

# Flowing Forward: Shaping Sustainable Tourism for the Flow Country

## Event Report

12<sup>th</sup> November 2025, 10 am – 4 pm, Wick

13<sup>th</sup> November 2025, 10 am – 4 pm, Armadale

## Introduction

The Flow Country Partnership, on behalf of The Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) hosted Flowing Forward, a two-day collaborative event in Wick and Armadale in November 2025. The events brought together businesses, tourism providers, stakeholders, policy makers and community members to explore the practical ways local businesses and organisations can benefit from collaboration with The Flow Country WHS. A range of speakers from local businesses and designated sites shared their experiences and ideas on embracing links with the Flow Country and similar designations, a short Slido exercise and breakout sessions allowed for further discussion and the sharing of ideas from all the attendees followed by an afternoon bus tour of some local Flow Country sites.

The events were well attended over both days with 56 attendees at the Wick event and 35 at the Armadale event. Attendees included businesses and organisations from:

- Local hotels, self-catering and hospitality venues
- Local Development Trusts
- Local museums such as Strathnaver Museum, Timespan
- Tour operators and guided excursions
- NC500
- The Highland Council (staff and Councillors)
- North Highland Chamber of Commerce
- VisitScotland
- Northwest 2045
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- Highland and Islands Enterprise

## Objectives

The main objectives of the events were to:

- Explore potential marketing opportunities for local businesses in collaboration with The Flow Country WHS.
- Explore and discuss how best to encourage slower and more sustainable tourism in the Caithness and Sutherland area.
- Aid in strengthening community engagement, collaborative working and support social inclusion in and around the Flow Country.
- Identify the wider challenges and opportunities for tourism in the Flow Country

- View examples of existing tourism infrastructure around the Flow Country and understand what could be built upon going forward.

The outcome of the events will be used in the development of the WHS's Sustainable Tourism Strategy that can be utilised by businesses in and around the Flow Country. The Strategy will produce an achievable, manageable and sustainable approach that will not only benefit local tourism but also reflect the needs of the people that live and work in the Flow Country and surrounding areas.

### Morning speaker session

We invited a range of speakers to share their experiences of embracing local collaboration and utilising a designation such as The Flow Country WHS to promote local businesses. The sessions welcomed the below speakers and their presentations:

- Tony Watson, Head of Tourism at North Yorkshire Council:  
*World Heritage Status – unlocking engagement and understanding with new audiences*
- Natasha Hutchinson, UNESCO Wester Ross Biosphere:  
*Where People, Place and Purpose Meet: Tourism in a UNESCO Landscape*
- Jason Watts, Forse of Nature:  
*Going with the Forse of the Flow*
- Fiona Saywell, UNESCO North West Geopark:  
*Ambassador Scheme for businesses in the North West Highland Geopark*
- Joyce Campbell, Armadale Farm:  
*Living and Working in the Flow Country*

All the presentations are available to view on the Flow Country website at [Flowing Forward - Shaping Sustainable Tourism for The Flow Country](#)



## Breakout sessions

The breakout sessions provided an opportunity for us to further workshop our objectives for the events. Participants divided into groups of 5-10 people for a more in-depth discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing tourism in the Flow Country based on the first-hand experiences of people living and working in the area.

See further below for the full output of the breakout sessions. In summary, the key themes highlighting opportunities for tourism in the Flow Country include:

- Strengthening trail networks and accessible outdoor recreation
- Leveraging digital technology for smarter visitor engagement
- Deepening educational, cultural and nature-based interpretation
- Empowering communities, supporting jobs and fostering pride of place
- Championing sustainability, climate leadership and slow tourism
- Building powerful regional partnerships and event programmes
- Attracting investment and supporting local businesses.

The key themes highlighting the challenges for tourism within the Flow Country include:

- Existing pressure on roads, infrastructure such as toilets and litter bins, lack of appropriate signage and public transport limitations
- Existing issues surrounding overtourism, the inappropriate use from overnighters and other visitors
- Ensuring responsible access and the overall protection of the Flow Country
- Identifying the gaps in education, promotion, and perception management
- Understanding the limitations in staff recruitment, pressures on livelihoods and local services and wider issues such as the availability of housing



## ➤ Opportunities

### Trails, outdoor recreation & access

Develop and promote a connected, well-marked, multi-activity trail networks that looks to utilise existing routes, improves access, encourages visitors to explore lesser-known parts of the Flow Country, and supports sustainable recreation.

- Collaboration with existing trails: John O’Groats Trail, North Coast Trail, extensive forestry and windfarm tracks.
- Establish clearly marked routes:
  - Carpark-to-carpark walking routes
  - Mountain-biking, horse-riding, multi-use trails
  - Family-friendly cycle routes and events
- Develop/promote long-distance options: e.g. Forsinain → Altnabreac → Loch More/Braemore. Potential creation of a ‘Flow Country Way.’
- Improve signposting and promote existing by-ways.
- Encourage and promote active tourism and safe off-road walking and cycling.
- Promote business opportunities such as bike rental, baggage transfer, accommodation.

### Culture, heritage, creativity & community stories

Celebrate and elevate local culture, stories and creative expression to differentiate the WHS and foster pride and community connection.

- Themed history, cultural heritage, arts tours such as ‘artists & Flow Country’, ‘whisky & peatland’.
- Storytelling events, local food experiences, bog-inspired art exhibitions.

- Promote local stories, traditions, myth-making (e.g., bog faeries).
- Collaborate with existing museums and other facilities (Strathnaver Museum, John O’Groats Mill).
- Build on existing creative work (BBC stories, apps, Feis events).
- Promote local connection to land and cultural identity.

### Interpretation, education & learning

Position the Flow Country as a world-leading outdoor classroom, deepening visitor understanding of peatlands, culture, biodiversity and climate, while empowering young people and communities.

- Nature trails with interpretation; guided & themed walks (heritage, farming, fishing, culture).
- “Bog schools”, education camps, scientific tourism.
- Local school partnerships; youth ambassador scheme.
- Promote ecotourism and peatland awareness.
- Bring heritage to life through education; utilise existing Flows to the Future materials.
- Videos and training to encourage responsible visitor behaviour.
- Support for teachers through ready-made resources.
- Promote scientific knowledge for all ages; invite artists, scientists, land workers to share skills.
- Promote dark-sky learning and astronomy events.

### Community involvement, skills & inclusion

Ensure local communities are at the centre of tourism growth by supporting skills, jobs, inclusion, pride of place and year-round economic opportunities.

- Empower local groups, volunteers and networks.
- Encourage sustainable jobs for local people and local skill use (traditions, crafts, land management).



- Support small local groups, unite communities, “happy communities, happy visitors”.
- Year-round tourism to support stable staffing.
- House local heritage exhibits and materials in community hubs/visitor hubs.
- Promote inclusion through accessible paths, wheelchair-friendly design.
- Encourage employment that retains young people and addresses depopulation.

#### **Digital innovation, marketing & visitor information**

Strengthen the WHS’s digital presence to guide visitor behaviour, improve awareness and advertisement, reinforce sustainability messages, broaden engagement between existing organisations and aid in travel planning before, during and after people visit.

- Development of digital signposting, a Flow Country app
- Development of a platform to share resources/messages to encourage slow tourism.
- Promote WHS brand and business association.
- Collaboration with social media influencers & digital creators to promote the Flow Country.
- Diversify content across platforms (video, VR experiences, livestreams e.g. puffin cameras/live feeds via RSPB).
- Pre-arrival educational videos, especially for campers/campervans.
- Use of digital ties with existing museums, heritage sites & other UNESCO sites.
- Better advertising of what already exists to counter the “nothing’s there” perception.

#### **Environmental stewardship, climate awareness & biodiversity**

Use the WHS designation to engage visitors in restoration works, promote nature-based tourism that supports conservation and highlight global environmental importance.

- Raise awareness of climate change, carbon storage & peatland resilience.
- Promote nature restoration and opportunities to engage with conservation e.g. wildlife-based activities.
- Promote biodiversity restoration and water quality improvements as a result of peatland restoration.
- Highlight landscape uniqueness: big skies, peacefulness, remoteness, dark skies.
- Encourage financial incentives for peat/land protection.

#### **Sustainable Travel, Responsible Tourism & Visitor Management**

Manage visitation sustainably by improving infrastructure, balancing visitor freedoms with education, and encouraging low-impact, slow and off-season tourism. Promote public transport, cycling and low-impact travel.

- Campervan code and pre-rental education; treat campervans as an opportunity not necessarily a threat.
- Visitor levy/campervan fee to reinvest locally.
- Improve camping facilities, explore campsite at Forsinard.
- Help manage pressure on roads, promote slow tourism.
- Encourage season extension to spread visitor load.
- Promote responsible behaviour and environmental protection.

### Events, festivals & year-round programming

Develop a calendar of high-quality events that celebrate nature, culture and the arts, helping to spread tourism across all seasons.

- Stargazing and dark sky events.
- Storytelling, heritage talks, local food events.
- Seasonal/annual events & festivals.
- Photography competitions, exhibitions, arts-in-the-landscape.
- Year-round event programming supported by committed organisations.

### Funding, investment & economic development

Use WHS status to unlock investment, support local enterprise, improve infrastructure and ensure communities benefit long-term.

- Visitor levy to support local infrastructure.
- Funding from renewable energy developers.
- Promote WHS branding, brand ambassador schemes and investment attraction.
- Provide guidelines for businesses on using WHS/UNESCO logo.
- Strengthen local businesses and attract and promote new businesses in collaboration with the WHS.
- Encourage economic growth, community benefit and local pride.
- Be aware of wider challenges (lack of housing, childcare, infrastructure).

### Partnerships & regional collaboration

Promote the WHS through strong regional and national partnerships, creating a unified and compelling multi-site destination.

- Collaborate with neighbouring UNESCO sites, local museums and community groups.
- Work with landowners to promote the benefits of the WHS, reduce liability and address issues.
- Potential partnership with Space Hub Sutherland.
- Build a stronger cross-regional destination with collaboration with neighbouring UNESCO sites (North West Geopark and Wester Ross Biosphere) that will benefit not only Caithness & Sutherland but the north of Scotland as a whole.
- Promote cohesion across the area; sharing skills, resources and lessons learned.

## ➤ Challenges

### Infrastructure & access

The wider Caithness and Sutherland area can struggle with lack of infrastructure and accessibility, creating pressures on visitors, staff, and residents. Awareness of issues surrounding signage, toilets, public transport and road quality/appropriate use all need be considered to safely accommodate tourism while protecting the landscape.

- Current limitations in transport links, parking locations, signage, petrol stations, and electric charging points.
- Lack of toilets and public facilities; vandalism and maintenance issues exasperating problems.
- Poor accessibility for different groups (wheelchair users, cyclists, walkers).
- Over-tourism causing traffic congestion and pressure on fragile landscapes.
- Need for designated pathways and better distribution of visitor traffic.
- Challenges in sustainable transport and promotion of public transport access.
- Housing shortages affecting staff availability and local livelihoods.

### Visitor management & responsible tourism

Visitor concentration and behaviour can be major challenges. There is a need for clear guidelines, facilities, education, and communication to ensure tourism is responsible and does not harm either communities or the environment.

- Campervans/campers causing litter, toileting issues, anti-social behaviour, and traffic disruption.
- Overuse of popular spots (e.g., Wester Clett) affecting wildlife and visitor safety.

- Managing visitor numbers, behaviour, and expectations.
- Lack of regulation or bylaws for managing poor visitor behaviour.
- Promoting responsible access in line with Scottish Outdoor Access Code.
- Informal social media contributing to misuse or overtourism.

### Staffing, local economy & community support

Tourism growth can be constrained by staffing limitations and the lack of support for local communities. The WHS must be aware of housing constraints and encourage work opportunities and local engagement to ensure tourism is sustainable and beneficial to residents.

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining staff due to housing shortages, seasonal work, and limited childcare.
- Burnout of tourism staff during peak season.
- Supporting local livelihoods: affordable housing, encouraging young people to stay, promoting green jobs, and improving quality of life.
- Community capacity is small; need support for fundraising, sustainable income, and planning at scale.
- Ensuring tourism benefits balance with local priorities.

### Promotion, awareness & education

Awareness and perception of the Flow Country is limited. There's a strong need for targeted promotion, education, and communication to attract appropriate tourism while protecting the landscape.

- Lack of knowledge and awareness of the WHS locally and internationally.
- Need to promote the area beyond "bleak bog" perception; highlight nature, history, culture, and carbon capture.
- Improving communication about responsible access, activities, itineraries, and events

- Multilingual and inclusive information required for diverse visitors.
- Using social media effectively without causing over-tourism.

### **Environmental protection & land management**

Sustainable tourism must prioritise conservation and preservation of the WHS, requiring clear visitor management and education strategies.

- Protecting peatlands, wildlife, and biodiversity from tourism impacts.
- Managing campfires, BBQs, and other visitor-related damage risks.
- Balancing economic opportunities (tourism, energy infrastructure) with landscape protection.
- Encouraging slow tourism, eco-tourism, and scientific tourism to reduce environmental footprint.

### **Policy, funding & governance**

Effective tourism development is limited by funding and governance challenges. Strategic co-ordination, long-term planning, and resource allocation are crucial.

- Lack of funding for infrastructure, staffing, and community initiatives.
- Potential visitor levy or windfarm benefit funds not fully optimised.
- Need for coordination across multiple stakeholders (local communities, businesses, government).
- Policy constraints, access issues, and balancing land use with tourism.
- Difficulty in long-term planning (10+ years) due to uncertainties in resources and policy.

### **Tourism experience & diversification**

Tourism needs diversification to extend the season, improve experiences, and reduce pressure on hotspots while encouraging responsible engagement with the Flow Country.

- Seasonality and climate can limit year-round tourism opportunities.
- Limited variety of events and activities across the year.
- Visitor experience affected by infrastructure and local knowledge gaps.
- Opportunities for slow, guided, and educational tourism underdeveloped.
- Marketing and itinerary integration to distribute visitor pressure and highlight diverse attractions.

## Tour of existing infrastructure

The afternoon bus tours took attendees to see the existing infrastructure previously delivered by the Flows to the Future project at Loch Rangag and Strathy Pools, and encouraged discussion on what outputs people would want to see more of from the WHS. The tours included an introduction from Caithness Broch Project on their proposed broch development to be situated close to Loch Rangag, a visit to a potential walk/interpretative project at Camster Estate and an opportunity to explore Strathnaver Museum. These tours provided the opportunity to see what exciting project ideas, proposals and infrastructure are currently in the area, and to discuss how the WHS can add value through joint working.



## Next steps

The outputs from these events will be used, amongst other resources, in the development of The Flow Country WHS's Sustainable Tourism Strategy. The Strategy will look to provide long lasting benefits for local communities and visitors to the Flow Country while ensuring the conservation objectives of the WHS are protected. The Strategy will be drafted by consultants, and overseen by our Tourism Working Group, made up of key tourism stakeholders currently working and operating within the Flow Country. The Tourism Working Group will ensure the views of local people are heard and will help influence any decision-making going forward. The aim is to work with and for the local community, ensuring the Strategy represents the people it will be directly impacting.

Follow-up events are planned for spring/summer 2026, where the draft strategy will be presented, and we will be encouraging feedback from people living and working in the Flow Country. Please look out for further information in the coming months.

Thank you to the presenters, contributors and attendees at both events, and everyone who provided their views on the next steps for tourism in the World Heritage Site. If you have any further input or additional comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to our World Heritage Site Co-ordinator at [sarah.lashley2@highland.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.lashley2@highland.gov.uk).



We would like to thank our sponsors at Nuclear Restoration Services Ltd (Dounreay) and The Highland Council Ward Fund for funding these events.



## Appendix A Wick programme

### Flowing Forward:

### Shaping Sustainable Tourism for the Flow Country

Wednesday 12 November – Assembly Rooms, Wick

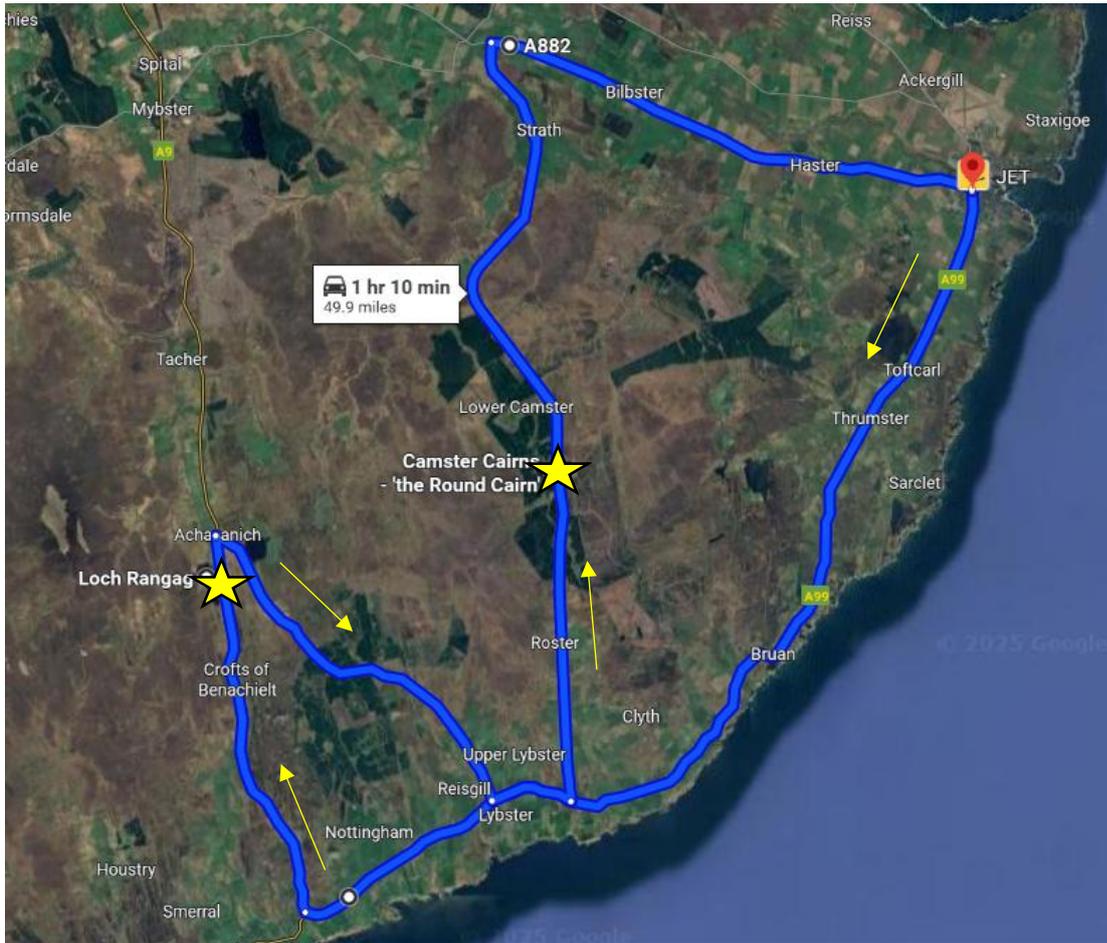
- 9.30 Registration, Tea & Coffee
- 10.00 Welcome – Frances Gunn, Chair, The Flow Country WHS Steering Group
- 10.15 An introduction to The Flow Country WHS – Sarah Lashley, WHS Co-ordinator
- 10.30 World Heritage Status – unlocking engagement and understanding with new audiences  
– Tony Watson, Head of Tourism, North Yorkshire Council
- 11.00 Where People, Place and Purpose Meet: Tourism in a UNESCO Landscape – Natasha  
Hutchinson, Wester Ross UNESCO Biosphere
- 11.30 Going with the Forse of the Flow – Jason Watts, Forse of Nature, Latheron
- 12.00 Workshop – identifying the challenges and opportunities for tourism in the Flow Country
- 12.45 Feedback and closing remarks from the morning session and next steps
- 13.00 Lunch
- 14.00 Minibus tour of Flow Country – see route overleaf
- 16:00 Return to Wick, closing remarks from the afternoon session.

#### Slido

Please scan the below QR code to take you to our Slido page



Slido code – **6067644**



### Minibus Tour

14:00: Leave Assembly Rooms, heading south via Latheron to Loch Rangag (for those using their own cars – car park at what3words /// hogs.competent.fishnet)

14:30: View of the interpretation materials, information on the WHS and surrounding area, talk from the Broch Project team on the nearby Broch Project site

14:50: Leave Loch Rangag, past Achavanich Stones to Camster Cairns (for those using their own cars – car park at what3words /// self.frocks.carpeted)

15:10: Short walk and talk from Camster Peatland Regeneration

15:30: Leave Camster Cairns, heading north back to the Assembly Rooms, Wick

15:50: Closing remarks

## Armadale programme

### **Flowing Forward: Shaping Sustainable Tourism for the Flow Country**

**Thursday 13 November – Armadale Hall**

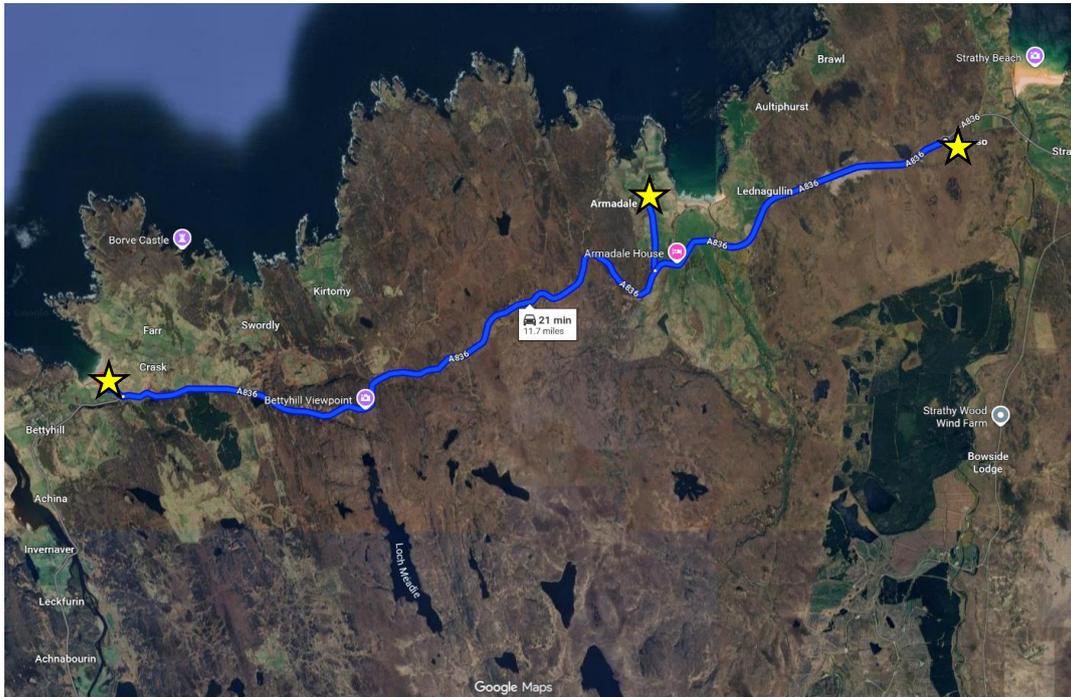
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- 10.30 World Heritage Status – unlocking engagement and understanding with new audiences  
– Tony Watson, Head of Tourism, North Yorkshire Council
- 11.00 Ambassador Scheme for businesses in the North West Highland Geopark – Fiona Saywell,  
North West Highland UNESCO Geopark
- 11.30 Living and Working in the Flow Country – Joyce Campbell, Armadale Farm
- 12.00 Workshop – identifying the challenges and opportunities for tourism in the Flow Country
- 12.45 Feedback and closing remarks from morning session
- 13.00 Lunch
- 14.00 Minibus tour of Flow Country – see route overleaf
- 16.00 Return to Armadale, closing remarks from the afternoon session.

#### **Slido**

Please scan the below QR code to take you to our Slido page



Slido code - **3742305**



## Bus Tour

14:00: Leave Armadale Hall, heading east to Strath Pools (for those using their own cars – car park at what3words /// anode.breakfast.heartened)

14:15: View of the interpretation materials, information on the WHS and surrounding area and a short walk to the mast overlooking Strath Pools

14:40: Leave Strath Pools, heading west to the Strathnaver Museum

15:00: Introduction from Strathnaver Museum staff, view of the Flow Country exhibit

15:30: Leave Strathnaver Museum, return to Armadale Hall

15:45: Closing remarks