



Responsible Tourism Strategy Quarterly Actions and Progress Report #8 Annual report January – March 2026

Introduction:

Following a year-long consultation, the all-agency South of Scotland's [Responsible Tourism Strategy](#) was launched on the 20th March 2024 at the SSDA's Annual Conference. Of the c200 businesses attending the launch: 97% said they supported the strategy (84% 'strongly' support). In other feedback at the end of the consultation process, 95% of business respondents said they saw themselves involved in the delivery of the strategy and 97% said they saw themselves benefiting from the strategy.

It is the collective responsibility of the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA), VisitScotland (VS), South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE), Scottish Borders Council (SBC), Dumfries and Galloway Council (DGC), and all in the South of Scotland, to deliver on this strategy: increasing our visitor economy by £1bn and supporting a further 6,000 jobs. To succeed, this strategy must be owned and delivered by every visitor economy business and community in the South of Scotland. It is our *collective* ambition. We therefore invite every businesses to get involved in the delivery: [joining the SSDA as members](#), being listed on the 'Scotland Starts Here' [website](#) and [app](#) (our consumer-facing brand), and actively being involved.

The SSDA, VS, SOSE, DGC and SBC can serve an enabling role, establishing the pre-conditions for success, but it is businesses themselves who will ultimately deliver the economic growth we collectively seek. And so we look to support, and get behind businesses, to really deliver on our ambition.

The Strategy has been endorsed by both the Regional Economic Partnership and the Convention of the South of Scotland, and hence it is also owned by, and will be supported by, a wider cast of public agencies including Historic Environment Scotland, Scotland Food & Drink, Forestry and Land Scotland, and the Scottish Government.

At the same time as the Strategy was launched, the first three-year [Action Plan](#) was published, with 122 actions across the four strands of the strategy; each with one or more lead agency responsible for delivery and a clear description of where we want to be by 2027.

We have committed to publishing brief quarterly progress reports for the next ten years, as well as more detailed annual reports and externally produced triennial reports, to ensure we continue to be transparent and accountable for delivering on the unprecedented ambition we have set for the South of Scotland's visitor economy.

This is the eighth quarterly report, which reports on the full second year of deliver April 2025-March 2026 – [this and all previous reports can be read here](#). It gives a flavour of some of what we have done in the last three months to advance the strategy but is not exhaustive. We aim to keep these quarterly reports as brief as possible, to maximise the readership. Many of the topics from our first two quarterly reports are, of course, also included here as we continue to push forwards these projects.

[CLICK HERE](#) for further live info about the c60 projects the SSDA is delivering.

Delivery systems and progress tracking:

The five agencies (SSDA, VS, SOSE, DGC & SBC) have established systems to push forwards delivery of the Action Plan in a coordinated and coherent way. The responsible officers from these five organisations meet every week for two hours: the first hour is spent deep diving into a specific area of strategy delivery, often with key external agencies or other partners in attendance, the second hour is sharing key updates for that week. In this way, we ensure a high degree of collaboration and partnership working, as well as holding ourselves accountable for the delivery of all sections of the strategy.

Areas of delivery in this quarter included:

STRAND 1: Inspire Visitors to come to the South of Scotland

Seasonality marketing campaign [Ref: Action 1.1.i]:

The SSDA ran a Seasonality marketing campaign for 2025/26. The campaign included a variety of marketing activities, including paid social media, new web content, press and PR. For 2025, the SSDA adjusted campaign planning and creative to align with learning from the 2024-25 campaign, as well as input from partners on previous campaign outcomes.

Businesses have been supported to get involved by: (1) feeding into the design of the campaign, (2) sharing the content, and (3) being inspired by the campaign to develop their off-season offering.

Two years into running seasonality promotions, the SSDA is seeing increased interest businesses in getting involved, with the two seasonal short break competitions receiving over 10,000 entries.

The campaign had a strong collaborative and partnership element, especially with Visit Scotland.

Six 25-second video reels were developed to target domestic markets within 2-4hrs drive of the South of Scotland. They juxtapose busy, stressed, urban, screen-based life with the South of Scotland's offering as a rural escape.

They are sensory and emotional: rather than aiming to reference lots of individual businesses, they sell the South as a destination for a seasonal escape which offers wellness and mindfulness.

[The videos can be viewed here](#)

Between January and March 2026, the campaign delivered just over 30k further visits to Scotland Starts Here, bringing the total to almost 70k visits, against a goal of 45,000 visits for the entire campaign runtime.

The campaign was delivered in partnership with Reach Media (Daily Record and Newcastle Chronicle) with significant coverage online and in print, as well as influencer and press visits in spring 2026.

Marketing Plan [Ref: Action 1.1.i]:

The SSDA worked closely with VisitScotland to closely align and collaboratively develop the new marketing plan for the South of Scotland to 2027. This combines the learning and insights of both organisations, to help refine messaging about the South of Scotland to key audiences, and set out specific actions to:

- Increase top-of-mind awareness and visibility of the South of Scotland as a year-round rural holiday destination to domestic target audiences.

- Position the South of Scotland as a holiday destination of choice for key international markets with high growth potential
- Align activities and planning closely to national as well as local strategic partners, insights and trends

In this period key marketing work built on the increased interest in the SWC300, aligning with ongoing marketing themes by VisitScotland. The SSDA organising a press visit for the SWC300 with journalist Nick Harding writing for Practical Motorhome as well as Campervan Magazine.

The SSDA also worked closely with D&G Council to promote the newly launched Rhins Coast Path. Travel Writer Sarah Baxter was commissioned by 4 outlets, including [the Guardian](#) and The Telegraph to walk the new route. For the itinerary, the SSDA showcased the outdoors as well as key development areas in the Rhins – watersports in Stranraer, Biosphere experiences, nature and wildlife conservation, as well as key attractions.

The SSDA also put increased emphasis on public transport travel, celebrating the anniversary of the Borders Railway with the launch of new [train and bus itineraries](#). This was a direct result of discussions with transport providers in the region and VisitScotland to mark the anniversary of the route by using the Borders Explorer Ticket.

VisitScotland Global marketing - Channel 4 partnership [Ref: Action 1.1.i]:

[Channel 4: Where To Next?](#)

Launched on 6 January, VisitScotland collaborated with Channel 4 on an episode of its online entertainment series, Where to Next? It saw stand-up comedians Fatiha El-Ghorri and John Tothill battle it out to be the “best tourist” on their trip to the South of Scotland. The pair began in Glasgow where they got tips of what to do and where, by the public. From Glasgow, they headed south through Ayrshire to Dumfries and Galloway, taking in

some locations found in the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere. The full episode was released on Channel 4’s YouTube channel, alongside short-form videos on Channel 4’s Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts.

Locations featured in Dumfries & Galloway included: Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, Kitchen, Coos & Ewes, Kirkcudbright, Swally & Scrán, The Open Book, The Murray Arms, Mostly Ghostly and Caerlaverock Castle. Itinerary only: Galloway Activity Centre and Galloway International Dark Sky Park

Activity was supported across VisitScotland channels with 7.4 million views on YouTube and 73,000 views of Channel 4s Facebook reel which had 410 engagements.

VisitScotland social media metrics for the South of Scotland for the period are as follows –

- Impressions: 6.15M
- Engagements: 257.04k
- Video views: 1.43M
- Saves: 12.27k

Media and PR [Ref: Action 1.1.i]:

From January to March 2026, the SSDA had over 18 pieces of positive destination coverage in the media, reaching an estimated audience of 583 million. See sample coverage for [January](#) and [March](#).

‘Scotland Starts Here’ visibility [Ref: Action 1.1.iv & 2.3.iv]:

The strategy partners have engaged with Transport Scotland around visitor signage across the South of Scotland and the opportunities for higher

visibility of “Scotland Starts Here” branding at key access points. Both local authorities continue to explore options to progress activity further.

Scotland Starts Here branded welcome signage has been installed on 20 key locations into D&G, with a further 5 in development.

This matches earlier work by SBC with Scotland Starts Here on eight key entry points.

Sustained long-term financial commitment [Ref: Action 1.1.v]

A SOSE funding agreement has been reached for the SSDA for the year 2026-27 and there is active work underway to develop a sustainable model for post-2027. SOSE was also the Co-Headline Sponsor for the South’s Tourism Conference and had a business specialist on site to engage with enterprises directly.

River Tweed Trail Business Engagement (Ref: Action Plan 1.2.iv & 1.5.iv):

The Tourism Business Engagement role has secured funding from Scottish Borders Council for a further year (2026-27). During this period, work continued to engage with businesses to raise awareness and provide support to ensure businesses are ready.

Specifically, activity has been focused on preparing for attendance at VisitScotland Connect in April – Scotland’s flagship B2B event. The development of materials included a short video, a map leaflet and suggested itineraries. These assets help to bring the trail to life and showcase the route and the attractions along it.

In addition, a business survey was undertaken to understand how local businesses currently engage with walkers, cyclists and future River Tweed Trail users, and to identify infrastructure and facility gaps that may limit the Trail’s economic potential. It represents the first in a planned series of

short, repeat surveys intended to track business readiness and emerging needs over time. A total of 87 businesses responded, representing a broad spread across the route corridor, with strong participation from accommodation providers.

Dark Skies Festival [Ref: Action 1.2.iv]:

As part of the Dark Skies Network, the SSDA has developed ambitious plans for a South of Scotland Dark Skies Festival (nine days in October) which will formally launch what we will call the South of Scotland Dark Skies Season (October to March).

From 16–23 October (provisional), businesses and organisations across Dumfries & Galloway and the Scottish Borders would host their own events — from very small, low-key activities through to larger programmed experiences. All events would be badged as part of the Dark Sky Festival, with the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA), through its consumer-facing platform Scotland Starts Here, coordinating promotion, PR and a central listings page.

Events could be anything that suits your business or community, for example:

- Stargazing sessions or night walks
- Dark Sky suppers or themed menus
- Storytelling, music or folklore evenings
- Photography workshops Wellness activities under the stars
- Family-friendly craft or learning sessions
- Music in the dark/silent disco

There has been remarkably high levels of business interest, with 50 businesses submitting expressions of interest within hours of the concept first being launched.

Inspire the travel trade to the potential of the region (Ref : Action 1.3.i)

The SSDA has been active in supporting businesses to become travel trade ready, strengthen their trade offering, and preparing to represent the South of Scotland at VisitScotland Connect (April 2026, Glasgow).

- The VisitScotland Business Support Hub offering a wider range of support and advice to tourism and events businesses continues to provide opportunities for South of Scotland Businesses
- VisitScotland ran a breakout workshop at the SSDA Tourism Conference attended by 25 businesses focussed on digital discoverability

Leverage our credentials and designations – engaging with media [Ref: Action 1.4.i]:

North America

- The VisitScotland North America PR team attended IMM in New York in January, a meet-the-media event supplemented by a programme of media meetings, followed by Tartan Week in April where news and updates for 2026 played a key role in pitching and media engagements, which included for responsible travel, off-season and off-the-beaten path experiences across Scotland, with mentions for the South of Scotland.
- Following a press trip in September 2025 to the Scottish Borders, Pink Ticket Travel, an LGBTQ+ publication ran a feature on the Scottish Borders in January 2026 highlighting the region's inclusive experiences, local community spirit, food & drink and LGBTQ+ led businesses. Link to coverage [In the Scottish Borders, everything is a little queer if you look closely enough - Pink Ticket Travel](#).

- Series of interviews with Vicki Miller in Canadian Travel Trade, in print and online, looking ahead to 2026 on the back of the What's New release exploring themes such as luxury, adventure travel, local produce, off-season experiences and responsible travel including mentions for Castle Douglas "food town", Galloway Forest Park and the Kirkpatrick Coast to Coast cycling route. Link to coverage: [PDF Canadian Travel Press, Vicki Miller Interview](#)

Europe

- Inclusion of South of Scotland messaging across all pitches at ITB Berlin in March (40+ media engagements) and Paris media meetings with high potential to lead to press trips in 26/27. Furthermore, inclusion planned in pitches at media networking event in Amsterdam in May.
- Brockloch Eco Retreat Treehouse featuring in this article from French online Magazine [Mister Travel](#)
- In Germany, two separate stories with focus on agritourism were published across regional print and online outlets. Both came on the back of press trips the team supported for freelancer Dörte Nohrden. Thanks to syndication, they appeared across a range of outlets, including A-list newspapers and travel magazines. One focused on Highland cow experiences at Kitchen Coos & Ewes ([Schottland: Hochlandrinder erleben auf der Airyolland Farm](#)), the second story spotlighted Belted Galloway cattle and farm stays in the region: [Urlaub: Wie Schottlands Farmstays Besucher verzaubern und Tradition bewahren - WELT](#)

UK

- Featured in pitches during 70+ media engagement meetings at TravMedia IMM UK (March 2026). Continuing to monitor journalist interest and potential opportunities, with strong alignment to themes such as responsible travel, off-season exploration, and off-the-beaten-path experiences across Scotland, including coverage opportunities for the South of Scotland.

Pitching, taken place:

- In January, dedicated Burn's Night pitch, spotlighting, Dumfries & Galloway and Ayrshire / wider south of Scotland region as a year round destination for Burn's history/activities. This activity also supported with a VS partnership with Channel 4 on 'Where to Next Series' spotlighting location in Dumfries and Galloway, (coverage below) ['I've found the UK's friendliest town - I didn't meet a single person that wasn't nice'](#)
- Feb half term pitch distributed to 80+ UK media contacts, mentions include: Loch Ken Eco Bothies (sustainable accommodation offering)
- Easter/spring pitch distributed to 106+ UK media contacts (March 2026) – plethora of Easter events and activities included, in addition to spotlighting rich agritourism offering and family/spring adventure activities – including [Loch Ken Eco Bothies](#) sustainable accommodation offering)

James Hutton Tercentenary [Ref: Action 1.4.ii]:

The SSDA has developed a partnership with the James Hutton Institute, Edinburgh Geological Society (EGS), Scottish Geology Trust (SGT), GeoWalks, Scottish Borders Council (SBC), South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE), and VisitScotland, to [work together to support the James Hutton Tercentenary in June 2026 to maximise lasting benefit to the South of Scotland visitor economy.](#)

By June 2026 we collectively aim to have:

- 1) A 'Deep Time Trail' to Siccar Point, with appropriate parking, signage and safe access.
- 2) A high-quality visitor offering with inspiring, immersive interpretation across physical signs and audio/digital story-telling.
- 3) Coordinated and impactful marketing which inspires people to visit Berwickshire, encouraging and supporting them to stay in the South of Scotland, exploring further and spending more.

All funding has now been secured for the Deep Time Trail, planning permission has been secured and work is underway.

A partnership with the Geological Society of America has been brokered, and they travel to Scotland for the June Tercentenary.

Scottish Dark Skies Observatory [Ref: Action 1.4.iv]:

The SSDA continues to support the development of the Scottish Dark Skies Observatory (SDSO) at Clatteringshaws in the Heart of the Galloway Forest Park. With the SSDA's support, the SDSO secured planning permission and construction will soon start.

North American Market Building [Ref: Action 1.5.i]:

Addition to Product development: Work is underway with a number of key businesses in the region to develop a collaborative genealogy products to target the North American markets

The SSDA continues to coordinate work to increase the North American market, with five main areas of activity and joint working:

- 1) Destination marketing partnership: Have a coordinated and collaborative approach to reaching target audiences in North America, building on existing learning/activity, with a clear, cohesive and compelling message about the South of Scotland which inspires increased booking.
- 2) Ancestry, history and heritage: Have a coordinated approach to increasing genealogy tourism, providing information, itineraries, content and signposting to reach out to the Scottish-US diaspora with a clear product and a warm, welcoming messaging, inspiring them to 'come home' and rediscover their clan homelands.
- 3) Travel trade: Engage, inform and inspire the international inbound travel trade, offering clear, bookable, long-range product which they can adopt, tailor and sell.
- 4) Product development: Strengthen the South of Scotland's product/offering, in line with the priorities and expectations of the North American market, addressing the current gaps and issues in the destination.
- 5) Link to existing SSDA/SSH content and planned work: Ensure that visitor economy businesses with a North American market are actively involved in the SSDA/*Scotland Starts Here* and are benefitting from the activity, content and support available.

There are exciting new media partnerships underway, with the SSDA organising a major lifestyle journalist from the Hamptons to visit the region in Feb/March and National Geographic visiting in the summer to write a feature on the Common Ridings.

Galloway Distillery and Sam Heughan Partnership [Ref: Action 1.5.i]:

The SSDA is continuing to work in [close partnership with Sam Heughan](#) and the Galloway Distillery. Proudly Dumfries and Galloway born and bred, Sam is absolutely committed to supporting community prosperity and economic regeneration in his home region.

Key developments in this period, include:

- [Sam appearing on the Jimmy Fallon](#) to millions of target show and promoting Galloway
- Sam speaking at the SSDA's Annual Conference.
- Final preparations for Sam to be the Grand Marshall at Tartan Week in New York.
- Development of a major motorbike ride-out event in Galloway to promote the destination
- A new partnership between the SSDA, Edinburgh Airport and Sam Heughan in development, for the national 'Welcome to Scotland' advert, also encouraging people to visit the South of Scotland.
- Plans for a major proposition around Burns Night 2027 (tbc)

Stranraer East Pier proposition [Ref: Action 1.5.i]:

The SSDA has developed a game-changing proposition for the East Pier of Stranraer: to develop a leading national visitor attraction of international significance in order to significantly increase the number of high-spending international visitors. A SOSE-funded a pre-feasibility study has been completed and SOSE's infrastructure team are working with DGC, and engaging with the range of site owners and a wide range of other stakeholders, to identify funding sources and develop a strong case for a full feasibility study and technical survey which would be a necessary step to enable any redevelopment of the wider East Pier.

In this period the SSDA attended a roundtable meeting of all senior stakeholders in this space: advocating hard for urgent, coordinated action to avoid another 14 years lost.

STRAND 2: Develop the Visitor Experience

Thistle Awards [Ref: Action 2.1.ii]:

The SSDA was active through Jan-March 2026 to encourage and support South of Scotland businesses to apply for a Thistle Award.

Food and Drink [Ref: Action 2.1.v]:

The SSDA delivered a major new piece of work to further develop the South of Scotland's food and drink offering, with three components:

- a) Driving B2B Engagement: Pro-actively reaching out to ensure as many businesses as possible benefit from the 2025 research, reports and toolkit.
- b) Funding collaborations: Encouraging relevant collaborations to engage the new SOSE/Scottish Government fund, specifically focusing on fostering business partnerships across the Scottish Borders.
- c) 'Year of Food Experiences': Making 2026-27 the Year of Food Experiences, developing a package of content for four seasonal campaigns, starting in Spring 2026, celebrating South of Scotland food experiences for each of these seasons.

This Year of Food Experiences has been branded 'Of Land, Sea and Seasons: Food experiences to savour' and has been launched on Scotland Starts Here, with four components:

- [A taste of Spring](#)
- [A culinary journey through Summer](#)
- [Celebrating Autumn flavours](#)
- [Savouring Winter comforts](#)

Burns Tourism [Ref: Action 2.2.i]:

The SSDA is continuing to lead the coordination of the Burns Tourism Partnership as part of its continuing delivery of its most recent [12-month action plan](#), with 15 clear objectives identified including the ongoing funding and development work for Ellisland and the production of a Burns' Walking Audio guide for Dumfries.

Together, two major funding applications have been made by the SSDA in partnership with DGC to the Dumfries Town Board: one for a Project Officer to scale-up this collaboration and promotion work, and the other for a major 'In the Footsteps of Burns' project which would build partnerships with potentially thousands of Burns and Caledonia groups around the world, attracting high-spending north American visitors.

The Project Officer has been successful, with funding secured for this full-time post for the next two years, and the SSDA is moving forwards at pace to recruit this post. It is also likely the Footsteps project will also be funded in 2027-28.

Common Ridings [Ref: Action 2.2.i]:

After the success of the new [Common Riding pages on Scotland Starts Here](#), work continues to ensure all common ridings are featured on the pages with visitor information to make these community events as accessible as possible and encourage longer stays in the region.

Each event now benefits from refreshed imagery, detailed descriptions of the key ride-outs, and insider tips on the best viewing spots—helping to showcase what makes each festival unique. This renewed focus has led to a noticeable increase in website traffic and growing media and travel trade interest, reinforcing the Common Ridings' importance within the South of Scotland's visitor experience.

A press trip with the National Geographic and VisitScotland has been secured for the 2026 Common Ridings and will include the importance of the genealogy links as well as the historic spectacle of the events themselves.

Fishing visitor information [Ref: Action 2.2.i]:

The SSDA has developed an [ambitious programme of work](#) to create a one-stop-shop fishing information hub for visitors on the existing *Scotland Starts Here* website and app: this will be the most complete and user-friendly single online source of information about all forms of fishing in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway.

In this way, the SSDA will make it easier to inspire more people to visit the South of Scotland, especially higher-spending, longer-staying visitors. This in turn supports local businesses, creates jobs and sustains economic prosperity. The SSDA will look to do this in responsible and sensitive ways, working with key organisations (commercial, community and conservation) to provide appropriate information: for example, on bio-security (net cleaning etc to guard against invasive non-native species), promoting local guides, and ensuring beginners and family groups are appropriately signposted.

The SSDA has reached out to the top 50 fishing businesses and stakeholders in the South of Scotland, sharing the plans, inviting their input and hosting a webinar discussing next steps. There has been strong support from all who have fed in and the SSDA is now 80% of the way through writing the copy for these significant new sections of *Scotland Starts Here*, with information about all fishing opportunities in the South of Scotland.

This major new section has been completed in draft and is [available online](#). The SSDA is consulting partners before its formal launch and promotion.

Events [Ref: Action 2.4.v]

D&G Council:

The Big Burns Supper continued to deliver a substantial programme of activity during 2024/25. While the festival operated over 34 days and achieved positive outcomes in terms of local engagement, trading income and funding leverage, the newly introduced Northern Lights element attracted almost 7,000 attendees of whom only 15% were visitors from outside Dumfries and Galloway.

Less encouraging news is that the council budget for 26/27 and 28/29 will involve a 20% cut to the events fund

Scottish Borders Council:

Scottish Borders Council continues to support the events sector and deliver against the Scottish Borders Event Strategy Plan. The plan targets support towards strategic events which have regional economic impact, are sustainable and work towards the delivery of net zero. Recent updates include:

Tour de France – Grand Depart 2027:

The official announcement was made on the 15 January in Leeds. Hosting the majority of stage one represents a major opportunity for the region due to the global attention it will bring, this will continue to position the region as a major cycling destination. It is expected to drive both immediate and long-term benefits, including increased tourism, enhanced regional profile, and strong community pride.

The Scottish Borders will have 118km/73 miles (65%) of the distance of the first stage, it will be broadcast in over 190 countries with a global TV

audience of 3.5 – 4 billion people. A social impact programme has also been announced; this will be delivered by Scottish Cycling with an investment of £1m over 4 years. Planning is underway to maximise the benefits and legacy as well as delivering and supporting Le Tour GB operationally.

Strategic Events Fund

The Strategic Events Fund continues to provide financial support for the creation and delivery of high-quality regional events across the Scottish Borders. The latest funding round which closed at the end of November saw applications received from the Borders Book Festival and the World Sheepdog. Event organisers were encouraged to submit applications early and ensure their proposals reflected the fund's aims of strengthening regional impact, fostering community engagement, and enhancing visitor appeal. Successful applicants for 2026 include:

World Sheepdog Trials 2026

The World Sheepdog Trials have been awarded £25,000 from the Strategic Events Fund. The event takes place 16–20 September 2026 at Huntington Farm, Lauder. It brings top handlers and dogs from around the world. This major rural sporting event is regarded as the most prestigious global competition in sheepdog trialling and is expected to attract over 300 elite dogs and handlers from 34 countries, drawing more than 30,000 visitors and generating an estimated £10 million economic boost for the region.

Borders Book Festival 2026

The festival has been awarded £25,000 from the Strategic Events Fund. It will run from 11–14 June 2026 in the gardens and orchard of Harmony House in Melrose. With an offering of over 100 events including a

dedicated Family Book Festival with children's authors and free activities the festival is known for attracting significant visitor numbers and therefore increasing spend in the local area.

Local Festivals and Events

Hawick Reivers Festival

A grant of £5000 has been awarded for the 2026 festival which will be used to cover essential operational costs such as insurance, venue and equipment hire, marketing, and event infrastructure enabling the delivery of a high-quality and largely free community festival. The organisers emphasise using local suppliers, ensuring that a large share of the grant spend directly supports the Hawick economy.

Common Ridings - Economic and Social Impact Assessment

A report has been commissioned to assess and to fully understand the scale of the economic contribution and the breadth of their social value, along with their community impacts. Currently a tender exercise is underway to appoint a consultant to deliver this piece of work. The report will assess and focus on local festivals in the Scottish Borders that feature a horse cavalcade element. The findings from this study will provide Common Riding committees with robust, evidence-based data to support future applications for external funding and to strengthen the long term sustainability of these events.

VisitScotland:

- Through National Events Funding VisitScotland is supporting The Galloch 15-17 May 2026, Borders Book Festival 11-14 June 2026 and Worldsheel Dog Trials 16-20 September
- In partnership with Scottish Government, VisitScotland has worked to secure Tour de France – Grand Depart 2027 with a significant proportion of the route coming through the South of Scotland on 2 July 2027.

Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund [Ref: Action 2.6.1]

Dumfries and Galloway Council:

After completing an audit of existing coastal gateway car park and countryside sites, DGC submitted 3 Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) development grants applications to Visit Scotland in early 2026 for a number of coastal gateway sites comprising, Port Logan, Ardwell, New England Bay and The Dhoon near Kirkcudbright. The Council has been successful in being awarded £60,000 by Visit Scotland to develop designs to RIBA stage 4 detailed technical design for infrastructure improvements. Consultants will be appointed and the design works are due for completion in September 2026. The above coastal gateway sites are part of the wider Solway Coast and Marine Project (SCAMP) which is a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Landscape Connections programme. Other prioritised coastal gateway sites will also have infrastructure improvements developed in preparation for a stage 2 delivery application to the NLHF in 2027. In addition, the site designs will be developed in parallel to the design development for the proposed North

Solway coast path which incorporates the existing core path coast network with the aim to create a continuous coastal route from Gretna to Cairnryan.

Scottish Borders Council:

The Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan for the Scottish Borders is now at draft stage. A number of key locations have been identified where interventions could be made to enhance the visitor experience and relieve pressure on communities. The plan also aims to manage tourism sustainably to ensure growth is within the capacity of the destination. Finalisation of the plan will enable the council to apply to the VisitScotland Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund which opened up for applications on 25 March 2026 with approximately £4million made available.

Scottish Borders Rail [Ref: Action 2.6.i]:

The SSDA is working closely with the Campaign for Borders Rail (CBR) to develop advocacy work to use the tenth anniversary to build all-party political support for the completion of the line to Carlisle. The SSDA and CBR wrote to all seven Party Leaders of the seven parties competing in the May 2026 Holyrood election, asking for explicit manifesto commitments to continue and complete the complete the line. Through this period they met with the Party Leaders or their lead manifesto writers, receiving strong cross party support. Four of the six parties competing in the May Holyrood election included references to completing the line in their manifestos.

Public Toilets [Ref: Action 2.6.vii]

The SSDA is continuing to work with Scottish Borders Council and Go Tweed Valley to find investment necessary for a serious strategic solution to the challenge of public toilets. A break out session was delivered in the SSDA 2026 Annual Conference on this theme.

Inward Investment (Ref: Action 2.7):

Center Parcs (Ref: Action 2.7.4):

Work has started on the seventh, and the first Scottish, Center Parcs holiday village. Centre Parcs chief executive Colin McKinley marked the start of the work on the site with a ceremonial tree planting, the first of many which will create an entirely new forest the first time Centre Parcs have established a woodland when developing a new holiday village. The Centre Parcs Scottish Borders development will deliver the £450m resort near Hawick and Selkirk, which is expected to create 1200 jobs in the Scottish Borders.

SOSE investments [Ref: Action 2.7]:

Rocks and Wheels

Work of the £7.8m investment in the Rocks and Wheels campus in Dalbeattie progressing well with project support for 3 years secured from Government via our Communities Team. Ahead of opening a UCI Pump Track World Qualifier event has been secured for the pump track there. This is a rare UK qualifier enhancing South of Scotland's designation and destination as a Bike Region. The pump track will open just ahead of the UCI event in June.

SOSE Cultural colleagues are working to support Creative Coathanger who are working to develop a range of branding, copywriting and visual media training and support focussed of assisting tourism and hospitality industry clients.

SOSE's film specialists are working in partnership with VS, Screen Scotland, Disney and the producers Alan Carr's Castle project to maximise the potential publicity and international reach of the filming.

Work continues to support the significant ambitions of Robert Burn's Ellisland recreation as The Home of Auld Lang Syne. Great publicity came out of NY and Tartan week this month with notable prominence for South of Scotland, inevitable given presence of Sam Heughan but notable all three, Ellisland, Galloway Distillery and the innovative Scotland Shop have SOSE support.

Mountain Bike Innovation Centre:

The significant SOSE investment in Mountain Bike Innovation Centre and associated facilities is now at construction phase.

Agritourism:

SOSE continues to support the work of Scottish Agriculture to being an international focus on all of Scotland with the first International Agritourism Conference coming to Scotland in June. A number of South of Scotland businesses are presenting or part of the extended programme of familiarisation visits.

Annan harbour project:

SOSE confirmed investments in several major projects including £1.2m investment and ongoing infrastructure and other support in the notable Annan harbour project which is now underway. As well as revitalisation and recognising the port's significant history the £15.6m development will include café, visitor hub, events space and a leisure lagoon and maritime heritage centre.

Center Parcs:

SOSE has worked with Scottish Government to secure a substantial capital sum of up to £30m that will deliver vital enabling infrastructure at Center Parcs.

SOSE colleagues working to support Center Parcs' construction and procurement stages have now agreed a range of specific work streams with a range of agencies and partners to enable progress to be made at pace now the site is live.

SOSE supported a number of South of Scotland hospitality businesses to go on an off-season learning journey to Cornwall to see innovative food and drink enterprises to help inspire our hospitality sector.

SOSE infrastructure and business development specialists continue to offer specialist advice and funding support to a growing number of community and commercial enterprises with five new tourism/hospitality projects starting engagement in last week.

SOSE has working with Scottish Government, Scottish Agritourism and HIE to grant fund a significant number of rural businesses via the £1,000,000 Agritourism Infrastructure Fund. Beneficiaries will be advised post-election.

To date over 200 tourism and hospitality enterprises have been support with SOSE grant funding of around £30 with further grant support for ongoing projects being progressed.

SOSE's Communities Team are undertaking a significant project supporting a range of enterprises in the Machar's including Wigtown Festival Company, Whithorn Trust and the support to buy the Wigtown Ploughman community

pub and restaurant. This cluster approach has significant tourism and hospitality focus.

The SOSE-led Small Producers Pilot Fund is supporting 32 small producers across Scotland with £377,000 of funding with 15 of those in the SOSE area. This will increase regional food resilience and improve supply chains for local produce into the local hospitality market too.

SOSE and Scottish Borders Council market the 1,000th client to be supported by their partnership on Business Gateway Scottish Borders. The 100th was The Scottish Cheese Academy offering certified cheese education, hospitality training and cultural tourism experiences based around excellent Scottish Cheese.

SOSE hosted 160 entrepreneurs to celebrate International Women's Day 2026 at Smiths Gretna Green, a number were from the tourism and hospitality sector. Kate Forbes as DFM visited Great Tapestry of Scotland to meet SOSE CEO Jane Morrison-Ross to recognise success of Pathways project which encourages entrepreneurship in women where grants of £1,000 to explore business ideas have led to over 100 business being created and hundreds more enquiries.

SOSE has invested in historic buildings at Barwhillanty Estate to provide more much-needed accommodation in addition to existing support to create a new year-round sustainable events venue which completes this month and launches with a series of events including Mr Pooks Supper clubs adding significant variety close to Castle Douglas Food Town.

A number of grants to tourism and hospitality sector enterprises have been made in recent months and details will appear on SOSE's website in due course.

Responding to concerns being heard from the tourism and hospitality sector across the regions SOSE's Chair and CEO recently hosted a large round table with representatives from across the region and all sectors of the industry to meet with partners including VS. A short-term action plan was agreed with a focus on maintaining our long-term strategy and ambitions whilst ramping up marketing and boosting the availability of the many great experiences we have that could be more prominent.

There was widespread recognition that AI was increasingly playing a significant role in potential visitors' destination choices, travel plans and itineraries. Two actions are being followed up. A boost to the amount of reliable, quality and visual content that was available to consumers and AI via our Scotland Starts Here platforms.

A commitment was made to explore whether AI could be maximised to the benefit of the South and SOSE has already arranged meetings with partners and Civ Tech to explore those opportunities quickly. Other meetings are with Edinburgh Futures trust's tourism specialist.

STRAND 3: Support Businesses to Succeed:

SSDA Business Plan [Ref: Action 3.1.i]:

The SSDA is continuing to deliver its ambitious [2025-27 Business Plan](#), which is closely aligned to the Responsible Tourism Strategy. The Business Plan is essentially the SSDA's programme of work for the next couple of years as a DMMO: 58 projects clearly delineated, each with a one-sentence strategic objective (the *why*), a handful of bullets around our approach (the *how*), details as to who we're partnering with on this, the targets, the Strategy reference, and the SSDA staff member leading.

The easiest way to skim it is to look over the contents page on pp5-6 which has hyperlinks to the relevant section. Or, even easier, there is an [interactive mind-map version](#) of the business plan here, which the SSDA will keep up to date with live updates for all 58 projects over the coming two years.

SSDA Annual Conference [Ref: Action 3.1.i]:

On the 11th of March 2026, more than 200 South of Scotland tourism business leaders came together for the fifth annual conference of the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA). The day was a chance for businesses to network, share their experience, build new collaborations and -together- map out the next chapter of tourism in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway.

There was a fantastic line-up of inspiring and informing speakers.

Vicki Miller, CEO of VisitScotland, spoke of her own experience growing up in the region, highlighting the many strengths of the South of Scotland's visitor economy and giving a national overview.

Raj Singh-Dehal, Chief Corporate Officer of Centre Parcs UK, briefed businesses on plans for Centre Parcs Scottish Borders, which has now secured planning permission. This £400m investment will create 700 jobs

through the construction phase and 1,200 permanent jobs once open, attracting 350,000 visitors, spread evenly through the year. This will, single-handedly, more than double the number of overnight visitors to the Scottish Borders.

Through the day, businesses took part in interactive breakout groups, including on:

- Trails to Turnover – Building world-class outdoor experiences that businesses can plug into
- Coastlines with Purpose – Turning coastal heritage into distinctive visitor experiences
- Living Heritage, Lasting Impact - How culture, tradition and place create unforgettable visitor experiences
- Getting People Here, and Around – The practical foundations of a thriving visitor economy
- VisitScotland Business Support Hub - Practical tips on digital distribution
- Marketing & social media - Finding and connecting with your audience online
- Routes to new markets – from development to market, your route into the travel trade
- Stories That Stick - Authenticity, AI and immersive experiences in modern tourism

Of those who gave feedback:

- 58% rated the day as “excellent”, 35% as “good” and 6% as “average”, 0% rated it as “not great” or “bad”
- 76% said the SSDA was “extremely useful”, 24% said “quite useful”, 0% said “not very useful” or “not useful at all”

Feedback included:

- “It wasn't just a 'sit down and listen' conference but one that got everyone involved. Topics were great and varied and speakers were very insightful (and funny!). It was my first time attending an SSDA conference and I look forward to attending another!”
- “The speakers in attendance were great, the choice of breakout sessions was VERY good (and actually very well handled). The SSDA team are really the stars - such enthusiasm!”
- “I really liked the venue, I thought it had a lovely, community feel about it. The range of breakout sessions was great, as were the speakers”
- “I enjoyed the breakout sessions, I thought they were more useful than previous years. I really enjoyed the data session and found that to be the most useful.”
- “It was welcoming and friendly atmosphere and really involving everyone at all levels of business. Can we do the workshops from the afternoon at another time? I wanted to do them all!”

Scottish Parliament [Ref: Action 3.1.i]:

SOSE Chair and CEO welcomed a range of ministers, MSPs and supporters of the South of Scotland and members of SOSE's Youth Advisory Forum to a Scottish Parliamentary Reception to mark SOSE's 5th Anniversary.

Planning support [Ref: Action 3.1.ii]:

The SSDA continues to support visitor economy planning applications, issuing letters of support and offering in-person representation at Committees where appropriate.

Short Term Lets [Ref: Action 3.1.ii]:

SBC and DGC are continuing to support businesses to apply for Short Term Let licences where required, supported by the SSDA, SOSE and VS. D&G Council has issued 1,731 licenses in total with 117 renewals. As of 9th

March 2026, Scottish Borders Council public register shows 1,281 applications have been received, with 1,262 issued and none refused.

Support and collaboration [Ref Action: 3.1.iv]:

VisitScotland's Tourism Business Support Hub launched earlier in 2025 continues to develop new supportive content. A new email programme is now up and running with the majority of businesses receiving information and advice on improving their digital channels. New content focuses on how to showcase your business, the importance of imagery, and how SEO is changing. More detail [VisitScotland Business Support Hub | VisitScotland Business Support](#)

Locally Led Destination Development meetings: [Ref: Action 3.2.i & iii]:

As part of the SSDA's [Locally Led Destination Development](#) work, the South of Scotland is divided into 14 different areas. The SSDA meets businesses in each area every 6-months. Full minutes from all meetings, and collated details of all business priorities and what is being done against these, can be found on the [SSDA website](#).

The SSDA has also met with/formalised partnerships with groups including Visit Kelso, Go Tweed Valley, Stranraer Development Trust and others in this period.

In this period the SSDA, hosted four LLDD meetings, all in-person, with almost 200 businesses attending. All bar one respondent said the meetings had useful - either 'very useful' (67%) or 'quite useful' (32%).

Feedback included:

- “Thank you for a positive meeting. I felt that I was being listened to.”
- “Thanks for the update very helpful”

- “Thank you, I really did take lots away from the meeting and really enjoyed hearing everyone’s stories too. I haven’t done much of this sort of thing but really did enjoy it.”

Regional Economic Partnership [Ref: Action 3.2.v]:

VS, the SSDA, SBC, DGC and SOSE are all actively represented on the REP, as well as Strategic Action Groups including on Transport and the Convention of the South of Scotland. This allows us to represent tourism at the centre of economic planning.

Workforce development [Ref: Action 3.3.i-viii]:

It was agreed with the Deputy First Minister at the Convention of the South of Scotland (COSS) in November 2025, that the SSDA would consult industry to collate information about workforce challenges and skill gaps which will give tangible recommendations and create an annual measure to be able to assess progress. The SSDA undertook this work and has developed a **MAJOR REPORT** which all relevant agencies (SDS, SOSE, VS, Springboard, DYC, both councils, both colleges, etc) have been actively involved in.

The SSDA made a funding application to the Scottish Borders Local Employability Partnership for work to address longstanding workforce issues, based on the needs of local businesses and the views of all key agencies. This was unfortunately not successful and the SSDA is now going back to the Deputy First Minister, SDS, SOSE and others to look at next steps.

Through the summer of 2025 the SSDA was invited to present the results of its research in this area to myriad national and regional groups, including Ministerial advisory groups and Parliamentary Committees, such as:

- Tourism and Hospitality Industry Leadership Group
- Tourism and Hospitality Skills Group
- Scottish Parliament’s Economy and Fair Work Committee
- Convention of the South of Scotland

- South of Scotland Regional Economic Partnership
- South of Scotland Education and Skills Strategic Co-ordination Group

The SSDA is continuing to work with partners to secure investment and support to deliver on the challenges and priorities identified by business. It has invited all the workforce partners to an update meeting in April to agree next steps.

Data Insights [Ref: Action 3.4]:

The latest independent STEAM results were shared in September 2024 show that in the first two years of delivery of the Responsible Tourism Strategy there has been:

- 33% growth in the visitor economy (£250m increase)
- 14% increase in jobs (1,933 increase)

The SSDA has collated all known data and made this [publicly available](#) for businesses in one place on its website. It has also conducted a survey of businesses, asking what data businesses want and need ([see results](#)).

STRAND 4: Act responsibly for long-term collective benefit:

Rural Transport Infrastructure fund [Ref: Action 4.1.i]:

A project was submitted by Dumfries and Galloway Council to the Visit Scotland's Rural Transport Infrastructure fund to upgrade several coastal car parks to improve safety, signage, and facilities for visitors, particularly motorhome users. It included clearer overnight parking zones, refurbished toilets, and a new free waste disposal site near the A75 to reduce environmental impact and support responsible tourism. The project was not approved for RTIF funding.

Funding was secured by Scottish Borders Council and the SSDA from VisitScotland for the Scottish Borders to develop a Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Plan. Scottish Borders Council recruited a consultant to support this work and the SSDA has been assisting with business engagement.

The SSDA has run an online survey and is using its eight Scottish Borders Locally Led Destination Development meetings to collect information from businesses in support of the Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan.

Rhins Coastal Path [Ref: Action 4.1.iii]:

The SSDA and D&G Council are working closely together on the media around the launch of the Rhins Coastal Path. Journalist visits have been arranged to walk the new route, with coverage in The Telegraph, The Guardian, Walk Magazine and Country File Magazine.

The SSDA organised and funded the visit of journalist Sarah Baxter to walk the path, with excellent coverage in four major national newspapers, including [The Guardian](#).

7Stanes Master planning [Ref: Action 4.1.iii]:

The SSDA is working with FLS on the continuing 7Stanes master planning process, especially around Dalbeattie and Newcastleton.

The SSDA has co-organised a visit to all the 7 Stanes in seven days, by Tracy Moseley, one of the most decorated female mountain bikers. This will result in significant national and international coverage.

Paths and Trails [Ref: Action 4.1.iii]:

The SSDA, with the two councils, is starting a new piece of work to significantly strength the digital information available on Scotland Starts Here (website and app) about paths and trails, for walking, cycling and equestrian use.

A major [new walking section to Scotland Starts Here](#) has been developed and launched, pages on:

- [History and heritage walks](#)
- [Coastal and riverside walks](#)
- [Accessible and family friendly paths](#)
- [Town trails](#)
- [Hill walks](#)
- [Nature and wildlife walks](#)
- [Long distance routes](#)
- [All walking routes](#)

With inspiration pages on:

- [Walks with rewards](#)
- [Scenic waterfall walks](#)
- [10 spectacular coastal walks](#)
- [7 walks from hostels](#)
- [Six climbs in the South of Scotland](#)

Investing in sustainable marine and coastal tourism [Ref: Action 4.1.iv]:

Solway Coast and Marine Landscape Connections Project (SCAMP Landscape Connections):

Scotland's 210-mile Solway Coast offers a spectacular diversity of stunning scenery. Now it is set to be supported by £8 million as the first project to secure funding through The National Lottery Heritage Fund's £150million [Landscape Connections](#) initiative. Thanks to National Lottery players, Solway Coast and Marine Landscape Connections Project (SCAMP Landscape Connections) will receive £1.4million of investment to shape plans which will unlock further National Lottery funding of up to £6.4million and act as an exemplar project in attracting further green finance.

Berwickshire Marine reserve

A new snorkel trail is being launched later this month during the Eyemouth Herring Queen Festival. The trail highlights 5 prime snorkelling spots between St Abbs and Eyemouth, it is designed to highlight the rich marine's biodiversity of the reserve and is part of the Scottish Wildlife's Trusts Living Seas programme.

Coldingham Bay

Access has been reinstated by See the Change to the beach as part of the beach wheelchair project ensuring inclusivity for all with mobility problems.

Berwickshire Coastal path

The coastal path has now been surveyed by SBC and all identified repairs have been completed. The path is a stunning 30-mile trail that hugs the dramatic eastern coastline of the Scottish Borders, famous for its cliffs, wildlife hotspots and geological wonders such as Siccar Point.

The path will form the route for a new event taking place in July - Castle to Castle starting at Bamburgh Castle and finishing at Edinburgh Castle blending history, endurance and scenery.

The Scottish Crown Estate Coastal Communities Fund 2025-2026

Funding is available to support community projects in coastal areas in the Scottish Borders. Cockburnspath, Cove, Coldingham, St Abbs, Eyemouth and Burnmouth are all eligible to apply for funds. has approximately £130k available to allocate to projects in the 2025-2026 financial year. Projects looking to be considered for funding should adopt a place-based approach [Funding available for community projects in coastal areas](#).

E-bike Hire Initiative [Ref: Action 4.4.3.ii]

Ettrick and Yarrow is supporting a new initiative promoting e-bike hire in the region, this compliments the expansion of several ongoing projects. In Eyemouth See the Change is increasing its fleet of e-bikes while Teri Bikes in Hawick is also expanding its offering. There is growing evidence these services are using used by tourists visiting the area.

Providing a framework to support and encourage tourism businesses on a journey to Net Zero [Ref: Action 4.2.5]

VisitScotland has launched detail of a Climate Action Accelerator programme that will help businesses across Scotland harness the many benefits that can arise from thinking positively and proactively about reducing emissions, working collaboratively with business leads and the communities they represent for long-lasting impact. A range of cohorts will be available in 2026. [Free Climate Action Accelerator programme launch - News | VisitScotland.org](#)

Tweed Trail Canoe trail [Ref: Action 4.4.i]

Strong national and international media coverage has generated huge interest not just in the trail itself but also the wider area, evidence suggests the canoe trail is attracting a strong audience.

Biggar Adventure, the main operator on the river, guided a total of 450 paddlers in 2024, paddling sections or the entirety of the trail, visitors either camped along the route or stayed in Innerleithen (with sites such as Traquair and Tweedside Caravan Park benefitting).

Many individuals and groups have sought advice on paddling the trail themselves, while organisations such as the Venture Trust and schools such as the Morrison Academy also enjoyed dedicated trips along the river. Other guiding outfits have also expressed interest in running trips in 2025, most enquiries are from overseas including Americans, Australians and families from Israel, Germany and Sweden.

Destination Tweed's new Literary Trail – Tweed Valley Words

The trail highlights the literary heritage of the Tweed Valley, guiding visitors to landmarks and locations that celebrate the writers inspired by the River Tweed and its communities

Contacts:

Key contacts for those responsible for delivering the Responsible Tourism Strategy:

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- **Scottish Borders Council:** Jane Warcup, Economic Development Officer [jwarcup@scotborders.gov.uk]
- **Dumfries & Galloway Council:** John King, Economic Development Officer Food and Drink and Tourism [john.king@dumgal.gov.uk]
- **SOSE:** Mark Rowley, Strategy Manager – Tourism [mark.rowley@sose.scot]

E-bike Accessibility Fund' [Ref: Action 4.4]

Scottish Borders Council's project 'Ebike Accessibility Fund' was selected as a finalist in the Cycling for All category, which recognises projects that:

- Increase access to cycling for underrepresented groups
- Foster community engagement and wellbeing
- Demonstrate measurable social impact

The Ebike Accessibility Fund stood out for its commitment to making cycling more inclusive—especially through electric bikes, which can empower people with mobility challenges, longer commutes, or limited access to traditional bikes.

Being named a finalist in the UCI Cycling for All & Sustainability Awards is a major recognition and demonstrates a project's impact on inclusive and sustainable cycling.

Visitor Management [Ref Action: 4.5.1]

VisitScotland content team has created a new guide based on the [10 Scottish Outdoor Access Code Tips | VisitScotland](#) to help visitors enjoy Scotland's stunning landscapes responsibly. The 10 Scottish Outdoor Access Code Tips has been translated into five languages (Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Spanish) and gives top tips to visitors on how to behave responsibly and safely across the countryside, whether they be walking or cycling, driving or camping.

It aims to capture visitors at the planning stage of their trip.

We hope you enjoyed this update. We are, together, committed to increasing our visitor economy by £1bn. We will achieve this by being the most active, engaged, strategic and united destination in Scotland. If you haven't already, [join the SSDA](#) and get involved!