tourism priorities

5. Venture North Management & Operations

Venture North currently has a Board of seven representatives, all from the tourism sector, and it is intended to expand the Board in the first instance to a membership of 12 by the end of year 1. This will ensure board representation from across Caithness and Sutherland, and the opportunity to create a Board Skills matrix that reflects Venture North’s role as the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for Caithness and Sutherland, which will inform the recruitment of new directors to the Board.

Venture North will seek to achieve an appropriate and representative mix of Board members not just geographically from across the region, but from across the different tourism sub-sectors, who are able to bring a knowledge and experience of the region and the tourism sector, and a willingness to take an active role in achieving the strategic tourism priorities set out in the Destination Recovery Strategy.

Delivery responsibility for the Destination Recovery Strategy will rest with the Destination Strategy Manager, supported by a small core team all based in the region, and reporting to the Board of Venture North.

Central to the success of Venture North and the Destination Strategy will be to focus at the regional level, and to bring added value to the work of the different tourism initiatives and local lead organisations already in place across the region, to address the issues and opportunities which require

a regional perspective and maximise the positive impact of resources for the tourism sector and communities across the region.

As set out above under Strategic Priority 7, it is intended to put in place an Area Tourism Partnership (ATP) for Caithness and Sutherland which will provide an opportunity for all the local areas and tourism community organisations, Development Trusts, and businesses to come together in conference annually, and to establish quarterly updates, to both hear how the Destination Recovery Strategy is progressing, and to input and inform the priorities and opportunities for each operating year.

The final role, membership and frequency of the ATP will form one of the early discussions with our local partners and stakeholders with the intention to hold a first ATP update in the final quarter of 2021, and to also adopt an ATP annual conference format as we return to more normal working patterns, and for it to be hosted in different locations across the region.

In terms of achieving a long term sustainable operating model for the DMO post 2024, core funding is now in place until 2024 to allow the delivery of the Destination Recovery Strategy, and part of the role of the Venture North core team will be to look at future funding opportunities and models for the region, working with local partners, as well as considering best practice across other DMOs and regions.



6. Venture North Performance Measurement Framework

As set out above, a comprehensive tourism baseline for Caithness and Sutherland does not currently exist, but it will form an early action for the DMO. At this stage, it is proposed 2021 will form the baseline, and the Destination Recovery Strategy progress will be measured against this.

Early discussions have already taken place with local and national partners including Highland Council and VisitScotland as to what data currently exists at regional level, and what can be sourced. It is recognised an initial STEAM report was developed for 2019 for Caithness and for Sutherland, and it is intended this is updated and developed for 2021 to provide a new baseline, able to measure progress against a range of tourism impact measures on an annual basis.

It is intended that the core of the Venture North Performance Measurement Framework will follow a Logic Model approach, providing a range of input, activity and output measures against the Strategic Aims for year 1 in particular, and to build over the three years the outcomes and impacts Venture North has achieved. This will also provide an annual tourism business barometer for the region covering all measures with analysis and narrative interpretation of contributions delivered.

Venture North is well aware of the survey fatigue across the sector and communities over the past year, as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sector continues to be assessed. The DMO will work with partners, tourism businesses and organisations to agree a set of performance metrics which

can effectively report on the tourism recovery of the region. This will include measures of Tourism Gross Value Add and employment, visitor days, and visitor numbers – and measure progress against the 7 Strategic Aims, and the ambition for tourism in the region.

Appendix A – Year 1 Delivery Plan

The year 1 delivery plan runs from April 2021 – March 2022. The actions are set out by quarter under each Strategic Aim, and progress and outputs will be measured against an agreed Performance Measurement Report to the Board of Venture North. For year 1, it is noted that the Destination Recovery Strategy consultation and development took place through June – August 2021, and the core Venture North staff team only came into place from July 2021.

The Action Plan for each year will be set against the Strategy framework and Strategic Aims, and it will be developed in consultation with key local partners.

Strategic Aim: Effective Capacity Building for the Tourism Sector		
Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1.Support the region’s ambitions for a Green Tourism Recovery and contribution to Net Zero Targets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with Zero Waste Scotland, Energy Saving Trust and Caithness Chamber to develop green recovery awareness sessions and calls to action. 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet and work with Regional Initiatives and wider DMO network to support, and promote best practice in green recovery; e.g. Far North Line, E-bikes 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot initial Green Recovery Event 	Quarter 4
2.Create a knowledge base of market trends, funding opportunities, regulations and market knowledge, accessible to tourism businesses, communities and Development Trusts across the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venture North Newsletter and Monthly blog 	On-going
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a funding/resources map 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a quarterly information bulletin for the sector as to what is happening within the sector 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop regional SWOT analysis and heat map of planned tourism investments, attractions and assets and gaps 	Quarter 4
3.Work with Business Gateway and partners to research and develop training, workshops and information packages for use by the tourism sector – digital/ customer service/ local knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map existing training offering for tourism in the region and identify gaps 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create annual Tourism Training Calendar 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of Training Workshops – final delivery topics to be defined from mapping 	Quarter 4
4.Establish forums for the exchange of best practice, new ideas and sub-sector regional initiatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish sub-sector groups to develop and promote 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outdoor Activities & Adventure - Sustainable Transport 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food and Drink (Taste North) 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heritage and Culture 	

Strategic Aim: Ensure a strong regional and sector representative voice		
Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Gather regular intelligence and evidence of the key tourism issues and priorities from across the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish template and information collection mechanisms building on Consultation contacts 	Quarter 2/3
2. With industry partners, define and agree the core regional messages, and the key audience for each	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Map existing regional messaging across partners Agree core region messages, audiences and frequency of messaging – media plan 	Quarter 3 Quarter 4
3. Identify and ensure VN representation at key local, regional and national forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder Map and Engagement Plan in place 	Quarter 3
4. Work with neighbouring DMOs on consistent messaging of common issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance at Highland Tourism Partnership Undertake DMO Visit Programme 	Quarter 3/4 Quarter 3

Strategic Aim: Raise the profile of Caithness and Sutherland as a high quality sustainable and responsible year-round tourism destination		
Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Maintain and enhance VN website, social media and marketing channels, linking effectively through to the local destination websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance at Scotland Re-Connect (VS Expo) 	Quarter 1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scotland Loves Local videos for Caithness and Sutherland 	Quarter 2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source and use more images of Central and East Sutherland in marketing activity 	Quarter 2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update area profiles and backlinks to local marketing sites 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Search Engine Optimisation development 	On-going
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapping and understanding the visitor digital journey, and create compelling brand and USP for the region 	Quarter 3/4
2. Maximise the current staycation market opportunity, and prepare for the returning international visitor market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submission for destination marketing funding 	Quarter 2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop with partners new visitor packages and itineraries for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outdoor Activities & Adventure Food and Drink Heritage & Culture 	Quarter 3 Quarter 4 Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with communities to develop regional story bank for 2022 	Quarter 4
3. Maximise the regional benefit from Scotland Theme years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and optimise Heritage App linking to the region's assets and visitor digital journey 	Quarter 4

4. Work to increase the average length of stay/spend per visitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with VisitScotland to segment existing and future Caithness and Sutherland visitor market 	Quarter 3/4
5. Work to extend the tourism season to a more year-round offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate a region wide annual calendar of events Create marketing content for year-round tourism experience with key partners such as NC500 	Quarter 3

Strategic Aim: Better manage the visitor and community experience across the region		
Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Create new itineraries and collaborations which encourage longer stays and promote different destinations around the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support delivery of NHI Community Signage Project Engage with partners to develop slow tourism content and marketing channels Work with communities to identify new theme trails and itineraries, and sustainable transport options 	Quarter 1 Quarter 2/3 Quarter 3/4
2. Work with local partners to identify and map regional gaps in the visitor infrastructure, and provision of facilities/ signage and public transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultation feedback on infrastructure to North Highland Visitor Management Group Scotland Loves Local Service Map produced for website and hard copies Engage and support development of Far North Rail Line and media opportunities 	Quarter 2 Quarter 3 Quarter 3
3. Create and maintain consistent responsible tourism messaging on issues such as outdoor access and wild camping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of existing responsible tourism core messages Map out and seek to agree consistent regional messaging for 2022 summer season 	Quarter 2 Quarter 4
4. Create Local Ambassador network with local memorable stories and insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research local story/champion approach within other DMOs Build library of local stories/experiences Build toolkit for local storytelling that can be used by communities 	Quarter 3 Quarter 3/4 Quarter 4

Strategic Aim: Position tourism as a career of choice for all ages, and to help to address staff shortages across the sector

Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Develop recruitment plan for the industry working with local and national partners, aligned to the Tourism Skills Investment Plan, and piloting different approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with Skills Development Scotland, Careers Scotland, Caithness Chamber of Commerce and Recruit North Highland to set out existing position post-COVID and Brexit 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather up to date picture of skills shortages and gaps across region 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support dedicated Caithness and Sutherland Region Skills Plan aligned to SDS Tourism Investment Plan 	Quarter 4
2. Create a distinct Caithness & Sutherland tourism career information pack and tourism story template which can be used across the region by local employers & schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify tourism career spokespeople/ambassadors across region 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With partners, develop tourism skills pack for use in schools 	Quarter 4
3. Work with the tourism sector to better understand and support the implementation of the Fair Work Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research Fair Work agenda and examples of tourism good practice 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host initial Fair Work event for tourism sector 	Quarter 4

Strategic Aim: Establish a tourism baseline for the region and be able to measure and demonstrate progress and impact against this

Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Establish a tourism baseline and Performance Measurement Framework for the Region, and the Destination Recovery Strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with HIE, Highland Council and partners to identify level of tourism baseline data available 	Quarter 2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With partners look to develop template for 2021 tourism baseline 	Quarter 3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with partners to combine tourism survey work to support information collection but minimize disruption to tourism businesses across region 	Quarter 4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree Targets and Reporting Format for Destination Recovery Plan 	Quarter 4

Strategic Aim: Build the capacity and engagement of Venture North across the region		
Key Action Areas	Year 1 Delivery	Delivery by Quarter
1. Building on what is in place already, establish an Area Tourism Partnership for the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment Plan for Board members from Sutherland With partners, define and agree role and proposed membership of Area Tourism Partnership Prepare Year 2 Action Plan, and recruitment of 1 further FTE to core team Bring together and pilot first Area tourism Partnership meeting or event 	<p>Quarter 2/3</p> <p>Quarter 3</p> <p>Quarter 4</p> <p>Quarter 4</p>
2. Ensure recognition of local tourism priorities within the Tourism Destination Recovery Annual Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion of Destination Recovery Plan Consultation – 130 communities, tourism businesses and key stakeholders Follow up Destination Recovery local contacts across region in terms of idea and project development to inform 2021/22 and 2022/23 Plans Develop VN engagement template and programme for tourism sector across region as part of year 2 Planning 	<p>Quarter 2</p> <p>Quarter 3/4</p> <p>Quarter 4</p>