

A Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the Flow Country

2026-2036

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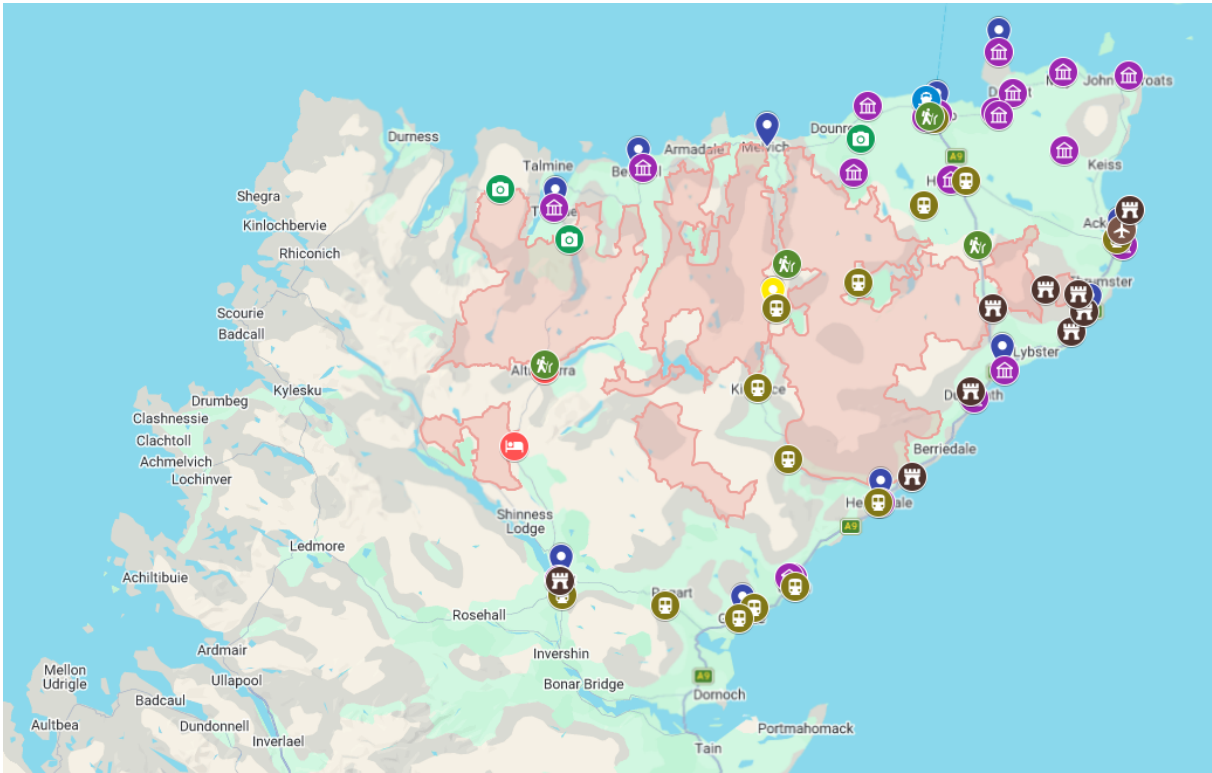
1. Introduction

The Flow Country was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2024 – the world’s first peatland World Heritage Site, Scotland’s only World Heritage Site inscribed purely for natural criteria and one of only three natural sites in mainland UK.

The Flow Country UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) is in the north of Scotland and is considered the most outstanding example of an actively accumulating blanket bog landscape in the world. This peatland ecosystem, which has been accumulating for the past 9,000 years, provides a diversity of habitats home to a distinct combination of bird species and displays a remarkable diversity of features not found anywhere else on Earth. Peatlands play an important role in storing carbon and the site’s ongoing peat-forming ecological processes continue to sequester carbon on a very large scale, representing a significant research and educational resource.

The Flow Country is however much more than just peatbog. Its complex history, varied land use and rich cultural heritage has shaped the landscape, towns, villages and settlements - a process that continues to this day and is reflected in the way of life of the people who live and work in Caithness and Sutherland. The cultural heritage of the area is especially important - archaeological remains of prehistoric sites with brochs and iron-age settlements, the ruins of villages left when people were forcibly removed from the land in the 18th and 19th centuries, and more recent stories of energy generation, farming diversification and community celebration.

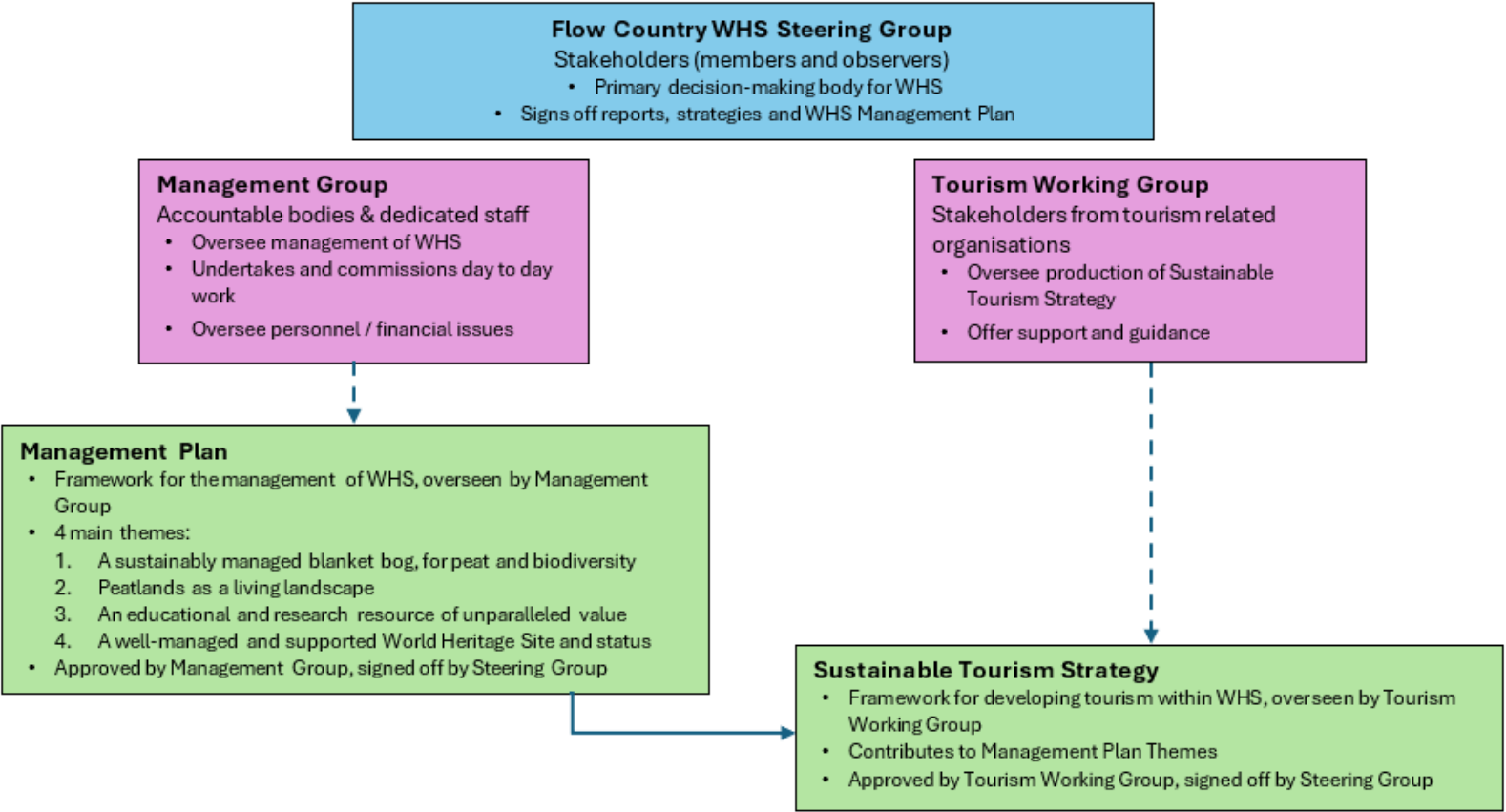
All of this means the Flow Country is a visitor destination - a fascinating place for people to visit, experience and appreciate its compelling stories, and also help sustain businesses and



communities. The Google map on the previous page shows the Flow Country's WHS areas in red, with visitor infrastructure—including settlements, transport, trails, and viewpoints—marked by coloured icons.

The opportunities for tourism arising from WHS inscription were explored in a series of consultative events in late 2025. These informed the commissioning of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy - this document - designed as a road map to guide the management, development and marketing of tourism in the Flow Country balancing the benefits for visitors and communities alongside varied land uses, conservation and protection of this special landscape.

The Strategy was developed in 2026 building on work completed for inscription, reviewing the current operating environment, mapping and auditing the visitor offer, listening to local views, analysis of the market and market trends and drawing on case studies from elsewhere. Findings and conclusions have been tested at community events and with the World Heritage Site Steering Group and sub-group, Tourism Working Group. A successful visitor economy depends on the commitment and actions of multiple participants. This Strategy sets out the direction of travel, approaches, opportunities and priorities for this collective action and partnership over the next 10 years. The diagram to the right shows how the Sustainable Tourism Strategy fits in relation to the WHS Management Plan and wider WHS governance framework.



2. Consultation & Engagement

2.1 Summary of Consultation

An extensive programme of stakeholder and community engagement has informed the development of this Strategy. Undertaken between February and April 2026, the consultation process was designed to ensure that local priorities and operational realities were taken into consideration and that the resulting approach is grounded in a shared understanding of both the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism development in the Flow Country.

Engagement activity focused on gathering perspectives from communities, businesses, tourism stakeholders and public sector organisations, alongside testing emerging strategic ideas and priorities.

The consultation programme consisted of four elements:

2.1.1 Tourism Working Group Discovery Workshop

An initial online discovery workshop was held with the Tourism Working Group to explore:

- Key opportunities and challenges
- Current tourism dynamics
- Strategic ambitions for the Flow Country
- Early ideas around visitor management, positioning and experience development

This session helped shape the emerging strategic framework and informed subsequent consultation activity.

2.1.2 Strategic One-to-One Conversations

In-depth conversations were undertaken with organisations and individuals representing a range of tourism and destination management perspectives such as VisitScotland, NC500 and RSPB. These conversations provided insight into visitor behaviour and tourism trends; opportunities for regenerative and experience-led tourism; environmental sensitivities and visitor management considerations; and community and economic development priorities.

2.1.3 Community Consultation Events

Two in-person community consultation events were held to test emerging recommendations for the Strategy and to gather local feedback. 46 people attended the events which sought to test the overarching vision and objectives for the Strategy; the application of a new Visitor Access Framework; opportunities for tourism experience development and options for community involvement and delivery.

Participants included community organisations, tourism businesses, and residents.

The workshops generated detailed feedback on visitor management, infrastructure, transport, interpretation, community benefit and future tourism priorities.

2.1.4 Community Online Survey

An online survey was produced to enable wider community participation. Topics of exploration included attitudes towards tourism development; views on the draft vision and objectives; thoughts around priorities and concerns; and potential opportunities for community involvement in delivery. 44 responses were received with findings broadly reinforcing the themes emerging from the in-person consultation process.



2.2 Summary of Consultation Findings

Feedback from across the consultation programme demonstrated strong support for a tourism model centred on careful visitor management, meaningful visitor experiences and long-term community benefit. Several consistent themes emerged. They were:

Core Strategic Direction	Gaps & Barriers	Key Opportunities
Slow & Meaningful Tourism - the tourism model should focus on low-impact visitation; longer stays; deeper engagement with the landscape; and learning, stewardship and meaningful experiences. The Flow Country should be positioned as a destination for visitors seeking quietness; nature connection; immersion; authenticity; and learning and discovery. Community Benefit - tourism should deliver direct and visible benefits for local communities - supporting local businesses; creating employment opportunities; helping sustain rural communities; and increasing local pride and confidence. Local communities should play an active role in shaping and delivering the visitor experience. Incremental & Managed Development - basic infrastructure and management should be prioritised over large-scale tourism development e.g. roads and transport connections; signage and wayfinding; parking and toilets; visitor information and interpretation; and general maintenance of existing assets. The strategy should build incrementally and carefully, with sustainable growth that brings economic benefits to communities, businesses and residents.	Connectivity & Transport - Transport and connectivity emerged as one of the most significant barriers to sustainable tourism development. Key issues identified included limited integrated public transport; lack of shuttle or transfer services; limited car-free travel connections; lack of equipment hire and supporting services. Infrastructure & Visitor Facilities - there are gaps in accommodation provision and a lack of clearly identifiable visitor hubs. There are some concerns around the long-term maintenance and funding of infrastructure. Governance & Community Involvement - there is support for deeper community involvement in tourism decision-making and delivery. Participants emphasised the importance of transparent governance; local ownership; community-led initiatives; and ongoing engagement beyond strategy development.	The Far North Line - stakeholders highlighted the potential to position the rail journey as part of the visitor experience; develop rail-to-trail and slow travel packages; and encourage lower-impact travel. Visitor Dispersal Through Multi-Day Itineraries - strong support for developing multi-day itineraries and guided experiences that encourage visitors to stay longer; explore multiple locations; and engage more deeply with the landscape and communities. This was viewed as an important mechanism for reducing pressure on hotspots, increasing visitor spend locally and supporting smaller communities and businesses. Community Ambassador Programme - an interest in opportunities for local people to become more directly involved in tourism delivery. This included support for the development of a structured Community Ambassador Programme that could support storytelling and interpretation; cultural events; encourage responsible visitor behaviour; strengthen local pride and ownership; and create more authentic visitor experiences.

3. Challenges & Opportunities

The table here provides a summary of the main challenges and opportunities for tourism in the Flow Country based on consultation, mapping and audit of the visitor offer and assessment of market trends. Addressing these challenges and responding to the opportunities drive the strategic approach and recommended actions which follow in the next sections - and which will deliver the benefits tourism can bring.

Challenges	Opportunities	Benefits
● Limited visitor proposition - low levels of awareness, perception & understanding, and a limited offer ● Fragility of landscape, pressure points and need to protect Outstanding Universal Values of World Heritage Site ● Lack of infrastructure - transport, access, facilities, digital ● Complex multi-partner management, governance & delivery ● Balancing visitor and resident needs and wants	● Attracting more of the ‘right’ kind of visitor looking for what Flow Country offers - those with the propensity to spend on their experience, while remaining conscious of, and seeking to avoid any negative impact on the landscape. ● ‘Considered’ experience development to encourage stay, spend & engagement ● Telling the story better across all aspects - environmental, social, cultural, historical ● Using and building on existing assets, facilities, provision and activities ● Businesses and communities actively responding to the market opportunity	● Job creation ● Wealth creation ● Population retention ● Opportunities for young people ● Facilities and services for residents ● Thriving and vibrant communities.

4. Vision & Objectives

The visitor economy of the Flow Country is complex. It embraces the globally significant designated landscape, the towns, villages, businesses and communities both within the World Heritage Site and around the periphery. It sits within a broader context of Caithness & Sutherland, the northern Highlands, nearby designated landscapes of the Wester Ross Biosphere and North West Highlands Geopark, and the popular North Coast 500 driving route. The opportunities and benefits tourism brings are substantial and extensive, but are not risk-free. A great example of how this can be done is shown in the case study for Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere on page 11.

Strong principles are core to this Tourism Strategy to secure benefits and minimise risks.

- Tourism should be **low-impact** on the natural and built environment of the Flow Country and beyond
- The experience for visitors should be one of **high-engagement** to build understanding and appreciation of the peatland and why it is important
- Tourism should create **opportunities for business** and **benefits for communities**
- The priority is to **build on what already exists**
- And take a **step-by-step approach** to ensure viability, positive impact and avoid unintended consequences

The vision and objectives for tourism are informed by the overall vision for the World Heritage Site and input from residents, businesses and organisations. These will guide and direct the direction, priorities and implementation of this Strategy.

4.1 Objectives

1. Cultivate a year-round visitor economy that enhances the overall wellbeing of our towns and villages
2. Implement a visitor management approach that guides investment, infrastructure, services and access, and encourages responsible behaviour
3. Raise awareness of the Flow Country as a destination that attracts high-value visitor segments with the means and motivation to spend, and who are committed to supporting nature, sustainability, and authentic experiences.
4. Support businesses and communities to develop new paid-for and free ways for visitors to appreciate, learn.

4.2 Vision

The Vision in a Sentence:

The Flow Country offers visitors a rare chance to slow down, explore responsibly, and connect deeply with a globally-important landscape—supporting nature, communities and future generations.

The Vision in Detail:

The Flow Country is a place of global significance, offering a distinctive experience best suited to visitors seeking thoughtful, multi-layered exploration. To protect this special landscape, our Strategy champions a low-impact, high-engagement approach. We invite visitors not merely to pass through, but to linger, learn and contribute.

Grounded in academic and scientific excellence, World Heritage status is a catalyst for responsible investment and community benefit. Through careful visitor management tourism will be a force for good—supporting businesses, creating jobs, and enhancing the facilities and pride that sustain our towns and villages. Immersive experiences that help visitors to get up close will reveal the complex story of the landscape, peatlands and our cultural heritage.

Through increasing awareness and meaningful experiences tourism will support a new era of stewardship, well-being and resilience for the Flow Country and its communities.

Case Study - Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere

Located in south-west Scotland, the Biosphere is a strong example of how an internationally recognised environmental designation can be used to support sustainable tourism, strengthen local identity and encourage deeper visitor engagement with landscape and community.

Covering a large rural area of forests, coast, farmland and uplands, it has developed a tourism approach centred around slow and responsible travel; nature and wellbeing experiences; community participation; business engagement; environmental learning and stewardship; and strong place-based storytelling.

Tourism is distributed across the wider landscape rather than concentrated in a single location. Local businesses, accommodation providers, guides, food producers and communities are connected through a shared destination identity linked to sustainability and environmental responsibility. This has helped position the Biosphere not simply as a protected landscape, but as a place where visitors can actively engage with local culture, nature and climate-related themes through immersive and low-impact experiences.

- ✓ Using Environmental Designation as a Visitor Proposition
- ✓ Working closely with local businesses to strengthen understanding of the destination story
- ✓ Focusing heavily on small-scale, immersive and nature-based experiences
- ✓ Strengthen local ownership and authenticity. Through community participation
- ✓ Promoting exploration across multiple settlements and landscapes, encouraging visitors to stay longer and disperse geographically.



5. Visitor Management

The Flow Country is not a single visitor destination or attraction. It is a vast and remote landscape which is made up of different settlements, access points, visitor sites, transport connections, habitats and is sensitive to unmanaged access.

Without a structured approach to visitor management, there is a risk that economic benefits fail to spread across communities, sensitive habitats become degraded, and visitor experiences feel superficial and disconnected.

A Visitor Access Framework has been developed to respond to such risks, setting out how visitors should encounter, understand and move through the Flow Country landscape. It aims to structure visitor experiences across different levels of access and engagement, discourage unrestricted exploration and guide how and where investment is directed into infrastructure and services. A useful example of this in action is in the Laponian area of Sweden summarised on page 15.

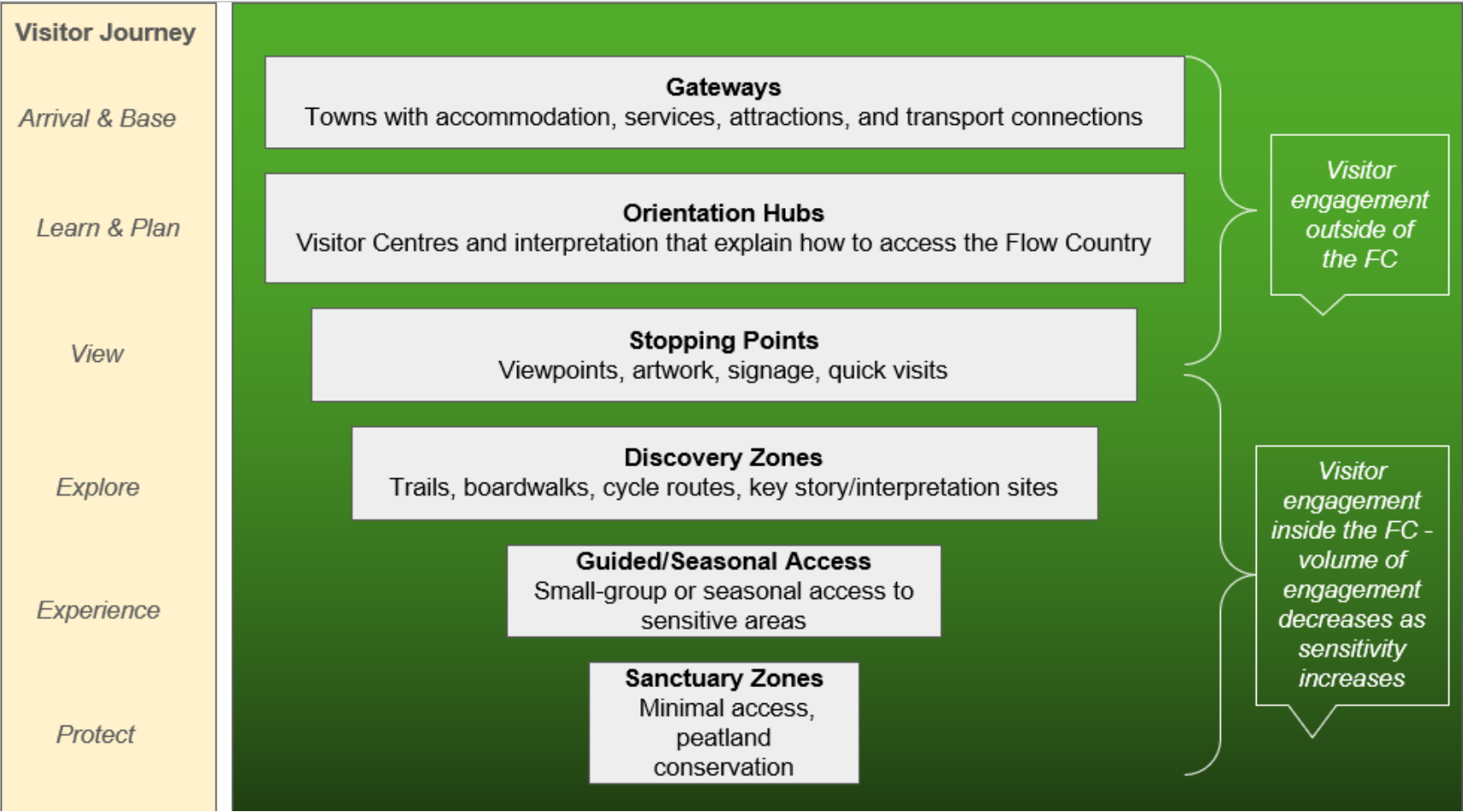
To inform the development of the framework, an audit and mapping exercise was undertaken of existing visitor experiences, infrastructure and tourism assets within and around the Flow Country. The audit included visitor attractions, centres and interpretation sites, existing walking and cycling routes, and significant viewing and orientation points. It demonstrated that many of the core components required for a strong visitor experience already exist across the region. However, it also highlighted that these assets are often unconnected, inconsistently presented, difficult to navigate and not always packaged into coherent visitor journeys.

The Visitor Access Framework has therefore been designed not to create an entirely new visitor system, but to:

- Better connect existing assets
- Clarify the role of different locations
- Improve visitor flow and orientation
- Support more sustainable patterns of access and movement
- Support low impact, revenue generating, financially viable initiatives

5.1 The Visitor Access Framework

The framework is organised around six complementary elements as shown in the diagram below.



It is designed as a funnel, guiding visitors through different levels of engagement with the landscape. At the top of the framework are the **Gateways**, where much of the initial visitor engagement takes place outside of the core area. These locations are towns and settlements on the edge of the Flow Country which provide accommodation, transport connections, parking and other services. They encourage visitors to stay in the area longer, support economies through providing opportunities for visitors to spend, act as strategic transport interchanges and help the landscape ‘absorb’ numbers of people and vehicles. Gateway examples are Thurso, Lairg and Helmsdale.

At the next level are **Orientation Hubs** which are typically visitor centres and information points giving visitors introductory interpretation, helping them understand the significance of the Flow Country and to plan their onward journey responsibly. Orientation Hub examples are Strathnaver Museum, Ferrycroft Visitor Centre and North Coast Visitor Centre.

Stopping Points are located both within and beyond the designated World Heritage Site area, offering accessible viewpoints, interpretation and opportunities for short-duration engagement. These locations play an important role in broadening awareness of the Flow Country while helping to manage visitor movement and encourage dispersal. They also provide opportunities for photography and user-generated social media content. The roadside viewpoints at Crask, Cnoc Craggie, Moine House and Loch Rangag, developed through the *Flows to the Future* project, provide a strong example of this approach (see images on page 19). Featuring distinctive Flow Country branding, interpretation panels, seating and bespoke corten steel and Caithness stone ‘fences’, they successfully combine landscape viewing with storytelling and visitor orientation. Stopping points could also incorporate public art installations and digital content to encourage visitors to pause, appreciate the landscape and better understand its significance.

As visitors move further down the framework, engagement becomes increasingly immersive and takes place more directly within the Flow Country itself. At the same time, the number of visitors engaging at each level reduces as landscape sensitivity increases. For example, **Discovery Zones** such as Forsinard Flows are designed to accommodate larger numbers of visitors through managed access and supporting infrastructure such as trails and boardwalks, while **Guided and Seasonal Access** experiences involve smaller numbers of visitors participating in more controlled and intensive experiences like guided tours or walks.

At the narrowest point of the framework are the **Sanctuary Zones**, where visitor access is minimal and not overtly promoted in order to protect the ecological integrity of highly sensitive peatland habitats.

The framework is also aligned to a structured six-stage visitor journey, helping to shape how people experience the Flow Country in a gradual and managed way:

- **Arrival & Base** – Gateways
- **Learning & Planning** – Orientation Hubs

- **Viewing** – Stopping Points
- **Exploring** – Discovery Zones
- **Experiencing** – Guided & Seasonal Access
- **Protecting** – Sanctuary Zones

This graduated approach enables the Strategy to balance visitor access with environmental protection, ensuring that people can experience and understand the Flow Country while safeguarding the landscape’s long-term resilience and World Heritage values.

It is important to recognise that these framework elements are not intended to be mutually exclusive and that there will naturally be overlap between them. Some locations may perform multiple functions within the visitor journey depending on their facilities, location and level of access. For example, an Orientation Hub could also be a Discovery Zone, and a Discovery Zone may contain Stopping Points or host guided experiences. The framework should therefore be understood as a flexible and interconnected system rather than a rigid hierarchy. Its purpose is to clarify the primary role that different locations and experiences can play within the wider visitor offer, while allowing for adaptability as tourism develops, infrastructure evolves and visitor needs change over time. An early action of this Strategy should be to apply the Visitor Access Framework to the Flow Country and identify current locations in each of the categories (see section 10.1).

Case Study: Laponian Area - Visitor Management Through Zoning, Infrastructure & Controlled Access

Covering over 9,000 sq km of mountains, forests, wetlands and Sami cultural landscapes, the Laponian Area in northern Sweden adopts a layered visitor management approach that concentrates infrastructure and visitor activity within appropriate locations while protecting more sensitive and remote environments.

The informal zoning model differentiates between high-access visitor areas, managed exploration zones, remote and low-intervention landscapes, and sensitive conservation areas. This helps:

- Concentrate visitor pressure in appropriate locations
- Reduce disturbance to sensitive habitats and protect cultural and ecological values
- Support different types of visitor experiences
- Reinforce expectations around responsible behaviour

Importantly, visitor movement is guided through information, orientation and infrastructure rather than extensive regulation alone.

- ✓ Supports tourism without opening all areas to unrestricted access
- ✓ Uses infrastructure strategically rather than extensively
- ✓ Creates immersive experiences while protecting fragile environments
- ✓ Encourages slower and more intentional visitor movement
- ✓ Balances conservation, community and visitor experience objectives



6. Orientation & Interpretation

Unlike destinations with immediately obvious landmarks or dramatic built attractions, the significance of the Flow Country is often not immediately apparent to visitors without explanation, context and storytelling.

Effective interpretation is therefore essential not only for enhancing visitor enjoyment and understanding, but also for supporting the long-term protection and stewardship of the landscape. It enables visitors to understand:

- Why the Flow Country matters globally
- What makes the peatland landscape unique
- How people and nature have shaped the area over time
- Why careful management and responsible behaviour are important

Strong orientation and interpretation also play an important visitor management role. By helping visitors understand where to go, how to access the landscape responsibly and what experiences are available, interpretation can support the overall objectives of the Strategy, particularly in encouraging longer stays through deeper engagement and better visitor dispersal.

The Strategy therefore proposes the development of a comprehensive and integrated **Orientation & Interpretation Plan** for the Flow Country.

6.1 An Orientation & Interpretation Plan

The Plan should establish a coherent and high-quality system for communicating the story of the Flow Country across both physical and digital platforms. It should aim to create a consistent Flow Country identity and sense of place; improve visitor understanding before and during visits; reinforce the quality and significance associated with World Heritage status; support the Visitor Access Framework and visitor journey; encourage responsible access and behaviour; and strengthen links between communities, landscape and visitor experiences.

Interpretation should not be concentrated in a single location. Instead, it should operate as a connected network of orientation, storytelling and discovery experiences distributed across Gateways, Orientation Hubs, Stopping Points and Discovery Zones. The Visitor Access Framework should directly inform where and how interpretation is delivered, ensuring that the type and depth of interpretation is appropriate to different locations and visitor experiences.

6.2 Orientation & Interpretation Principles

The Strategy proposes the following core principles:

6.2.1 Integrated Physical & Digital Interpretation

Interpretation should combine:

- Physical signage and installations
- Digital interpretation
- Audio and mobile content - see case study to the right
- QR-linked storytelling
- Guided experiences and ranger engagement

This layered approach will enable visitors to engage with the Flow Country in different ways depending on location, interest and level of immersion.

Case Study: North West Highlands Geopark - Using Digital Storytelling to Enhance Visitor Understanding

As part of its visitor offer, the Geopark has developed a series of smartphone-based audio guides that help visitors explore the landscapes of Coigach and Assynt through stories, local voices and expert interpretation. The guides reveal the geology, history, culture and natural heritage of the area, helping visitors understand the significance of what they are seeing while exploring independently and at their own pace.



- ✓ Extends storytelling beyond visitor centres and staffed sites
- ✓ Provides a guided experience without the need for a physical guide
- ✓ Reveals hidden stories within the landscape
- ✓ Delivers interpretation across a large geographic area in a cost-effective way

6.2.3 Strong Arrival & Orientation

To create a stronger sense of arrival and identity across the wider region, clear orientation should begin before visitors enter the core Flow Country landscape. This should include:

- ‘Welcome to the Flow Country’ signage at key arrival points and entry signage on principal roads and transport routes
- Interpretation in train carriages and at railway stations along the Far North Line
- Orientation information at walking and cycling access points
- Digital pre-arrival information and trip planning support

6.2.4 Branded Towns & Villages

To help reinforce the idea that the Flow Country is not only a protected landscape, but also a lived-in cultural landscape connected to surrounding communities, settlements within and around the Flow Country should play a stronger role in telling the story of the landscape. This could include:

- Badging towns and villages as part of the Flow Country experience
- Consistent use of the Flow Country logo and visual identity on ‘welcome to’ signs
- Interpretation integrated into public spaces and visitor facilities
- Community storytelling and local heritage content

6.2.5 High-Quality Design

As a World Heritage Site, interpretation and orientation infrastructure should reflect a high standard of design, material quality and environmental sensitivity. This includes:

- Durable and low-impact materials
- Contemporary but locally appropriate design

- Accessible and inclusive interpretation
- Consistent visual identity across the destination

The design approach should build upon the strong foundations already established through the *Flows to the Future* roadside viewpoints at Crask, Cnoc Craggie, Moine House and Loch Rangag. These sites successfully combine high-quality materials, distinctive branding, interpretation and landscape-sensitive design that are both functional and visually distinctive. The Orientation & Interpretation Plan should therefore seek to evolve and extend this established design language across the wider destination, creating a coherent family of orientation hubs, stopping points, signage and interpretation that is immediately recognisable as part of the Flow Country experience. This approach will ensure continuity, maximise the value of previous investment and avoid the need to develop a completely new design identity from scratch.



Image: Roadside viewpoint at Loch Rangag created as part of the *Flows to the Future* project

6.3 Interpretation Themes

Interpretation should be organised around three interconnected themes that collectively tell the story of the landscape, its global importance and its relationship with people and nature.

Landscape This theme should help visitors understand that the Flow Country is both an ancient landscape and a globally important living system. Interpretation should explain the environmental and global significance of the Flow Country landscape, including: • UNESCO World Heritage designation • Peatland formation and geology • Blanket bog ecosystems • Carbon sequestration and climate importance • Landscape scale and remoteness • Peatland restoration and recovery • Water systems and hydrology • Environmental stewardship and conservation	People This theme is important in ensuring that the Flow Country is understood not as an empty wilderness, but as a cultural landscape shaped by generations of people. Elements could include: • Social history • Crofting and land management • Cultural heritage and traditions • Historic settlements and clearance history • Archaeology and historic sites • Contemporary rural life • Community resilience and stewardship • Local stories and lived experience	Flora & Fauna This theme should encourage visitors to slow down, observe more closely and appreciate the subtle ecological richness of the landscape. Elements could include: • Key species and habitats • Birdlife and migratory species • Biodiversity and ecosystem health • Seasonal changes and cycles • Scale and interconnectedness of habitats • Wildlife adaptation and survival • Conservation and restoration impacts
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7. Marketing

7.1 A Strategic Approach to Marketing

Marketing will play an important role in shaping the future of tourism in the Flow Country. However, for a destination of this nature and sensitivity, marketing cannot simply be about increasing awareness or attracting greater visitor numbers. Instead, it must act as a strategic tool for influencing who visits, how they behave, where they go and how they engage with the landscape and communities. It will do this by:

- Carefully prioritising market segments - attracting visitors with the propensity to spend whose interests and behaviours can align with the Flow Country offer
- Encouraging slower and more immersive travel patterns
- Promoting appropriate experiences and locations
- Reinforcing stewardship and respect for the landscape
- Providing clear pre-visit information on where to go, what to do and how to explore responsibly

This approach is particularly important given the Flow Country's proximity to the North Coast 500 and its growing profile following UNESCO World Heritage inscription. While these bring significant visibility and opportunities, they also increase the importance of proactively managing visitor expectations and behaviour both pre- and during a visit.

Marketing should therefore be viewed not only as a promotional tool, but also as a visitor management mechanism that supports the wider aims of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

7.2 Market Trends

A review of tourism market trends was undertaken as part of the strategy development process to understand how changing visitor motivations and behaviours may influence future opportunities for the Flow Country. The review identified a number of significant trends that strongly align with the destination’s emerging positioning and strategic direction.

Market Trend	What’s Happening?	Relevance to the Flow Country	Strategic Implications for Sustainable Tourism
Shift towards slow travel, longer stays and shoulder season travel	Visitors favour fewer places, longer stays, deeper engagement and travelling outside peak periods to avoid crowds and enjoy more authentic experiences.	The Flow Country’s scale, quietness and lack of “tick-box” attractions are well suited to slower-paced, year-round tourism. Its wildlife, dark skies and changing seasons provide compelling reasons to visit beyond the summer months.	Promote multi-day itineraries, walking/cycling/rail access, and overnight stays in gateway towns. Develop and market seasonal experiences (e.g. dark skies, bird migration, autumn colours and winter landscapes) to encourage visits throughout the year and spread demand more evenly.
Preference for authenticity & local connection	Visitors value real places, people and memorable, place-based accommodation that reflects local character and stories over polished attractions	The Flow Country’s remoteness, dark skies, landscape setting and cultural identity create strong potential for distinctive accommodation and experiences linked to nature, wellbeing, slow travel	Integrate local communities and cultural narratives into the visitor offer, encourage development and promotion of small-scale, high-quality accommodation that aligns with the destination brand and sustainability principles (e.g. eco-lodges, converted rural buildings, rail-linked stays)
Rising demand for sustainable & purpose-led travel	Visitors increasingly seek ethical, climate-aware and meaningful experiences	UNESCO World Heritage status and carbon-storage story provide strong credibility	Translate sustainability into clear visitor actions via marketing, interpretation and experience development
Health & wellbeing	Growing interest in mental health, calm environments and digital detox	The Flow Country offers silence, space, big skies and minimal disturbance	Develop low-impact wellbeing experiences (guided walks, photography, mindfulness) without over-programming the landscape
Digital discovery & social influence	Travel decisions increasingly shaped by online content and peer sharing	Flow Country visibility is growing but remains fairly abstract and non-specific	Actively curate digital narratives to steer visitors to appropriate sites and behaviours

Flexible, mobile travel patterns	More short breaks and flexible itineraries, often car-based	NC500 traffic brings proximity but not always depth of engagement	Convert passing traffic into longer stays through targeted messaging and inland itineraries
Growth in nature-based tourism	Strong demand for landscapes, wildlife, remoteness and nature immersion	The Flow Country’s peatlands, birdlife and sense of wildness align directly with this demand	Position the Flow Country as a low-impact, high-value nature destination; manage capacity to avoid pressure on sensitive sites

These market trends support a destination position for the Flow Country that emphasises nature-based, sustainable, slow and meaningful travel experience that move beyond generic place promotion toward curated experience offerings, behavioural guidance, community co-creation, and digital storytelling that aligns visitor motivation with responsible practice.

7.3 Target Markets

To deliver the ambitions of this Sustainable Tourism Strategy, it is essential that the Flow Country adopts a focused and selective approach to target markets. Given the sensitivity of the landscape, the dispersed geography of the destination and the aspiration for low-impact, high-engagement tourism, success will not be measured primarily by visitor numbers, but by the quality of visitor engagement and the extent to which tourism delivers environmental, social and economic benefit (see measures of success at section 10.3).

The marketing approach should therefore prioritise visitors whose motivations, behaviours and expectations align with the character and capacity of the Flow Country. This includes visitors who are:

- Motivated by nature, learning and discovery
- Interested in slower and more immersive travel
- Comfortable with remoteness and simple infrastructure
- More likely to spend, stay longer and travel year-round
- Receptive to responsible visitor messaging and stewardship principles

- Interested in local culture, landscape and authenticity

The Strategy draws particularly on target market segmentation developed by VisitScotland alongside wider international travel trends and consultation findings.

7.3.1 Priority Target Markets

The following priority markets represent the strongest strategic fit for the Flow Country, aligning closely with the destination’s environmental sensitivities, experience offer and ambition for low-impact, high-engagement tourism.

Segment	Who are they?	Why are they a good fit?
Natural Advocates (Domestic) 	Environmentally aware visitors motivated by nature, wildlife, learning and conservation.	● Likely to stay longer and travel out of peak season ● Strong alignment with peatlands, wildlife, climate story ● Comfortable with remoteness and limited facilities ● Receptive to guidance and responsible behaviour
Curious Travellers (Domestic) 	Independent travellers seeking meaning, authenticity, culture and places with a story.	● Drawn to UNESCO World Heritage designation ● Interested in people and landscape/land use stories, ● Appreciate community-linked experiences
International Explorers (Netherlands & Germany) 	Active and culturally curious, seeking authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences beyond traditional tourist spots	● Likely to stay longer stays and travel out of peak season ● Motivated by discovery and (guided) learning ● More likely to go beyond headline attractions ● Interested in nature, culture and local stories

7.3.2 Secondary Target Markets

The following secondary markets also present opportunities for the Flow Country, particularly where visitors can be encouraged towards longer stays, deeper engagement and more responsible travel behaviours.

Segment	Who are they?	Why are they a good fit?
Engaged Sightseers (Domestic) 	Visitors who enjoy general sightseeing and touring, taking in historical places as well as scenery and nature.	● Often already present via NC500 ● Respond well to standout designations ● Could be encouraged to extend stays in Gateways
Purposeful Contributors 	Organised groups of visitors looking for specialist talks, study tours etc that allow for deep engagement and/or research-led stays or volunteer programmes.	● Aligned with Natural Advocates ● Useful for positioning the FC as a global exemplar ● Guided/seasonal access ● Longer stays and shoulder-season travel

7.3.3 Lower Priority & Carefully Managed Market Segments

The Strategy also recognises that some visitor markets may be less compatible with the long-term sustainability objectives of the Flow Country and may therefore require careful management rather than active targeting.

Segment	Rationale for lower priority
High-volume coach tourism	Large-scale coach tourism is likely to place pressure on the Flow Country’s limited infrastructure, small settlements, road networks and sensitive visitor locations. Smaller high-value group travel delivered through minibuses and guided tours is a more appropriate focus.
Mass wild-camping / ‘van life’ tourism	While independent travel forms an important part of the Highlands visitor economy, unmanaged growth in overnight roadside parking, informal camping and high-volume motorhome use can create disproportionate pressure on the Flow Country’s fragile peatland habitats, local communities and remote roads and lay-bys.
High-volume, fast-paced visitors	The Strategy recognises that some visitors travelling through the north Highlands - particularly along the North Coast 500 - may engage only briefly with the Flow Country. While these visitors contribute to regional viability, they are often associated with short dwell times, surface-level engagement, and limited local spend beyond fuel and brief stops.

Overall, the target market approach reflects the wider ambitions of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy in terms of striving for high visitor spend, quality over quantity, engagement over volume and stewardship over consumption. It will also help position the Flow Country as a distinctive destination for meaningful, immersive and globally significant nature-based tourism experiences.

7.4 Marketing Proposition

The value of the Flow Country comes from scale, stillness and subtlety: the changing light across the peatlands, the sounds of birdlife, the stories embedded within the landscape and the opportunity to witness ecological restoration on a globally significant scale. The recommended marketing proposition below therefore positions the Flow Country as a destination for meaningful and immersive travel; a place of global environmental significance; a landscape to learn from, not simply pass through; a place where visitors can reconnect with nature, culture and themselves; and a destination shaped by stewardship, authenticity and care.

It seeks to support both visitor management and long-term sustainability objectives by attracting audiences whose motivations and behaviours are more compatible with the capacity and sensitivity of the landscape.

The Flow Country is a landscape of vast skies, deep peatlands and quiet discovery — a place where nature, restoration and community come together in one of the world’s most important peatland environments. Here, visitors are invited to slow down, explore thoughtfully and experience a globally significant landscape through immersive journeys, local stories and meaningful connection with nature and place.

This marketing proposition should be used consistently across all destination marketing, interpretation, visitor information, digital content and partner communications in order to create a clear and distinctive identity for the Flow Country. It should guide not only how the destination is promoted externally, but also how experiences are developed, how stories are told and how visitor expectations and behaviours are shaped.

7.5 Marketing Themes

To support a clear and distinctive destination identity, marketing activity for the Flow Country should be organised around a series of interconnected themes that reflect both the qualities of the landscape and the wider ambitions of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy. These themes presented below provide a framework for destination storytelling, experience development, interpretation and content creation, campaign activity, visitor behaviour messaging, and partnership marketing activity.

Global Significance The Flow Country should be positioned as one of the world’s most important peatland landscapes and a place of international environmental significance, moving beyond a ‘scenic countryside’ message. The theme would reinforce: • UNESCO World Heritage status • Global climate relevance • Carbon storage & sequestration	Slow Travel The Flow Country is particularly well suited to visitors seeking slower, more immersive travel experiences. This theme should position the destination as: • A place to pause • Somewhere to experience gradually rather than consume quickly • A landscape without distraction	Social History & Connection to Place The Flow Country is not only a natural landscape, but also a lived-in cultural landscape shaped by generations of people, communities and land management practices. This theme should focus on: • Local people & voices • Heritage & culture • Stories of community & landscape • Independent businesses, local guides and community-led experiences
Exploration & Learning The Flow Country is a destination that rewards curiosity and discovery. This theme should focus on: • Interpretation & storytelling • Guided exploration • Railway journeys	Elemental Experiences One of the defining qualities of the Flow Country is its elemental character. This theme should focus on the sensory and emotional experience of the landscape: • Dark skies & night landscapes • Water & peat • Weather & atmosphere • Land & life	Managing Visitor Behaviour Visitor management messaging should be integrated positively and consistently throughout marketing and interpretation activity reinforcing the idea that visitors play an active role in protecting the landscape. • Respect fragile ground • Stay on paths • Travel responsibly & considerately

Together, these themes establish a consistent narrative that positions the Flow Country as a globally significant landscape best experienced through slower, more meaningful and responsible travel. They should be used flexibly across platforms such as social media, PR & media activity, and photography and film.

While each theme has a distinct role, they are intended to work together as part of a cohesive destination narrative. For example a rail-based itinerary may combine **slow travel**, **exploration & learning** and **elemental experiences**; a guided peatland walk may connect **global significance**, **social history** and **visitor stewardship**; and a dark skies experience may combine **elemental experiences**, **slow travel** and **responsible behaviour**.

The application of these themes should also be informed by ongoing visitor monitoring. As visitor numbers, distribution and environmental impacts are better understood, marketing activity should be reviewed and adapted accordingly. This adaptive approach will enable partners to increase promotion of experiences and locations where it is felt there is capacity, while reducing or redirecting marketing activity where visitor pressure or environmental impacts become a concern. In this way, marketing becomes an active visitor management tool, ensuring that tourism growth remains aligned with the long-term conservation objectives of the World Heritage Site.

Existing Brand Asset: *The More You Look, The More You See*

The Flow Country Partnership already uses the phrase ‘*The more you look, the more you see*’, which provides a strong foundation for future destination marketing.

Unlike many tourism destinations that rely on iconic landmarks or instant visual impact, the Flow Country reveals its significance gradually. The phrase captures the essence of the proposed marketing proposition by encouraging visitors to slow down, look more closely and engage more deeply with the landscape. It reflects the subtle beauty of the peatlands, the richness of wildlife, the hidden stories of people and place, and the sense of discovery that comes from spending time in the landscape.

The phrase also aligns strongly with the strategy’s Slow Travel, Exploration & Learning and Global Significance marketing themes. As such, it should continue to be used as a key supporting message across marketing, interpretation and visitor communications, helping to reinforce the idea that the Flow Country is a destination best experienced through curiosity, immersion and meaningful engagement rather than quick consumption.

8. Experience Development

At present, many visitor experiences associated with the Flow Country remain fragmented, informal or difficult to access and understand. Although there are already important assets and experiences across the region, there is limited packaging, limited visibility and relatively few distinctive ‘signature’ experiences that clearly communicate why visitors should choose to spend time in the Flow Country specifically.

There is therefore a need to enhance both the number, quality and seasonal spread of experiences available, while ensuring that future tourism development remains aligned with the environmental sensitivity and wider ambitions of the Strategy.

8.1 Experience Development Approach

The experience development approach for the Flow Country is structured around three interconnected areas that together support deeper visitor engagement, stronger local economic benefit and more sustainable patterns of tourism growth.

8.1.1 Signature Flow Country Immersions

Developing immersive and distinctive experiences that encourage visitors to stay longer, engage more deeply with the landscape and connect with its globally significant stories through guided exploration, multi-day itineraries and locally-led experiences. These could include:

- **Flagship Multi-Day WHS Itineraries** - a series of curated multi-day itineraries that encourage visitors to spend longer in and around the Flow Country while exploring different parts of the landscape and surrounding communities. Initially, they could draw on existing experiences to provide structured, immersive journeys centred around themes such as peatland restoration, wildlife, and cultural heritage with the potential of developing more as new curated experiences come on board (see bullet point below.) They could potentially be curated and enabled by the Flow Country Partnership and delivered through a network of partners, combining a mix of guided and self-guided experiences and

linking together gateways, orientation hubs, discovery zones and guided/seasonal access. See Wadden Sea case study to the right for an example of how another World Heritage Site has used itineraries.

The recruitment of dedicated Flow Country Rangers could play an important role here, both in terms of visitor experience and visitor management. Rangers could act as highly visible ambassadors for the World Heritage Site, delivering guided activities and educational experiences as well as providing interpretation, welcoming visitors, supporting responsible behaviour and connecting with communities. Their presence would help create a stronger sense of stewardship and care across the destination while improving visitor understanding of the landscape’s global significance and ecological sensitivity.

- **A Curated Collection of Bookable Tours & Experiences Run by Local Businesses** - a stronger and more visible collection of high-quality, bookable tours and experiences to encourage visitors to engage more deeply with the Flow Country and surrounding communities. Experiences could include guided peatland walks, wildlife tours, dark skies photography, cultural storytelling, events and restoration experiences.

To enable this, **targeted business support and capacity building would be required** to help local businesses and guides develop, package and promote experiences aligned with the Flow Country brand and sustainable tourism principles. This could include support around product development, storytelling, pricing, collaboration, digital booking systems and marketing, helping businesses translate existing local knowledge and assets into compelling visitor experiences.

Case Study: Wadden Sea World Heritage Site - Lower Saxony & Hamburg Itinerary

A structured, multi-day journey through a dynamic coastal landscape shaped by tides, linking gateway cities, national parks and islands.



- Visitor centres introduce tides, safety and ecology
- Small group mudflat walking with certified guides
- Bird and seal watching
- Cycling
- Ferry trips to islands

Delivered by:

- National park authorities
- Certified guides
- Local businesses

- ✓ Controlled access through guiding and zoning
- ✓ Strong interpretation and education
- ✓ Low-impact activities (walking, cycling)
- ✓ Delivered by local partners



8.1.2 Car-Free & Low Impact Experiences

Given the environmental sensitivity and dispersed nature of the Flow Country, future experience development should actively encourage low-impact and sustainable travel patterns that reduce pressure on infrastructure and habitats while supporting slower, deeper and more responsible visitor engagement with the landscape. This could include:

- **‘Rail to Trail’ packages** - consultation highlighted that the Far North Line presents one of the most distinctive sustainable tourism opportunities available to the Flow Country and should be positioned not simply as a means of transport, but as an integral part of the visitor experience itself. There is significant potential to develop the Far North Line as a signature ‘rail-to-trail’ experience through curated itineraries linked to stations and nearby experiences, integrated walking and cycling routes, guided excursions from stations, and storytelling and interpretation onboard and at arrival points.

However, maximising the potential of rail-based tourism will require stronger onward connectivity from stations into Gateways, Orientation Hubs and Discovery Zones. The development of small-scale, seasonal, on-demand shuttle bus services therefore represents an opportunity to support more sustainable visitor movement.

- **Walking & Cycling Trail Network Development** - there is an opportunity to develop an expanded series of branded, safe and ecologically sensitive walks and cycling routes that provide low-impact immersion within the Flow Country landscape. Rather than encouraging unrestricted access, these experiences should be underpinned by the Visitor Access Framework and carefully guide visitors towards appropriate and resilient locations through managed trails, boardwalks and identified routes that support exploration while protecting sensitive peatland habitats as well as the visitors themselves. A clearly branded network would help create a stronger sense of identity and coherence across the destination, while encouraging slower travel, longer stays and deeper engagement with the landscape, wildlife and cultural stories of the Flow Country.

Case Study: Strathspey Storywalks - Using Storytelling to Deepen Visitor Engagement

Developed within the Cairngorms area, the Strathspey Storywalks combine walking routes with locally rooted stories, interpretation and audio content that help visitors connect more deeply with the area’s history, culture, people and environment. The walks encourage slower exploration and emotional connection to place.



STRATHSPEY STORYWALKS
Outdoor storytelling & guided walks around Aviemore in the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland

- ✓ Add depth and meaning to simple walking experiences
- ✓ Encourage low-impact visitor engagement
- ✓ Reveal hidden layers of landscape, history and ecology
- ✓ Strengthen local identity and community voice
- ✓ Create distinctive experiences using relatively light-touch infrastructure

8.3.3 Storytelling & Community Connection

Strengthening how the story of the Flow Country is shared through improved interpretation, local storytelling, business engagement and community participation, helping visitors develop a deeper understanding of the landscape and its people. See Strathspey case study on previous page for an example of how this is being done elsewhere.

- **Storytelling workshops for businesses and frontline staff** - the Strategy could support the development of storytelling workshops and training for businesses and frontline staff, including accommodation providers, cafes, visitor attractions and transport operators. These workshops would help local businesses better communicate the significance of the Flow Country, recommend appropriate experiences and strengthen the consistency of the visitor narrative across the destination.
- **Community Ambassador Network** - An ambassador network could further deepen community involvement and local ownership of tourism. This would involve recruiting and training local residents to act as voluntary advocates for the Flow Country through activities such as welcoming visitors, leading community walks, sharing local stories and supporting events and interpretation activity. As well as enhancing the visitor experience, this approach would help strengthen pride, participation and stewardship within local communities. See Campaign for National Parks case study on the right for an example of this type of network in action.

Case Study - Campaign for National Parks Ambassadors

- Aimed at young people
- Use digital platforms to talk about the National Parks
- ‘Take over’ CNP digital channels
- Talk to the media (with media training)
- Represent CNP at events
- Write articles, blogs, news items etc
- Share videos and reels of what’s happening in the parks

“The purpose of an Ambassador for CNP is to help raise the profile of our organisation and connect with diverse audiences ...we give Ambassadors a platform for their own voices and causes in return for volunteering with us ... fixed term arrangement for a year ... ambassadors are required to agree with our principles and support our aims”

MEET OUR AMBASSADORS

Click on their profiles to learn more

JESSICA DAVISON

RUTH GARRETT

CHARLOTTE HUBBARD

EBEN MYRDDIN MUE

ROSHNI PARMAR-HILL

LINN WIBERG

ROBSON PEISLEY

JESSICA DAVISON

I love the outdoors, especially our National Parks. I was fortunate enough to grow up visiting Northumberland National Park. The rolling hills and hidden valleys are a place of solitude and wonder. Since 2019, I've volunteered with Northumberland National Park and in 2022, after being nominated for the Volunteer of the Year award with the Campaign for National Parks, I became Campaign for National Parks' first Ambassador.

Since then, I have graduated from a degree in Environmental Sciences and started my career as an Ecologist.

Being an ambassador for Campaign for National Parks, I have had the opportunity to speak at the 2024 UK National Park Conference, been a part of...

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We're always on a look out for individuals who are passionate about National Parks, the natural environment, right to roam, access and inclusion and so much more. If you're interested in becoming a National Park Ambassador with us you can check out our full volunteer role description and apply by filling out the form below. If you have any questions please contact our Programme Manager, Anna Bedford at anab@cnp.org.uk.

[APPLY HERE](#)

AMBASSADOR ROLE DESCRIPTION

Download our full volunteer Ambassador role description

Role description (639+0 KB)

July 2026

9. Infrastructure

Every destination has to provide the right facilities and services in the right locations to support a visit, manage the impact and underpin the visitor experience. These ‘brilliant basics’ are not a primary motivator for a visit but will have a substantial impact on enabling the visitor experience, levels of visitor satisfaction and addressing community concerns over pressure points. The Visitor Access Framework is the starting point for what infrastructure needs to be in place and drive where investment and development happens. Early work on applying the Framework through mapping and auditing will identify what currently exists, any enhancements required and any gaps that need filled. From this, and progress made on experience development priorities, an **Infrastructure Investment Plan** can be developed identifying phased implementation. Given the relatively high capital cost of most infrastructure development and the need to secure permissions and funding, this plan should be phased over 10 years. Highland Council is currently producing a Tourism Investment Plan for the Highlands so there is the opportunity to feed Flow Country requirements into that.

Looking over the life of this Strategy there are three main areas where infrastructure investment will be required:

- Managing impact - parking, toilets and bins
- Supporting access - trails, boardwalks, stopping points
- Accommodation - ensuring the right accommodation is available in appropriate locations

9.1 Managing Impact

Inevitably most visitors will arrive and explore the Flow Country by car even with an expansion of car-free options. Rightly there are concerns that increased numbers of visitors will have a detrimental impact particularly on small settlements, single track roads and fragile landscapes. This means that adequate parking must be in place especially at Gateways and Orientation Hubs for cars, vans and motor bikes. Limited parking will be necessary at Stopping Points and Discovery Zones to avoid obstructions and ensure safety.

Availability of toilet facilities are an important, if unglamorous, element of infrastructure. The main provision of public toilets will be in Gateway towns and Orientation Hubs, but there may well be the need for new facilities at some of the larger sites. Where this is impracticable, innovative approaches such as supporting businesses or community groups to extend their facilities and/or give access to visitors could be explored.

Equally litter bins will be essential at all points across the Visitor Access Framework, although pre-visit and on- the-ground messaging around taking rubbish home will be helpful in reducing volume and littering.

More generally, messaging about responsible behaviour and practical information designed to support that behaviour including on parking (locations, good practice) and toilets (locations) will help mitigate negative impacts.

9.2 Supporting Access

To fully appreciate and access Discovery Zones and to enable the development of multiple ways to experience the Flow Country new or improved walking or cycling trails and boardwalks will be required. These are big-ticket items and could be part of a long-term incremental infrastructure investment to enhance and extend the visitor experience. In the first instance existing tracks and drove roads - of which there are many and each has its own story to tell - should form the basis for a network of routes which can be promoted to visitors in the short to medium term. In the longer term new trails or boardwalks could be considered to open new routes and sites and manage visitor access appropriately.

Stopping Points perform a separate function based on places of interest - viewpoints, historic sites etc - so paths or boardwalks would provide a way to access these safely. Whilst not always feasible, some should be accessible for those with restricted mobility.

9.3 Accommodation

Accommodation is a special kind of infrastructure essential to encouraging overnight stays and associated spend. Securing the economic benefits of tourism in the Flow Country to Caithness and Sutherland generally will be highly dependent on having places to stay overnight. This means there needs to be a range of accommodation options of different types and

price points in the right locations. Accommodation (hotels, B&Bs) will primarily be in the Gateways where of course there is already existing provision. Beyond the Gateways there are opportunities for farm diversification (converted buildings, bunk houses, campsites, glamping pods etc) and in and around smaller settlements. The priority is small scale, incremental improvements - upgrading of existing hotels and guest houses, campsites and alternative accommodation in response to a gradually expanding market.

Any expansion of accommodation provision needs careful consideration to avoid unintended consequences. Impact on the viability of existing accommodation requires investigation, within an overall quality improvement approach. Availability of affordable housing for local people is another challenge facing communities so any increase in conversions to self-catering properties needs thought and management.

In the first instance a **comprehensive audit and appraisal of current provision** is required to capture location, type price, value, quality etc with an assessment against the needs and expectation of the market. From this gaps and opportunities can be identified as well as an exploration of potential funding sources and enabling activity by Highland Council through planning regulations.



10. Implementation

10.1 Implementation Framework

Informed by the strategic approach in earlier chapters the table below sets out an implementation framework to guide detailed planning for the next 10 years. Next steps for each action area are shown with priority next steps indicated in bold, selected because they are quick wins or are fundamental to progress in other areas.

Action Area & Key Elements	Rationale	Next Steps	Years 2-3	Years 4+
Visitor Access Framework (VAF) Mapping	The VAF underpins the Strategy and its implementation so having an overview of locations and categories is an important foundation which will inform other actions. Objective 2.	Use VAF to map and categorise places and locations.	Audit & assessment to identify opportunities, pressure points, gaps etc.	Update and refine
Orientation & Interpretation - Strategy - Phased programme	Integrated, coherent & consistent approach to establishing the Flow Country’s presence & identity, telling its story and moving people around. Use VAF as basis for what is needed where. Objectives 1,2,3,4.	Commission production of long-term Orientation & Interpretation Strategy based on VAF	Agree phased implementation plan Secure funding	Continue roll out of implementation

Marketing - Marketing Plan - Brand development - Implementation	Carefully tailored and targeted communication programme - focused on 'low impact, high engagement'. Objectives 3,4.	Develop detailed Marketing Plan	Implementation Brand development - guidelines & wider application	Evaluation and continue implementation
WHS Immersive Experiences - Packages (tours, talks etc) - Rangers	Direct action to secure 'right' kind of experiences. Importance of personal engagement for visitor management, education and enjoyment. Objectives 3,4.	Undertake 'Experience Audit' to identify and map current provision - input to VAF.	Develop pilot programme of multi-day tours, identifying key partners (local guides, RSPB, Far North Line, accommodation providers, transport providers) Secure funding & commitment to employ two more seasonal Rangers for Flow Country.	Evaluate pilot programme, develop and extend using visitor feedback.
Business Activation - Advice - Funding - Training	Support and encouragement to businesses to develop new experiences, upgrade facilities, train staff, respond to market opportunities. Objectives 3,4.	Audit business support programmes & channels Commission tailored content for FC tourism businesses	Promotion, recruitment of tourism businesses and implementation (via workshops, online seminars, etc)	Evaluation, refinement and development
Community Initiatives - Ambassador programme - Community projects - cultural programming & events, art projects/ stopping pts	Engage community, connect visitors and residents. Objectives 1,3,4.	Scope community ambassador scheme identifying funding & resources.	Establish pilot ambassador scheme. Work with community organisations to develop tourism-related projects, including identifying funding & resources	Evaluate pilot, develop and extend.

Infrastructure ● Parking ● Boardwalks ● Hides/huts ● Trails ● Stopping points/ viewpoints ● Bins, toilets	Manage visitor pressures and address resident concerns. Facilitate access and support new experiences. Objectives 1,2.	Commission audit of existing infrastructure against VAF locations Identify gaps and needs. Develop phased long-term implementation plan.	Identify funding and resources for implementation & maintenance. Start implementation.	Continue implementation and maintenance.
Accommodation ● Audit ● Development programme	Ensure sufficient range, type and quality of accommodation is available to enable longer stays and increased spend Objectives 1,4.	Commission accommodation audit of current provision, identifying gaps, opportunities	Develop investment programme to support investment in accommodation to meet target market needs	Continue implementation

10.2 Funding Streams

The list here indicates some of the most significant funding programmes operational as of Spring 2026 (nb current rounds for some are now closed). While relevance and eligibility for specific projects are yet to be determined as those projects are scoped and developed it is encouraging that funding streams are potentially available.

- Highland Council £20M **Pride in Place programme** for Sutherland
- Highland Council Social Value Charter for **Renewables Investment**
- Highland Council **Rural Tourism Investment Fund**
- **Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund** - managed by VisitScotland for low carbon transport, multi-use paths, toilets and motorhome facilities, visitor info signage
- Dounreay **Communities Fund** for Caithness & North Sutherland
- **National Lottery Heritage Fund** - note that work is underway to develop a suite of projects meeting NHLF criteria under the headings 'Peat', 'People' and 'Planet' which could include some projects prioritised in the Sustainable Tourism Strategy
- SSEN £1bn **Community Benefit Fund**
- Strathclyde North/SSE **Renewables Sustainable Development Fund** - £225K pa for community and charitable projects
- **North Highland Initiative** for grants for community projects and initiatives
- Scottish Government **Future Farming Investment Scheme** for capital grants to improve environmental performance and **Agritourism** providing 40% of capital investment costs
- HiTrans **Active Travel** for capital grants for community cycle parking
- HIE **Digital Support** for digital and technology capital grants and digital advice grants

10.3 Evaluation

While one of the principles of this Strategy is to take things step by step it will be important to monitor and evaluate progress. The table below sets out some useful indicators. The North Coast 500 will be a key partner in collecting data and analysing the results as it will be concerned with similar measures.

Measure	Rationale	Mechanism
Community views	Ensure implementation meets community needs and concerns, early warnings are picked up and monitored	1) Community Consultative Panel: 8-10 community reps to provide input on key elements, test ideas, monitor progress 2) Annual Community Survey - set baseline in Year 1
Community initiatives	Ensure community opportunities are realised	Monitor and assess number and type of initiative
Business views	Ensure business opportunities are realised and pick up business concerns and support needs as well as information on start-ups, jobs created etc	1) Business Consultative Panel: 6-8 business reps to provide input on key elements, test ideas, monitor progress 2) Annual Business Survey - set baseline in Year 1
Occupancy	Monitor overnight stays and growth in value	Business Consultative Panel & Business Survey
Visitor sentiment	Monitor visitor views and perceptions - highlights, complaints, recommendations	1) Monitor social media channels 2) Monitor review channels 3) Visitor survey
Infrastructure improvements	Manage environmental impacts and visitor & community satisfaction	1) Monitor and assess number and type of infrastructure project developed 2) Footfall counters at Stopping Points & Discovery Zones 3) Rangers monitoring sites/locations for litter, irresponsible parking etc
New experiences	Attract visitors & communicate Flow Country story	1) Monitor and assess number and type of experience 2) Visitor feedback

11. Governance

The successful delivery of this Strategy will require the commitment and efforts of numerous organisations and individuals. To oversee the Strategy and make the required connections to partner, business and community organisations, and funders a Tourism Group should be established. This group can build on the current Tourism Working Group delegated to produce this Strategy. It is recommended that Task & Finish groups are established to oversee the development and implementation of specific projects bringing together relevant partners and agencies.

Principles	Tourism Group Remit	Tourism Group Membership	Collaborators
● Keep membership and operations simple, focused, and flexible ● Involve decision makers or power brokers - those that can make a difference ● Refresh membership regularly ● Call on experts as required	● Reports to WHS Steering Group ● Develops detailed implementation programme and action plans for Strategy ● Establishes Task & Finish project groups as required ● Evaluates activity and refines programme as required ● Undertakes 5 year strategy review	● Public agencies - VisitScotland, Highland Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise ● Flow Country Partnership ● Business representatives x 2 ● Community representatives x 2 ● Voluntary/charity sector x2	● Chamber of Commerce ● University of Highlands & Islands ● Community organisations ● Community Rail Partnership ● Highlands & Islands Enterprise ● Landowners ● North Coast 500 ● North West Highlands Geopark ● RSPB ● Renewables Industry Representative ● Wester Ross Biosphere



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