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Foundations for Recovery:
Towards an overview strategy – tourism perspectives

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Context and drivers

The Fraser of Allander Institute (FAI) in its 2021 report *COVID-19 and Scottish Tourism in 2021* laid out a set of scenarios for the short and medium term future of tourism in Scotland. This points out that the pandemic has had an impact on both demand and supply sides of tourism businesses. The latter include staff shortages, reduced capacity of restaurants, bars and venues, increased costs and supply chain disruption.

While there are still major uncertainties over winter 2022, wider economic trends arising from UK Government policy, the war in Ukraine and wider political uncertainty suggest that the wider context for tourism in the short to medium is stabilising around the Fraser of Allander's middle scenario:

Scenario Three: Doors Open. These remain challenging times for consumers. Concerns over possible COVID-19 infection, worries over household incomes and job security result in people watching their spending and where they go and what they do.

But what this means for North Carrick (or any particular location) is unclear. The 2021 Carey-Wardrop report for NCCBC strikes a note of caution in looking at market data. In particular it suggests 2019 may have been the high point in international tourism for a decade or more. COVID-19, climate change and post-pandemic economic hangovers are likely to depress international travel *for a prolonged period*.

So while it is even harder than usual to predict trends in tourism it would be optimistic to assume a return to the pre-pandemic market structure. At the same time The *Scotland Outlook 2030* strategy² published in 2020 suggests the market is open to more opportunities to uncover, showcase and move visitors around all of Scotland's assets creating memorable experiences for all types of visitor to enjoy, talk about and share. It suggests a move to relieve pressure on honeypot destinations which would be good news for less well-known areas such as North Carrick.

The new strategy outlines an ambition *"...to enrich the lives of those who live here and visit us; it will protect and preserve our places, with Scotland's tourism industry acting as pioneers for delivering responsible tourism"*. Its emphasis is firmly on addressing current imperatives: climate change and its effect on travel patterns; responsible tourism that gives back more to communities than it takes out; and higher business costs from higher-waged and better qualified staff. This chimes well with the North Carrick context and sets a positive backdrop for a local strategy.

¹ <https://fraserofallander.org/covid-19-and-scottish-tourism-in-2021/>

² <https://scottishtourismalliance.co.uk/scotland-outlook-2030-overview/>

An overall strategic approach – Bruce’s web

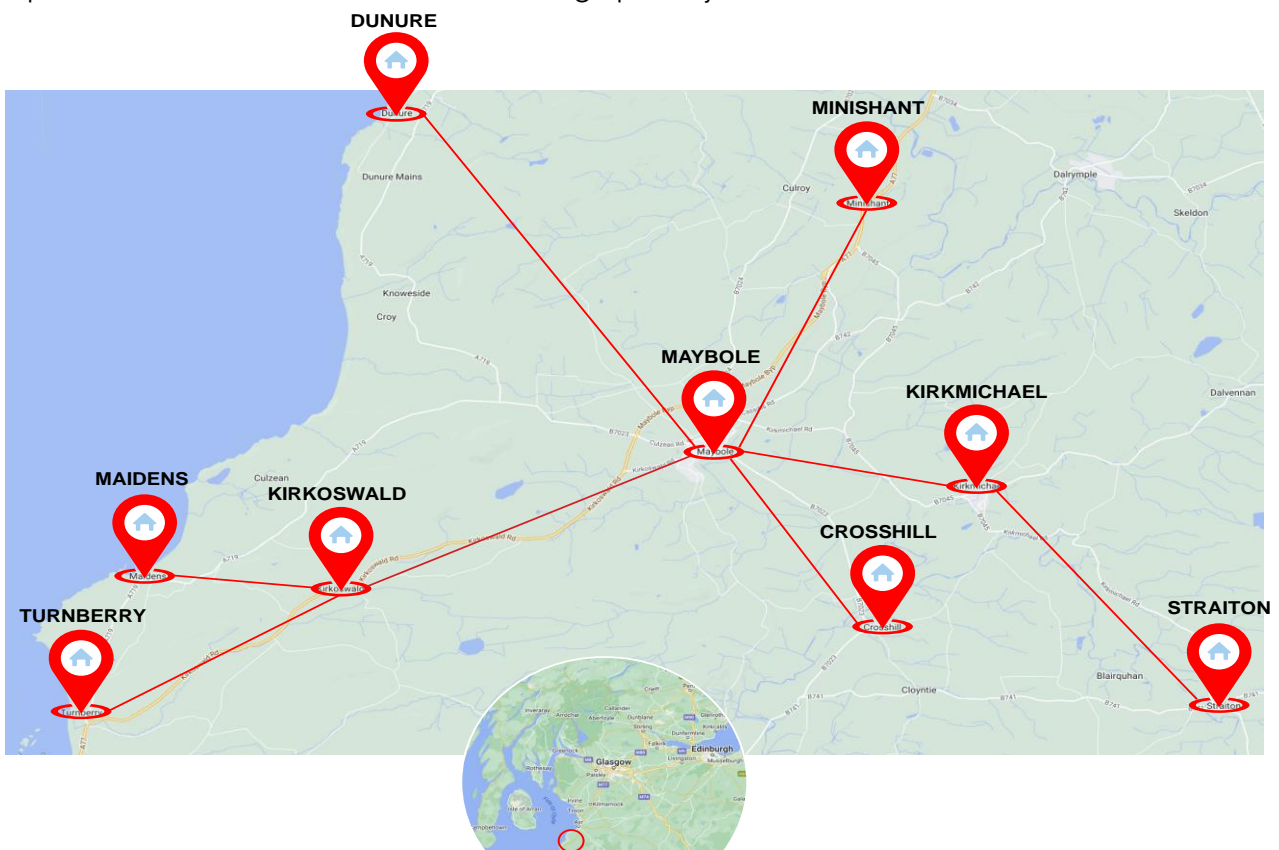
“Tourism is no longer just about tourists; it’s about people. Success means more than numbers; it’s about enrichment and prosperity for residents and our visitors”? So for North Carrick:

- The key goal is to increase the opportunities for visitors to stay longer and spend more; and
- Investment should give a high priority to community benefits and resilient businesses.

The earlier Carey-Wardrop report establishes some important building blocks to achieve this:

- Plans must link to wider Scottish and Ayrshire initiative, not be stand-alone.
- Focus on developing strong narratives around Burns Country, Robert the Bruce, maritime and farming heritage, Clan Kennedy, walking, cycling, water-based sports.
- Create an experience that *links* the visitor through a series of things to see and do, and places to eat and stay (rather than one or more major self-contained destinations).

There is a real opportunity, which builds on the existing initiatives and Community Action Plans, to develop local itineraries and packages of experiences – linking to higher level branding and promotion Ayrshire and Scotland levels. This means structuring the tourism products around the separate communities in North Carrick. Geographically it resembles a web - *Bruce’s Web*.



Key features of the web

The web is a distributed model whereby the responsibility for delivering an excellent experience to visitors is shared across North Carrick, and each community benefits. But like most web structures, there needs to be a centre. In this case one that supports and encourages village nodes rather than controls them. Maybole is the centre of the web and its development will be key to the overall strategy. In turn it will link with wider initiatives beyond North Carrick.

The approach should use Community Wealth Building principles and build on recent community consultation and planning in the communities. There is a need to link these developments together – so each community is in a business relationship with all the others – mutual support is essential.

Within this structure of a supportive centre and linked nodes, each community will have responsibility for, and control, its offer – based on agreed minimum services and standards.

This approach should enable distribution of tourist visits across the area, leading to longer stays and higher spend by providing much more than a day trip experience. In turn this will support more businesses to flourish and for communities to thrive.

Planning investment

Delivering a successful strategy is usually a messy and evolutionary process, rather than a tightly managed set of pre-planned activity. But it is important to set clear criteria on which to base a choice of actions – particularly when many partners and actors are involved. So as this approach develops and activity and investment should:

1. Prioritise community benefits and resilient businesses.
2. Contribute to Net Zero and improve the built and natural environment.
3. Aim to increase the opportunities for visitors to stay longer and spend more.
4. Focus on domestic markets and overnight stays.
5. Increase North Carrick's share of voice within wider tourism promotion.
6. Pay attention to lifecycle costs to ensure quality is maintained.
7. Link to strong narratives supporting the area's history, heritage and natural assets.
8. Create/link rich itineraries and packages rather than catalogues of attractions.

Delivering the web in community nodes

For a small area with closely linked communities, there is a wide variety of stories to tell and interpret for visitors. Carrick has a collection of characterful villages, agricultural and coastal landscapes and lots of history. There is much that exists and more to build on.

The basics

To be part of the network, every community will need to have a basic set of year-round services, without which *no other investment* will deliver significant results:

- Adequate car (and motorhome) parking and facilities in most places;
- DDA accessibility to the places people will visit;
- Electric vehicle charging points that work;
- Toilets (and showers for active visitors in at least some locations); and
- Places to eat and drink.



Developing the community offers

The distinctive offers

Overnight visitors rarely stay for only one thing, and in general couples, families and groups will have different interests and needs. This may not apply to groups of cyclists or golfers for example – but even in these instances there will be different interests. So to be successful, each community will need to provide interest for different members of visitor groups with its own distinctive variations on:

- An activity hub – promoting and servicing local activities like walks, cycle routes, water sports, etc.
- Interpretation and showcasing local history, heritage, arts and culture
- Promoting local businesses and services – making it easy for visitors to spend money
- Somewhere to go when the weather is bad.
- Distinctive local offerings that make each place worth visiting.



Each community links with all the others

The network will work most effectively when each of the 'nodes' actively directs people to the others – through information, signage and linked stories and themes. People should have a clear idea where their next stop is going to be as they explore the network. And each stop should provide a longer visit than a 20-yard walk from the car.

There will be a role for the central hub in promoting the nodes and overall experience. But to work well, direct links between the nodes, informed by a clear understanding of what each other offers, will be essential.

Linking and moving people

There is a clear need to underpin the strategy with a strong active and sustainable transport component. In part this means building the local offer, with 'mobility hubs' as the goal..



This concept is becoming increasingly common throughout Europe and there is specific planning guidance for such hubs in Scotland. The diagram and table above indicate the full range of elements and not all will be relevant to North Carrick.

To make these hubs work other linking activity will be required:

- An increase in the availability of public transport;
- Local transport hire facilities – e-bikes and other modes;
- Improved road signage highlighting the network for road and rail and trail travellers;
- Improved path and trail signage also highlighting the network; and
- Access to travel support services such as bike repair and outdoor equipment.

Coordination and support

All in all, the unifying vision should deliver private and community owned businesses that employ people and attract visitors, based on local assets and strengths. This is the only long-term sustainable solution – investing in projects that can work towards standing on their own feet.

Growth will depend on the ability to use existing accommodation and visitor facility capacity more efficiently through higher occupancy rates, better seasonal and geographical spread and increased prices. In turn the greater number of overnight stays will lead to greater amounts of direct and indirect spend in the area.

So, bearing this in mind alongside the ideas articulated earlier, taking strategy forward will require a central support function that:

- Supports and facilitates (rather than dictates and delivers) local initiatives;
- Links to and gains traction with wider tourism promotion for South Ayrshire, Ayrshire and Scotland; and
- Ensures that investments and support are delivered with a clear intention and plan for establishing economically sustainable enterprises.

Practical support for businesses in the web

Care must be taken to include existing businesses and independent new starts in any planning – privately owned existing businesses will be the foundation of successful delivery.

At the same time there may be collaborative benefits that are not easily generated 'bottom up' from either private or community enterprise. For example central administration, bookings, servicing, and so on for local transport hubs may be the difference between viability and failure. Centralised stock management and merchandising can be hugely beneficial to small shops and cafes.

A new Development Trust or similar would identify such opportunities and then:

- a) Support existing enterprises or organisations to take on coordinating and support roles where appropriate; and
- b) Set up and deliver them where not – in some cases with an exit strategy.

Bike /watersports / activities including sales, repair, collection and delivery, instruction, tuition, guiding etc. may work best if run from one hub, with outlets (probably seasonal pop-ups) in each community. Initial investment is high and an area-wide footprint would maximise utilisation of equipment and staff.

Cafes and catering generally, where there is a need, can be run as satellites or franchised outlets or simply B2B customers of a central unit which could provide fresh baking, central buying and cooking, and potentially manage some 'street food' units or coffee wagons which would fill gaps in provision and support outside events. This might also allow for some training and development of staff who could move about and utilised as demand changes.

Local products and produce retailing and distribution to ensure that local products are widely available.

A single 'front door' for visitors to find information, be signposted to the right places, and make bookings – linked to the tiered marketing approach previously described to reinforce existing brand messages.

750th Anniversary if this is to be delivered in lead up during 2023 and as a major impact year of events in 2024, coordination work will need to start almost immediately (or earlier!). A successful approach will harness energy from many businesses, community groups, schools, Council officers, social enterprises and more. But central coordination and support, along with branding and promotion will be essential. The Development Trust could tackle this in a way that would build connections and credibility to establish its position and modus operandi as the central facilitative core for all future activity.

Maybole

Maybole is an essential component in the web. So it is critical that its existing regeneration plans deliver facilities to match its central hub location – especially parking for cars and buses. There is an opportunity for the community businesses to occupy vacant shop units or warehousing in Maybole and showcase the Carrick Product year round. The bypass is a big opportunity but a coherent plan to attract new businesses is needed – and the community coop would kick start the process. There is a strong case to use the strategy to support development in Maybole, to help make a thriving Maybole at the core of the Foundations for Recovery programme.

Digital

An understanding of the impact of digital developments will be an essential part of a coordinating function. Three key factors should underlie this activity:

- The way people purchase tourism products has changed significantly, and will probably continue to change as the digital world evolves.
- While the way products are *experienced* has changed less dramatically, there are important opportunities to connect directly with visitors before, during and after a visit.
- Quality is improving as a direct result of the power of comparison - digital transparency means poor quality is found out quickly and consumers seem less tolerant.

The Bruce as the theme

In an image-saturated society and in a competitive globalised world, where effective destination brands are becoming increasingly important, events can be used for destination promotion and to launch a destination brand. Hallmark events can be particularly effective devices for achieving long-term event tourism benefits.

Iconic events are deemed as those that hold high symbolic value and have a strong appeal (Getz and Page, 2016b). Iconic events can come to represent their host destination and become a community's most recognised event. Using the Bruce 750 celebration and establishing the North Carrick region as "Bruce country" is thus potentially a key plank in a future strategy. IF adopted it should be reflected in branding and across all activity. It will require investment, but initial testing suggests an interest from funders and local appetite.



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