

Applecross Tourism Strategy 2020 – 2030 (Draft)

A route to managing tourism for the benefit of everyone

We aim to make Applecross a community that thrives, not despite, but because of its tourist population. Thrives in business opportunity, employment opportunity, economic sustainability, and *quality of life*.

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Applecross Tourism Strategy 2020 - 2030

Section 1

Where we are now

Balancing a natural environment, local life, and tourism has always been a delicate line. Tourism, its economic benefits, and the influx of people it brings is essential for Applecross to grow and flourish. Not only are tourists

imperative for business, they bring outside influence, new residents, enthusiasm, trends, opportunity, friendship and innovation, forcing Applecross to adapt and evolve.

Tourism affects every aspect of Applecross, even people that believe they have no connection or benefit from those that visit. From access to grant funding, to thriving restaurants and bars, a fully stocked shop, a school, nursery, community run petrol pumps and surgery. Tourism has contributed to their sustainability and without it these things would struggle to survive.

However, it is not just the positive effects of tourism that benefit everyone; the negative aspect of tourism has significant impact too. As visitor numbers have grown over the last decade, infrastructure has declined. With the launch of the NC500 in 2015, there was evidence of a sharp increase in visitors which has continued year on year, putting immense pressure on the roads, facilities and the landscape.

Previously a must-see destination for those wanting a slower pace, to enjoy the great outdoors and to get away from the hustle and bustle, Applecross has now become a must-see overnight stopping point for those completing the NC500 route.

Here lies huge opportunity, but only if harnessed in the right way. The increase in visitors has enabled new businesses to develop and local people to remain in the area. At the same time though, the impact of huge numbers of visitors in vans and motorhomes has highlighted a great need for better infrastructure in order to cope.

With the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 came an easing of lockdown in July and a rush of tourists that had not been seen before. Whilst businesses desperately needed visitors in order to continue trading, demand outstripped supply several times over and people spilled out onto the landscape, camping and parking motorhomes on any spare piece of ground with little regard for the environment. Applecross had to adapt and accommodate. It was being overwhelmed with issues of drunk and disorderly behaviour, vandalism, littering, human waste, damage to a sensitive environment and a landscape that local people no longer felt free to use and enjoy.

Out of this chaos came the beginnings of something positive: a pilot scheme was launched to manage the overspill of visitors; groundworks were undertaken to ensure sensitive areas were less accessible; signage was

installed to help people understand the nature of their surroundings, and a ranger was employed to provide guidance and information.

Things improved greatly. Important lessons were learnt about what works and what doesn't, and what has the potential to help Applecross thrive again.

Perhaps it is time to look at tourism from a different angle. What if we were all in it together? Making Applecross a great place to visit and, in turn, visitors improving rather than destroying quality of life for local people.

Section 2

Setting the scene. Localism, not tourism

What's in a name? Tourism has all the connotations of negatively impacting the environment, overburdening infrastructure and taking without understanding.

What if tourism became **localism**? To begin with it is the same beast with a different name. But if seen through new eyes it starts to become something else.

People want to **experience** their holiday. They want to immerse themselves in the culture, get to know the locals, understand how it is we live up here in this remote place. They want to feel they have found a hidden gem of a restaurant that sells local seafood; they want to stumble upon a white sand beach with turquoise waters; they want to find remains of history with a story to tell; they want to go home feeling they have found a place no-one else has discovered. The Applecross they now **know**.

We just haven't invited them in. We haven't told them about these things because we have been so busy trying to fight fires with the overwhelming numbers.

Localism means those who visit us are temporary locals too...**local visitors**. And it is our responsibility to help them to understand what it is to be local here. Where the special places are, how to look after our wildlife and our landscape. Because if you feel a part of something, if you feel involved and attached to something, you don't destroy it, you nurture it.

Moving from tourism to localism requires a different focus, and it requires change. But the benefits of doing so will be numerous. For everyone.

Section 3

The value of tourism

It is important to put tourism into perspective, into its relevant context. Where does tourism sit in terms of how much income is generated, and how much Scotland relies upon it in order to survive? How much **value** does tourism have to us?

Tourism counts for 13% of total employment in the Highlands, much higher in Applecross itself at 45%¹ (to be confirmed following tourism survey)

In 2017 tourism in the Highlands was valued at £316m with over 15,700 people employed²

Domestic tourism has increased in Scotland by 17% (2019 figures) with the value amounting to more than £6bn³

International visits and spend has increased in the Highlands from 2013-18⁴

The USA is the biggest international market in the Highlands, with northern Europe on the decline. The average stay for overseas visitors is between 8-14 nights and fell mainly between July and September⁵

The average stay for domestic market in the Highlands was between 4-7 nights, and mainly fell between July and September. Overnight stays, day visits and spend is in **decline** for the Highlands⁶

Section 4

Global Trends

What are the wants and needs of today's global visitor

There are tourism trends⁷ that occur globally that will change habits and activity, and will filter down to the Highlands, and subsequently Applecross. They are what people are tending to **want** and **need** in their holiday right now. These trends tell us where there is huge potential, and in which direction we should be moving.

i) Wellness

As the world has become busier and faster, as the digital age has developed and everything is accessible immediately, there has, in contrast, been a huge growth in 'wellness'. Not just holidays but experiences. People seeking meaning, self-improvement, an antidote to a stressful life, a remedy for a demanding lifestyle, mindfulness, getting back to nature, a slowing down even

for just a few weeks. The Highlands, and Applecross in particular, is ideally placed to appeal to this growing requirement in a holiday. The wide-open landscape, the remote aspect of daily life, the history of Applecross as a sanctuary, all contribute to its huge appeal as a place to escape.

ii) Environmental Sustainability

As we grow ever closer to a climate emergency, the environment has become of paramount importance to those looking for a holiday. Individuals are choosing accommodation and eating establishments with green credentials, and there is a willingness to pay more for something that supports and gives back to the environment.

Scottish Government has committed to net zero carbon emissions by 2045⁸, and the UK Government has a green agenda that will shape the future of the way we live – and holiday.⁹

Due to digital media and the ability to share powerful images around the world of the dying planet, there is a much greater awareness of the damage we as humans are doing. There is a social shift in how we do things, from cutting down on single use plastics, to development of plant-based products, reducing air travel and the importance of planting trees. These things are GLOBAL and they affect everything we do, including how we travel. Already in 2019/20 searches online for eco-friendly travel were up 73%¹⁰.

A holiday spent immersed in nature, where everything is sustainably sourced, or locally grown and made, will be highly desirable as a destination to visit and spend time.

Applecross has the potential to lead the way in joining forces to protect its environment, and as a by-product of that activity, it will attract a very different visitor. A green visitor. One who will already be invested in looking after our landscape and our waters.

iii) Transformational travel

Gone are the days of booking a two-week package holiday for some sun, sand and sangria. Not strictly true. Those holidays are still out there. But the trend is moving towards transformational travel. A change from package holidays to affordable, individual ways of travelling have meant that people can plan a trip that is unique to them, that is tailored to their needs and offers something different.

The introduction of AirBnB has opened up so much variety in the world of accommodation. Why stay in a hotel chain when you can stay in a lighthouse, a Shepherd's hut or a luxury yurt?

Add to that the huge influence of social and digital media, to inspire individuals to go off the beaten track, search out new horizons, or just find that bridge, or that mountain, or that café that they have seen in the pictures on Instagram.

Everyone can now be their own explorer or adventurer. And they want to come back feeling they have truly experienced something rare, or different from everyone else. That they are more widely travelled, that they got to see the *real* Scotland, not that bit that the tourists see.

It might be kayaking in clear blue waters with dolphins swimming alongside; or mountain biking down a great piece of single track to arrive at a bustling café selling great coffee; or maybe it is leaping into the cold waters of the sea with the backdrop of snow covered mountains; or whiling away the hours listening to local music while having a pint and some seafood with the best views in the world.

A place that can offer something different, something jaw dropping, something that makes you feel alive, can really establish itself as a destination for transformational travel.

iv) Technology all the way

Already the fast pace of technology development has seen a significant change in consumer habits. People want (and receive) information 24 hours a day, in an instant. One can book a holiday in the middle of the night, tailor it to their needs, and plan every element without even leaving their home. Digital media has given the consumer choice; it allows the individual to make an informed decision based on a number of different sources. It is no longer a case of heading to a travel agent and going through the holiday brochures. If a business is online, it has access to a worldwide market. But more than that, it is able to reach its chosen audience. Deciding whether to be digital or paper based is long gone. To what degree digital is the question.

Those businesses that adapt, accommodate, and are innovative, will be the ones to thrive. The future is about reaching the right audience, telling your story, and making it easier for consumers to book.

Section 5

Vision

Where Applecross is a community that thrives, not despite, but because of its tourist population. Thrives in business opportunity, employment opportunity, economic sustainability, and quality of life.

Mission Statement

The Applecross Tourism Group was set up as a result of the growing need to manage tourism in the area. The working group comprised of volunteers, business owners, and The Applecross Trust with the aim of developing into a Tourist Association further along the road.

The Tourism Group was tasked with developing a Tourism Strategy for Applecross, which would give direction and guidance, and would be adopted and endorsed by the whole community.

The strategy would provide a way forward in managing the significant increase in visitor numbers, ensuring quality of life is improved for local people, visitors, wildlife and the environment.

Forming the Tourist Association will ensure that Applecross has a voice in a bigger arena, able to represent and feed into other groups and organisations. It will ensure cohesive messaging across the region, accessing the right audience collectively, having more weight, and greater reach.

We will develop the Tourism Group to ensure that the mechanism is in place for better management of tourism in Applecross, not individually, but together as a community. We will look to develop better communication, and to form more meaningful partnerships that not only generate good business, but also work for the greater good of the landscape in which we all live.

Section 6

Objectives

Our objectives provide the road signs that ensure we are going in the right direction to reach our goal. These are the markers to bring about change. It could be that we find this strategy is relevant for the next ten years, but we will keep reviewing and keep asking the right questions to ensure we are on track. And if needs be, we will test and adjust for the current climate.

- 1. The status quo is not ok (with graphic)**

2. **The X factor** (with graphic)
3. **Visitors that want to come back** (with graphic)
4. **Look to new markets** (with graphic)
5. **Think big** (with graphic)

Section 7

1. The status quo is not ok

It is important to talk about the elephant in the room. Whilst there has been huge benefit from tourism in Applecross, the negative impact has also been significant in recent years, culminating in the chaos that was 2020. Despite unique circumstances (unable to fly to other countries, schools closed, people furloughed and made redundant, everyone previously in lockdown for 3 months), that brought about this perfect storm, it would be foolish to say that things will go back to normal in 2021 regardless of the globally changing climate. While 2020 was overwhelming and the sheer numbers of people in a concentrated timeframe became unmanageable, tourism in Applecross had already begun to negatively impact quality of life for local people for some time.

This is not about harking back, but about acknowledging this is not the way forward, and finding a new route to a happy Applecross.

It is widely accepted that tourism in Applecross cannot remain as it is, and we must be prepared for change. We are in the fortunate position of already having a thriving tourism economy. Now is the time to empower Applecross to manage those visitors, shape their behaviour and activity, and make it a more fruitful environment for both visitors *and* local people.

What we will do:

Building on the foundations installed in 2020, there will be a plan developed to manage free camping, and overnight parking, and the resulting impact of the significant numbers now visiting Applecross each year.

The plan will address human and general waste, fires, unacceptable behaviour and damage to the landscape.

From this plan, there will be a way forward to manage free camping and overnight parking in Applecross. Messaging and educational information will

feature, and the protection of the environment and the people within it will be at its core.

What we won't do:

Make Applecross an unwelcome place to stay in the hope that visitors will just leave and not come back.

We won't have unrealistic ideas of banning visitors from spending time in Applecross. We will find solutions and deliver positive change that benefits both visitors and local people.

We measure success by:

Seeing a positive change in visitor behaviour and activity. Better management of existing visitors, specifically those camping and in motorhomes, resulting in improved relations between our local visitors and local community.

Improved facilities in Applecross that can manage the number of people visiting. Improved care of the landscape, with a reduction in damage, fires, litter and human waste.

In 2021 we will:

Develop a work plan for overnight parking/free camping that outlines positive changes that benefit visitors but also local people.

Better manage the existing visitor market, working within manageable/existing infrastructure.

Develop a local charter for businesses that focusses on supporting existing infrastructure, taking responsibility for the surrounding environment, and ensuring that business growth does not negatively impact on local life.

Urge all local businesses to sign up to the 'I declare a climate emergency' group with the aim that Applecross pioneers the way for environmental, sustainable tourism.

Section 8

2. The X factor

Applecross already has it. That thing that makes people stop in the middle of the road and take a picture. It is a beautiful place, of wonder and charm. Once

caught up in the magic of their surroundings, our local visitors will want to cherish it and look after it.

This is where we shape the Applecross we want people to see. Through digital media, we put forward the story, in images, of *our* Applecross. Through local ambassadors, we will create content that will be shared and liked and reposted and will reach the people who will embrace everything Applecross has to offer.

What we will do:

Gather better data so that we can understand what people want and what is valuable to them.

Appoint local ambassadors, and provide them with the material to enable them to share images and the right message on social media.

Bring Applecross to life with stories. Applecross *is* its people, and our local visitors will want to know their history.

What we won't do:

All do this separately as individuals without any cohesion as a place.

Go off-piste with stories and images and content that do not align with the direction in which we have agreed to go in the strategy.

Our measure of success will be:

When we hit on a story, or an image that really resonates with digital visitors, not just once but consistently. When the overall image that we are sending out of *our* Applecross results in a change of visitor behaviour, and a change of visitor activity.

When digital content results in an increase in revenue for a particular business, or an increase in numbers walking the paths, or visiting the Heritage Centre, or swimming in the sea. When one area of Applecross benefits from success, the whole of Applecross benefits.

In 2021 we will:

Appoint Applecross ambassadors

Collect data throughout 2021 on visitor activity

Develop the Applecross social media, and an Experience Applecross website to tell the story and provide the content.

Section 9

3. Visitors that want to come back

We need new visitors in order to grow, and to keep Applecross sustainable. But what we really want (and need) are visitors that fall in love with Applecross, with its people, its landscape and its experiences. We want visitors who invest emotionally with the place, who return time and again for weekends, holidays and events.

Returning customers don't have to be convinced to book. No advertising needs to be spent on them. They need no signage to tell them what they shouldn't do, because they already love the place like a local.

In order to really succeed at having a good repeat customer base, Applecross must work together as one, linking up businesses and activities, providing *good* service, telling the story, talking about the great things to see and do, and again, shaping the Applecross we want people to see.

What we will do:

We will gather information to help us understand where we do things badly, and what needs adjusting in order for people to return.

Remove any restrictions which are making it difficult for our local visitors to book a return trip. It may mean better online booking systems, or better communication, or even that a loyalty or recommend-a-friend scheme would encourage repeat business.

Identify and look to reach those people who are likely to return to Applecross. No longer hoping for the best and never sure who you might get, we can actively target those people we know a bit about.

What we won't do:

Applecross is already busy in the summer months and so our aims are not about increasing bed nights or numbers of people visiting. It is about getting to the *right* visitors, changing visitor behaviour, and increasing consumption per visitor. This is best done with repeat business.

Our measure of success will be:

If we manage to increase the number of repeat local visitors. This is best done by capturing their heart on the first trip. Length of stay plays a significant part, as does ensuring that our local visitors get to see and do all the exciting things that Applecross has to offer.

We will therefore look to increase the length of stay for our local visitors: rather than flying through for just one night, there is an increase in those staying for 2+ nights.

The ratio of number of visitors to consumption/revenue generated increases. The ideal result would be that visitor number remain at a constant, with a higher number of repeat visitors, and an increase in consumption/visitor activity.

In 2021 we will:

Conduct a study to find out where we are making it difficult for people to book their visit and look at ways of improving the route to market.

Collect data for measuring consumption, length of stay, and repeat business etc.

Look at how to best communicate Applecross' best assets (things to do and see, where to eat, walk etc) and have this in place by end 2021

Section 10

4. Look to new markets

As the world gets smaller thanks to the digital age, travelling gets easier. More and more people travel, not just for a two-week holiday once a year, but for weekend breaks, day trips, sabbaticals, wellness, and work. Put aside the restrictions placed upon the world due to the pandemic, travel looks set to increase further still over the next decade, and this brings with it new markets and a new kind of customer.

Over the last few years, focus has changed from a predominantly domestic and northern European market, to USA and potentially Asia. It is important to get to know the needs and wants of these particular markets, and this requires good data, and a willingness to offer new things.

This is also true for new trends: wellness, experiential travel, and environmental sustainability. Keeping in mind the bigger picture, and who you

are wanting to reach out to, will shape a consistent and clear image of what Applecross offers.

For example, If Applecross wants to attract the wellness market, offering buckets/spades, cheeky postcards and seaside rock is not the way to go.

What we will do:

Look to the audience/visitor behaviour we want to attract, not the one with which we think we are stuck.

Learn about the new market in order to reach them in a successful manner. Work out if they are right for Applecross as well as whether we are right for them. What do they like? Who are they? What is currently stopping them from coming?

Look at ways to reach that new audience.

Whilst travel connections are lacking, there is work going on at a higher level to improve those road/rail and public transport networks. It is important that Applecross gets involved in those arenas in order to be included within the plan. Better public travel networks mean less reason for vehicles on the congested roads.

We will tell good stories that will reach specific audiences.

While looking at new markets, we will keep our environmental responsibility front and centre. This is not about attracting more visitors; this is about changing focus so that we attract the right visitors, and that requires a proactive approach.

What we won't do:

Go for the quick buck. We have seen the results of immediate success and greater income, and it has caused long term detrimental issues. Having *more* people and *more* money is not always the right option.

We measure success by:

When a long-term development into a different/new market in order to change visitor behaviour and activity, actually becomes a reality.

When that market proves to be loyal, repeat local visitors, respectful and cherishing of Applecross. That is when you have a market with the highest value (monetary, but more importantly socially).

In 2021 we will:

Look at which new markets would be the most beneficial for Applecross (and its businesses) and how to reach those markets.

Be in the conversation about improved travel networks.

Section 11

5. Think big

Not big business, or even big numbers of visitors, or big income. Think BIG.

Working together as one destination, with one aim can be very powerful. It can turn heads, make people sit up and take notice. There is always more power in standing together, than going it alone.

We could all as individual businesses promote our product, and populate social media, develop online sales/bookings, and grow a really successful business. This would ensure that those people have a sustainable income, can employ others, and contribute to the local economy. But this does not harness tourism as a destination, and as a community. It does not address the issues that tourism brings, and we as a community do not fully benefit from the latent potential in shaping tourism to work for us. These elements are the responsibility of no-one individually but everyone collectively.

Working together to shape the Applecross that potential visitors see, is the way to a better managed visitor economy, higher spend/stay ratio, and a more consistent message. It is a streamlined way of reaching a bigger, more targeted audience, and of ensuring our local visitors really get the best from their stay.

And in working together to send out one message to visitors, we also benefit from working together once people are here. We are the best advocates of where to eat, what to do and see, and where to shop. It is our job to build strong links with other businesses, and to the landscape, history and culture, to help our local visitors to fall in love with Applecross.

What we will do:

Work together to form one BIG Applecross instead of lots of individual businesses all working separately for the same aim.

Share ideas with each other and never forget to reach outside of Applecross to learn from Best Practice elsewhere.

Try innovative new things. And be prepared to fail. In fact, accept that failure is a good thing and move on having learnt.

What we won't do:

Get stuck on an idea that is clearly not working in reality. We keep analysing, keep gathering data, and make adjustments where needed.

Give up at the first hurdle. This is a long-term strategy for long term change. There will be some activity that might fail. This does not mean that all elements of the strategy are bound for failure too. It is important to acknowledge it, learn from it and change it.

We measure success by:

Seeing new ideas actually working. It might be an income generated, or changing visitor behaviour, or even a happier ambience in Applecross.

Elements of Applecross (business and community) working together on innovative projects for a greater purpose.

In 2021 we will:

Develop a platform for idea sharing, where businesses and local community members can put forward suggestions and solutions.

Ensure we have individuals connecting with outside organisations so that ideas can be shared on a greater scale.

References (appearing at the bottom of the page relevant to the reference)

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6. Visit Scotland. Insight Department: Highland Factsheet | 2018
7. Visit Scotland Insights Department: Trends 2020. Travelling towards transformational tourism. February 2020
8. Scottish Government Climate Change Policy 2019
9. UK Government. Policy Paper 19 August 2020: Environment Bill. Environmental targets

10.Booking.com Sustainability Travel report 2019 & Visit Scotland Insights
Department: Trends 2020

Section 12

The sign of success (summary)

Last one-page flow chart showing all of the above in an easy to read graphic.

Where we are now > vision > mission statement > global trends > objectives > actions > results