

Case studies



Visit**Aberdeenshire**

Case studies – introduction

In August 2024, we spoke to five different tourism businesses in Aberdeenshire and asked them to share their responsible tourism journey. We also asked them to offer advice for other businesses considering becoming more sustainable and inclusive.

The result is five case studies, covering topics from developing sustainable products and applying for accreditations, to sharing your story online and welcoming everyone.

A common piece of advice they all shared was this: share your knowledge and talk to each other. We are incredibly grateful that they have been so generous in sharing their stories and insights with us, and we hope that their advice and experiences will inspire more tourism businesses to adopt Responsible Tourism practices.

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Thank you to
Kelly, Maggie,
Matt, Raeanne
and Viktorija.



Case study - Crathie Opportunity Holidays

Background

The idea for Crathie Opportunity Holidays came about in the 1990s, when Christine Sloan, who lived in Crathie Manse with her husband, the local minister, realised that the derelict stables in the grounds had the potential for a new purpose.

“Don’t be afraid to welcome disabled guests”

With a background in social care, and an awareness of how challenging it was for her disabled friends to find suitable holiday accommodations, she came up with plans to convert the old buildings into holiday cottages that people with disabilities and their families could hire.

They arranged consultations with various disability organisations and developed plans to renovate and adapt the cottages to meet the needs of all guests. Through fundraising, they managed to raise the necessary funds to bring the project to life.

Today, Crathie Opportunity Holidays operates as a charity and their mission is to provide disabled people and their families with the opportunity to enjoy a worry-free holiday, with accessibility as a given rather than an afterthought.

Thanks to a loyal base of repeat customers and word of mouth, the cottages are popular, and as a result, their only current advertising activity is through Google ads.

Current set up

They offer 4 cottages, each thoughtfully adapted to meet different needs. All of them are wheelchair accessible, with one featuring additional aids for guests with visual or hearing impairments, and one cottage is designed to be allergy free.

Their website provides detailed accessibility guides for each cottage, covering specifics like door width, the height of the bed and toilet etc. These guides are available as PDFs, making them easy to download or print. Example: [Gairn Cottage Accessibility Guide](#)

When they began renting out the cottages, the team received training in disability awareness, and they now have a comprehensive in-house training programme for new staff. This includes a housekeeping manual and equipment training for the housekeepers.



Audience and how to provide for them

On their website, they describe their accommodation as “disabled-friendly holiday cottages with access for all”. While this might seem like a broad claim, they truly cater to a wide range of disabilities, in different ways, as Maggie – who manages the cottages - explains:

Wheelchair users

The cottages feature amenities like ceiling track hoists, adjustable washbasins in the bathrooms, adjustable profiling beds, wide doors to ensure easy access etc.

Visual impairments

The cottages have contrasting colours between the floor, skirting and walls to aid navigation. They offer information about the cottages in large print, and equipment such as page magnifier, boil alerts, and liquid level indicators.

Hearing loss

They have the Bellman system installed, which is essentially a pager with lights and vibrations. This includes a pad under the pillow that vibrates if smoke detectors (attached to the ceiling) go off at night.

Allergies

The cottages have non-feather duvets and pillows, and the housekeepers take extra care when cleaning. This includes changing vacuum bags before cleaning the allergy free cottage, and avoiding placing flowers or potpourri in the cottage.

Autism and dementia

This year, they are taking accessibility even further by converting one of the cottages into an autism-friendly environment, and a second cottage which will be made dementia-friendly. This includes avoiding certain bright colours (reds and yellows mainly) and patterns (steering clear of stripes) for example.

They also understand the importance of consistency and familiarity for guests with autism. To help guests prepare, they will provide photos of the cottage’s interior in advance, ensuring that what is shown matches the real setup down to details like bed linens. This attention to detail helps guests feel comfortable and reassured before they even arrive.

Some other things they offer:

- They have contacted over 100 visitor attractions, places to eat, parks etc in the region to find out about their accessibility, and have compiled the information into a visitor’s guide. Each cottage has a copy of this book.
- They are also planning to change their garden areas to have a sensory area, wildlife area, quiet area and an upgraded children’s play area.
- They put a bird feeder in easy view of each cottage, and many guests have commented on the mental health benefits of watching the birds.



Website listings

They are featured on **Euan's Guide**, where they currently have an excellent rating of 4.8 out of 5. This website is particularly valuable, because the reviews are from actual guests who have stayed with them. If the cottages are fully booked, Maggie often directs people to Euan's Guide, so they can find other accessible accommodation.

Crathie Opportunity Holidays are also listed on **AccessAble**, although the process for this is slightly different. AccessAble visited them to carry out an in-person audit in winter, which means the images might not fully capture the experience at other times of the year. Unfortunately, it's not possible to upload your own photos to the listing.

They also take part in a scheme called **Respitality** and offer a couple of short breaks for carers each year as part of this scheme. You can read more about this scheme here: [Aberdeen Carers Support Service](#)

Awards

Green Tourism

Crathie Opportunity Holidays have had a Green Tourism Gold Award since 2006. Alongside their commitment to inclusive and accessible tourism, they have also focused on sustainability since the charity's inception.

For example, they have biomass heating and solar panels, they use environmentally friendly cleaning and laundry products, and they use LED lighting. They only offer Fairtrade coffee, tea and sugar to the guests, and recycle a wide range of materials, such as office products, glass, cans, cardboard and printer cartridges.

Applying for the Green Tourism Award was relatively straightforward for them. Since sustainability and inclusivity had been a core focus from the start of the project, they already had many of the necessary practices in place. As a result, they didn't need to make significant changes to meet the award criteria.

Thistle Awards

In 2023, Crathie Opportunity Holidays were shortlisted for, and ultimately won the "Inclusive Tourism" category at the regional Aberdeen City and Shire Thistle Awards.

As regional winners, they advanced to the national awards, where they competed against three other finalists but narrowly missed out on the top prize.

Maggie felt that the application process was straightforward, they received a link with a list of questions to answer, and their submission was reviewed by a panel of experts who determined the shortlist.



Advice from Maggie

1) Ask your customers what they need

Disabled guests understand that not everything will be perfect, so it's important to find out what the non-negotiables are before they book. Asking questions makes people feel that their needs are considered and valued.

2) Get disability awareness training

Maggie found it very beneficial to have disability awareness training. For instance, they visited Ballater to experience navigating the town in a wheelchair, and they used special glasses to understand different visual impairments. This hands-on experience has helped them better cater to their guests' needs.

3) Identify simple steps to take

Providing a good service doesn't have to be complicated. For example, if a customer rearranges the furniture to suit their needs, Crathie Opportunity Holidays tell the guests to leave it as they like it, and they take a photo of the room and keep it on file. This way, they can make sure to arrange the room in the same way for future stays.

And it doesn't have to be expensive, for example, the RNIB online shop is a great resource for ideas for visually impaired guests, and their equipment is reasonably priced: [RNIB shop](#)

4) Provide detailed information

Provide detailed information on your website, such as door measurements, space between the bed and the wall, how high the toilet is and if a toilet is left or right transfer. Accessibility guides should be easily accessible online. Not everyone will read the information, a lot of people will still call to ask the questions, so be prepared to answer their questions.

5) Use accurate photos

Avoid using wide-angle shots on your website. Instead, use photos that realistically represent the size of the room and its accessibility features. This helps ensure that guests have a clear and honest view of what to expect.

6) Don't overpromise

It's impossible for any venue to meet every individual's needs perfectly. Be honest about what you can offer and suggest alternative options if necessary. For example, sharing a link to Euan's Guide can help guests find other accessible accommodations.

7) Get feedback from your guests

Encourage guests to provide feedback by asking questions like, "is there anything we could have done differently?" They really are the experts, so this helps you understand areas for improvement or offer better advice to future guests. If you can't act on every piece of feedback, explain why clearly.

8) Don't be afraid to welcome disabled guests

Don't worry about what to say or making mistakes, disabled people are just people after all. While accessibility is important to them, it's also important to match your product to your audience. For instance, a cottage in Royal Deeside may not suit someone looking for a city break, no matter how well-adapted it is. Know your product and your audience to ensure a good fit.



Case study – Aberdeen Performing Arts

Background:

Aberdeen Performing Arts manage three venues in Aberdeen city centre: His Majesty's Theatre, Music Hall and Lemon Tree (a smaller lounge and studio space).

"Everyone is welcome here"

Aberdeen Performing Arts are dedicated to making their venues accessible to everyone. They take a broad view of accessibility, ensuring their spaces are accessible and welcoming to all, regardless of background, disabilities, gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. The mantra across all three venues is simple: "Everyone is welcome here". They are determined to create a space where everyone can join in.

Sustainability is also a priority for Aberdeen Performing Arts. They have developed a high-level 10-year action plan aimed at reducing their carbon footprint.

To achieve these objectives, Aberdeen Performing Arts have introduced two specialised roles: a Creative Changemaker for Climate Action, and a Creative Change Maker for Inclusion and Relevance.

Additionally, Aberdeen Performing Arts have also invested in staff training to make sure the team understand diverse needs. For example, they have invited different disability groups to provide training on understanding different needs, such as working with guide dogs and people with autism.



What they do:

Matt Godfrey, the Director of Finance and Commercial at Aberdeen Performing Arts explains that Aberdeen Performing Arts ensure that their programme offers something for everyone, across all demographics, and they have adapted their buildings to be accessible and sustainable.

They take a practical approach, asking themselves questions like "what can we do", "what are the quick wins"? They have an active Green Team, so sustainability is very much part of their operations, and staff are encouraged to share their ideas.

Here are some examples of what they have put in place:

Sustainability:

Buildings – they have switched to LED lights, installed motion sensors so lights only come on when needed, and use 100% renewable electricity.



Food and beverages – they try to source as much as possible from local suppliers (butchers, greengrocers etc) at their café at Music Hall and restaurant at His Majesty’s Theatre, and they have a food waste reduction scheme in place.

Climate action – they encourage conversations about climate change from an arts perspective. They believe that art can be a playful way to encourage climate action, rather than making people feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation. The idea is to engage people in a way which makes them think about what they can do to help, and that no action is too small.

Transport – being in Aberdeen presents some transport challenges, as their location means that they inevitably need a certain amount of transport. They are finding some creative solutions to this according to Matt; for instance, they introduced an international festival in 2024 to coincide with the Edinburgh Fringe. This allows international artists to perform in Aberdeen before and after the Fringe, which reduces their travel to Scotland. They call this “sustainable touring”.

Inclusivity:

They are committed to being accessible and inclusive, both in-person and online.

At the venues:

Wheelchair access – while His Majesty’s Theatre already had ground floor access, Music Hall presented challenges with its imposing front steps. Previously, wheelchair users had to enter through a side door, making them feel excluded. In 2019, Aberdeen Performing Arts addressed this by installing a lift that cleverly collapses the steps at the front of the building, allowing wheelchairs to be transported up from street level to the main entrance, providing the same front door access as everyone else.



Free essential companion - they provide one free ticket for those who need someone with them to come to an event. Their definition of an “essential companion” is someone who assists the customer with mobility or guidance, and also ensures their safety and enjoyment at the venues. Once registered, customers have the option to book online or via the Box Office.

Access Champions – ten of their front of house team have been trained to be “Access Champions” so they can assist autistic, visually impaired, or deaf visitors from the moment they arrive. They explain what will happen step-by-step and remain their point of contact throughout the visit. Their training sessions were held by local service providers, but also people with lived experience. The training programme for these Access Champions has included:

- best practice for guiding visually impaired customers
- understanding audio description
- deaf awareness



BSL (British sign language) interpreter – for visitors with hearing loss, they offer performances with a dedicated BSL interpreter, who works with them on every performance.

Audio description – a team of audio describers watch the performances in advance. Visitors with visual impairments can then request earpieces to listen to the audio description during the show. The audio description doesn't just cover the action on stage, but also describes the set and costumes, to bring the show to life. Customers have the option of using their own smartphone (an app called Mobile Connect), or using headsets provided by the venue.

Captions – some performances feature caption screens, one at either side of the stage. Their captioners work to provide the actors' words on the screens at the same time they are spoken or sung, just like subtitles on TV. Speaker names, sound effects and offstage noises are also shown. The captioning units can be seen from every seat in the house, allowing you to watch the action on stage and read the subtitles at the same time. While this service is suitable for those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, it is also popular for those who don't have English as their first language.

Brochure – they print a brochure with information about their performances, and they provide it in various formats; a traditional print brochure, but also a large format brochure, and a video version. There are symbols in the brochure to indicate which access services are available, as well as any concession pricing.

Touch tours – their audio describers work with visiting theatre companies to offer pre-show touch tours, where they invite visually-impaired visitors to come and feel the props and explore the stage before the performance.



Relaxed performances – National Theatre of Scotland, Scottish Ballet and Scottish Opera offer relaxed performances when they visit Aberdeen. This includes adjusting the performance, the lights are slightly up, doors are open, there is more spacing between seats, so that families or people with additional needs have a more relaxed and comfortable experience.

LGBTQ+ - Aberdeen Performing Arts have a Creative Change Maker for Inclusion and Relevance, who works with the programming team to make the programme inclusive and relevant to the diverse communities within the North-east. The Change Maker partners with organisations like Sanctuary Queer Arts and Look Again to produce cabaret nights for the LGBTQ+ community at the Lemon Tree.

Young people and children – they offer a dedicated programme of performances for children, particularly as part of their summer schedule. They also have a programme of youth theatre groups, early years creative activities, and music making. All activities offer free spaces, no questions asked, for those who would otherwise not be able to afford to take part.

A highlight is their annual festival called "Light the Blue" in June every year, which is an event "for young people, by young people". The festival culminates in "The Big Gig", where children from local groups across North-east Scotland showcase their talents. Throughout the festival, the children



and young adults also have the chance to attend workshops and go backstage to learn directly from the technical team at the theatre.

Diversity – Aberdeen Performing Arts collaborate with a community interest group called “We are here Scotland” to produce a three-day festival called “Rise Up!” for black people and people of colour (BPOC). Now in its third year (2024), the festival includes art, music and events for different cultures, and celebrates the creativity of the BPOC communities.

Inclusion - Aberdeen Performing Arts offer workshops and performances that are relevant to groups which are under-represented. The idea is to develop their audiences and build an inclusive and welcoming offer. Some examples:

- The Changemaker for Inclusion and Relevance works with refugees and asylum seekers to offer opportunities to take part at no cost.
- A new strand of workshops called “Encore!” offers creative activity for those over 60.
- There is a community choir which is open to all, with no need to audition.



Adult workshops offer a “pay what you can” ticket option to make activities accessible to all, and this model is offered across many events produced by Aberdeen Performing Arts.

Digital and online:

While their website isn’t fully accessible yet, it’s on their roadmap to make the website more accessible and reduce the clutter.

They currently have an “Access” page listing on their website, listing all their accessible services and performances, and they also offer video brochures online.

Aberdeen Performing Arts had planned to include virtual tours of the theatre interiors on their website to allow visitors to prepare before the visit. However, they have had to reconsider these plans to make sure they find a balance between making their spaces more open and ensuring security. As the theatres are public buildings, detailed online videos, especially of backstage areas, could pose safety risks. Instead, they offer familiarisation visits on request, to allow customers to come in and see the spaces and walk through the customer journey ahead of their visit.

They provide both online and phone booking options, with ticketing schemes for carers and companions. They try to ensure that all information is available online, allowing people to confidently book online without having to phone to ask questions.

They are working with their ticketing solution platform (Spektrix) to ensure that the booking process is made as accessible as possible for online bookings.



Telling their story

Aberdeen Performing Arts use humour to encourage their visitors to be eco-friendly while at their venues. For example, in the public bathrooms at Music Hall, colourful signs provide playful instructions. Next to the electric hand dryer, a sign reads:

*10 seconds is all it takes
To dry your hands enough
Finish reading these words
Your hands have had enough puff*

They also try to explain their sustainability initiative in a light-hearted way. For instance, on the wall of the bathroom are pictures of lightbulbs, saying “Not in? We dim!” to explain their motion sensor lighting. They also have Doric inspired bin covers, encouraging audience and visitors to recycle their waste.



Aberdeen Performing Arts have a dedicated page on their website called “Our Environment”, where they share their sustainable practices and link to their Environmental Sustainability Policy.

When it comes to marketing, they aim to strike a balance between promoting performances and telling their broader story.

Matt mentioned that they plan to share more about their sustainability story and inclusivity journey on social media and online. However, they recognise the challenges; any statement they make must be backed up not just by words, but also with evidence.

Awards and accreditations

Communicating what you do is important, and as mentioned above, statements are good, but evidence is even better. One way to prove your commitment is to achieve awards and accreditations.

Aberdeen Performing Arts are delighted to have been shortlisted for the Aberdeen City and Shire **Thistle Awards** in 2024, in the “Celebrating Thriving Communities” category, for their work engaging with and supporting the local community,

They are also members of **Springboard**, an initiative led by Creative Carbon Scotland. It involves a series of local assemblies that builds networks of people and organisations across Scotland to collaboratively share knowledge on climate action and sustainability.

While they are considering applying for the **Green Tourism Award**, they acknowledge the challenges in obtaining certificates and accreditations; evidencing sustainability and inclusivity can be complex, but it is an important part of the assessment.



Aberdeen Performing Arts are working through the “**Theatre Green Book**”, a network of theatre communities dedicated to sustainable practices. This initiative provides guidance not just for theatre buildings, but also for the performances and operationally. The programme has evolved into a self-accreditation system, where theatres can achieve a preliminary, basic, intermediate or advanced rating. It’s a valuable industry benchmark, allowing Aberdeen Performing Arts to compare their sustainability efforts with other theatres.

Some advice from Matt

1) Don't be afraid

Starting your journey towards being sustainable and inclusive can be overwhelming, but focus on the quick wins first, things you can easily do or reduce (for example gas and electricity), before branching out and trying larger initiatives.

2) Do something, anything

It doesn't have to be a grand gesture or big investment. Simple steps, such as encouraging staff to switch the lights off when they leave a room, can make a big difference. Behavioural changes don't cost much or take much effort.

Identify:

Step 1 – things you can do or influence directly

Step 2 – things you can't influence (audience habits, location etc)

While step 2 can be challenging, there may be creative solutions, such as the “sustainable touring” approach mentioned above.

3) Look for support

Don't hesitate to seek advice from others - talk to other businesses to get their advice, talk to charities and organisations who offer support, like VisitAberdeenshire.

4) Share the conversation

Sharing your challenges and successes can be incredibly valuable. Collaborate, exchange ideas, and learn from each other's experiences.



Case study - Dalriada Lodges

Background:

Dalriada Lodges is a family-run business offering eight luxury self-catering lodges just outside of Stonehaven.

“Don’t be afraid to ask questions”

When Kelly and her parents developed the concept, they knew they wanted to provide a high-end experience, while being as sustainable and inclusive as possible.

They followed VisitScotland’s guidelines for 5-star accommodation and adopted green building standards when constructing the lodges. From the start, they made the decision to insulate the cottages, install smart heaters, LED lighting, fibre broadband etc.



Since opening in 2018, it’s been a learning experience for Kelly, who has adapted quickly by taking onboard feedback and future-proofing the business across all areas of the business:

Transport

They initially installed just two EV charging points, but now offer one at every lodge. They encourage sustainable ways to travel - secure bike storage is available next to each lodge, and they offer up-to-date information on public transport to their guests.

Energy

The lodges feature energy-efficient appliances and LED lighting throughout. Guests are encouraged to switch the lights off when not in use. The electric heating system includes smart heaters, so if someone turns the heating up and opens the window, the heater will adjust the temperature down. Thanks to excellent insulation, the lodges don’t need much heating.

Recycling

Each cottage has three bins: general landfill, recycling and glass.

Water conservation

Guests are encouraged to reuse bed linens and towels during their stay. The landscaping around the lodges has been designed to require minimal watering.



Biodiversity

The lodges have eco-friendly sedum roofs which encourage native biodiversity.

Accessibility

All doors are wide enough for wheelchair access, with level entry from vehicles to the front door. Furniture can be rearranged or removed to suit individual needs.

Skirting boards are in a contrasting colour to help delineate walls and floors, and calm colours are used throughout.

The lodges have two bedrooms, allowing space for accompanying carers if needed.

Allergies

Two of the lodges are guaranteed pet-free, and all lodges have hypo-allergenic bedding. Cleaning standards are very high.

The air filtration system is so effective that a guest with breathing difficulties installed the same system at home after staying at Dalriada Lodges.

Website

They have dedicated pages on sustainability and inclusivity on their website, that Kelly can easily update as needed. The website also has a link to AccessAble, so guests can find detailed information about accessibility features, measurements etc there.

Kelly has received feedback from clients that a screen reader has no problems reading the website.

Booking journey

Bookings can be made online or by phone. However, Kelly discovered that screen readers can't currently navigate their booking system (SuperControl).

A visually impaired client phoned Kelly to let her know, so Kelly contacted the booking system, who is now exploring improvements.

Digital app

All their guests have access to an app, which was developed through "Touch Stay", a US company. The app can be used online or downloaded as an app on your phone.

The app includes content similar to the website, plus instruction manuals, cheat sheets for the appliances, and short videos, such as walk-arounds and instructions videos like "how to use the keypad".

The app translates information into 17 languages and offers adjustable font sizes.

Having the app means that they can offer a completely paper free booking journey and stay.

Accessibility guides

A detailed accessibility guide to all the lodges is available on AccessAble.

Additionally, Kelly has created one-page instruction sheets for all appliances in the lodges, available as printed copies in the lodges, and on the app.



For example, the user manual for the washing machine is more than 10 pages, so Kelly has condensed it into a one-page cheat sheet, to make it as simple as possible for guests to use the washing machine. She has done the same for the grill, oven, microwave, heated towel rail etc.

Check-in and check-out

Guests receive an email with a link to the app a week before their stay. They are also given the codes for the gate and front door, as well as wi-fi joining instructions, allowing them to check in with ease, at a time to suit them.

The key-less entry system means they can access their lodge when they arrive without having to wait for Kelly to meet them. Kelly can then stop by to welcome them, once they have settled in. There is no formal check-out process either, the guests can simply leave when they are ready.

Community engagement

As a seaside town, tourism is important to Stonehaven. Kelly collaborates closely with the local community, as they all want to attract tourists, who spend money in local shops and restaurants, to the area.

The business also does what it can to support the local community:

- Sponsoring the annual Stonehaven Fireballs Festival on Hogmanay.
- Sponsoring the land train that transports visitors from Stonehaven to Dunnottar Castle.
- They promote local charities on social media whenever they can.

They also work with the town's tourism and business associations, which provides networking opportunities.

They prioritise using local tradesmen and sourcing as much as possible from local shops.

Associations:

AccessAble

When they signed up to AccessAble, an auditor visited them and did a very thorough assessment. Their website now links to AccessAble, as the information on AccessAble is very detailed, and includes dimensions, measurements and sizes. This allows potential guests to make up their own mind if the lodges meet their needs.

Green Tourism Gold Award

After opening in 2018, they applied for the Green Tourism Award and initially received a Silver Award. They were given an action plan that included practical advice, such as working more with local suppliers and making sure their suppliers also recycle, and they quickly achieved a Gold Award.

When applying, they were in the fortunate position that they had made sure the lodges were as sustainable as possible when they were built, so Kelly didn't find it too difficult to apply for the Green Tourism Award.

Scottish Thistle Awards

Dalriada Lodges won the Best Self-Catering Accommodation award in the Aberdeen City and Shire Thistle Awards shortly after they opened in 2018. They were also shortlisted in 2023, in the new "Inclusive Tourism" category.



Telling their story:

Kelly has found telling the business's story a steep learning curve. She updates the website herself, adding new information as needed.

When it comes to social media, Kelly is mindful of terminology and tries to keep the tone positive without being condescending. She prefers to show, rather than tell, allowing people to make their own assessments. For example, she shares photos to show that the lodges offer level access, without explicitly mentioning disability.

Another example is that many people with disabilities travel with a carer, which often means they need two separate rooms. By posting on social media about the lodges having two bedrooms and two bathrooms, Kelly can effectively communicate that the lodges are suitable for guests with these needs without specifically mentioning carers. This subtle approach allows guests to draw their own conclusions about its suitability.

Their message is simple: "Everybody is welcome", without singling out specific demographics or disabilities.

Kelly asks the guests if they would like their towels or bedding changed during longer stays. The message is simple: "Help us be better for the environment". It seems this message works, as her guests appreciate Kelly being so passionate about sustainability and inclusivity, so they feel like they are helping her personally, as well as the environment.

Advice from Kelly:

1) Look at what you already do

A lot of businesses may already be doing more than they realise.

For instance, Kelly discovered she offered a lot of features that work for people with dementia, without realising it.

2) Be open and honest

Dalriada Lodges don't describe themselves as "fully inclusive" as they recognise that their accommodations may not suit everyone.

The key is being open and honest, for example, make sure your photos are realistic, and provide clear and accurate information.

3) Offer different options to book and find information

Some guests prefer to book online, while others like to call to book.

Make sure your website has enough information for those who don't want to phone, but also, provide the option to speak to someone directly - not everyone is comfortable online.

4) Put yourself in your guests' shoes

Consider what you would want as a guest. For example, Kelly realised she wouldn't want to read a lengthy instruction manual while on holiday, so she created simple instructions for all appliances.

Once in a while, try finding information or making a booking on your own website, to check that it all makes sense.



5) Ask questions and share knowledge

When they first started planning the lodges, Kelly and her parents asked hundreds of people questions to gather valuable insights, such as “what would give you the wow factor?” The feedback was crucial in shaping their approach when they were starting out.

Don’t be afraid to ask questions of guests, industry experts and suppliers. Kelly doesn’t pretend to be an expert; she admits that she is still learning every day.

Share pitfalls and advice with others – the best webinars Kelly has attended are those that include break-out sessions, so you can learn from other tourism businesses and share knowledge.

6) Ask for guest feedback

It is very important to ask for feedback from your guests, in person and via email. It’s an opportunity to learn and improve, but it also makes the customer feel valued. Always thank them and take their suggestions seriously.

Send follow-up emails to guests within a week of their stay, but not on the day of departure - give them time to return home and reflect on their stay.

7) Ask “how did you find us?”

A really useful question is “how did you find us”. This simple question helps you understand which marketing activities work best.

Kelly has tried Google ads, TV ads, booking.com etc, but has found that recommendations from friends and family is the most effective marketing.

8) Automate processes...

Try to automate as many processes as possible. For example, the app has been a game changer for them – it’s easy to update and it streamlines so many processes, not just for Kelly, but for the guests as well.

9) ...but don’t make it too complicated

Try to avoid making things too complicated for guests. A lot of people, especially older guests, may not be very tech-savvy, and may not even have the internet on their phones.

For instance, Kelly chose not to upgrade to more advanced door locks that require smartphones, to make sure no one felt excluded.

Offering both online and phone bookings is crucial – some guests don’t trust online payments for example.



Case study – Fyvie Castle

Introduction:

Fyvie Castle is a 13th century fortress located in the village of Fyvie, near Turriff in Aberdeenshire. The castle offers guided tours of both the historic building and the gardens.

“Make it easy for people to make responsible choices”.

Fyvie Castle is part of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). The NTS is a conservation charity dedicated to protecting Scotland’s heritage.

NTS are committed to sustainability, with a Climate Change Officer on staff and a “[Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone](#)” strategy, alongside a [plan to protect nature](#).

NTS have identified climate change as a significant risk to their business. For example, recent storms caused extensive damage when 100,000 trees came down at Haddo House, and a tree crashed through the roof of the group lunch venue at Fyvie Castle. As a result, they won’t be able to offer group lunches at Fyvie Castle until 2025, which has had a significant impact on their financial plans. The climate change impact is something they address in their sustainability strategies.

Developing sustainable experiences:

Initial idea

In 2022, Raeanne Verlegh, the Travel Trade & Hospitality Business Development Manager at NTS, was having a chat with Gordon, the Head Gardener at Fyvie Castle, about the sustainable gardening practices at the castle. They started to wonder if this could be shared with visitors by turning it into a bookable experience.

They started to develop an experience that they called “The Future of Sustainable Gardening”, a unique product that includes a tour of the gardens led by the Head Gardener, as well as a tour of the castle. But it’s not just a regular garden tour; the Head Gardener also teaches visitors how to care for the produce in the garden, offering hands-on advice and insights.

Among other things, they wanted the tour to highlight the importance of seasonality, showing how the weather and seasonal changes impact what can be grown in Aberdeenshire. Additionally, there is an option to include a tasting experience, where the visitors can sample seasonal produce, like summer berries, or squash in the autumn.

This experience was developed with the Travel Trade in mind, so it’s available on request rather than a scheduled tour. As it’s led by an expert, it has a higher price point than their regular tours.



Raeanne's top tips for developing sustainable products:

- Look at what you already have and think about how you can create products and experiences around it. In this case, Fyvie Castle already had a stunning garden and a passionate Head Gardener, so the product didn't require any extra investment or new hires.
- If you are developing a new experience, make sure to conduct a risk assessment. Visitors love hands-on experiences, but you may need to limit group sizes to ensure they are supervised, and that they don't do more damage than good.

Testing and promoting the product

Given the higher price point, they decided to test it on MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and events) agents first. For instance, the networking group SITE was invited to try it out.

VisitScotland also picked up the product, featuring it in presentations and information packs for MICE agents in Germany and France, as well as leisure agents in North America.

NTS also promoted the product through their regular B2B channels, such as newsletters and trade shows.

Raeanne's top tips for testing the product:

- Test your new product with the travel trade first before offering it to the public. The travel trade can provide valuable feedback, and while the general public may not yet be actively looking for sustainable products, the Travel Trade are very interested in new products in general, and sustainable products in particular.
- Be patient, it takes time to launch a new product. The Travel Trade often work 18-24 months in advance, so bookings won't come overnight.

Launch

The first booking for this experience came in the summer of 2024 when a luxury operator booked it for an exclusive group of 11 people.

Raeanne's top tips for launching the product:

- Tell your story in a compelling way, relevant to your audience.
- Avoid being too preachy or making them feel guilty, but don't dumb it down either. Instead, focus on making them feel good about their visit and the positive impact they're contributing to by booking your experience.



Tourism Cares:

After the launch, VisitScotland approached NTS to feature the experience on the Tourism Cares Meaningful Travel Map. Visit Scotland wanted regional spread, i.e. to highlight experiences in less-visited areas, and Aberdeenshire fit the bill, being slightly off the beaten track. Overtourism is one of the challenges that Tourism Cares hope to address.

Raeanne completed the application and wrote the submission details, which included a description of the experience, an impact statement, and information on rates, group sizes, accessibility etc. The whole process didn't take too long.

The focus was on biodiversity, inclusivity, equality, sustainability and the local community – Fyvie Castle is actively working to attract a diverse audience for example.

Raeanne's top tip for joining Tourism Cares:

- If you are thinking of applying for Tourism Cares, have a look at the Meaningful Travel Map on their website and see what other tourism businesses have said, and let that inspire your application.
- Complete the form with as much detail as possible, the team at Tourism Cares will get back to you with questions if there is something they need you to clarify.
- The impact statement is important. It should clearly show how your new products positively affect the local community, sustainability, accessibility or biodiversity.

Summary of top tips:

- Create products and experiences based on what you already have.
- Be prepared for it to take 2-3 years before you start seeing bookings for new travel trade bookings.
- Test your product with the travel trade first.
- Conduct a risk assessment of your experience, and limit visitor numbers if necessary.
- Consider applying for Tourism Cares.

The final words of the case study go to Raeanne and this top tip:

Not every visitor is actively looking for sustainable experiences, but some are, especially in the travel trade. Even people who aren't actively looking for sustainable experiences might be interested if you "make it easy for people to make responsible choices".



Case study – The Bay

Background

The Bay, an award-winning fish and chip shop in Stonehaven, are committed to being as sustainable as possible. Viktorija, the Business Development Manager at The Bay, told us: *“we are proud to work with local suppliers and excited to tell their stories”*.

The team at The Bay want to ensure full traceability of every ingredient - trust from the customers is a key factor for them. For example, they display the farm and variety of potatoes they are serving that day, as well as the name and number of the boat which caught today's haddock. This is also a great conversation starter with the customers.

Fish is the most popular item on their menu, so the team at The Bay feel that it is their responsibility to protect the waters the fish is caught in. To do so, they must be as sustainable as they possibly can - starting from the energy they use, packaging and cleaning products, to the way they operate.

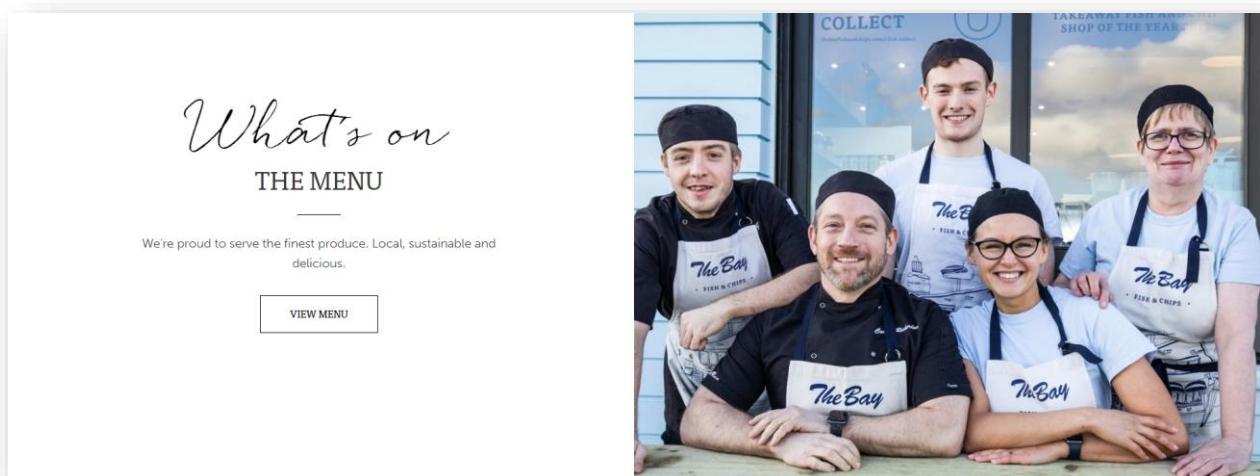
Part of their ethos is to look after their staff and showing their appreciation every day. They recognise that the team are the ones who communicate their story to the customers, so they invest time and resources in training their team members on sustainability and the importance of it.

However, when it comes to sharing your responsible tourism story, it's not just about communicating your story to customers in the shop, it's also about getting the message across on social media and your website, without coming across as preachy or putting people off. The Bay have found a great way to do just that.

Website

The Bay does a great job of weaving in mentions of their locally sourced produce throughout their website, while still making it clear that their food is high quality and tastes fantastic.

They also keep it informal and personal, with lots of photos of their team and the owners sprinkled across the site. A great example is this: “We’re proud to serve the finest produce. Local, sustainable and delicious.”



They have a page dedicated to their awards, which they are rightly proud of. This helps back up their claim that they offer a quality product.

Along with awards for their excellent food, they have also won awards for their responsible tourism practices, including fundraising awards, Footprint Awards (an awards scheme for sustainability and responsible business practices in the foodservice industry), and several environmental awards.

Their blog is another great way they share their responsible tourism story. For instance, on National Fish and Chips Day, they posted an interview with Calum, the owner of The Bay, about sourcing ingredients the right way. They have also written blogs about mental well-being, team profiles (again, keeping it personal) and fundraising for the local community.

Some examples from their blogs:

“The Bay’s Calum Richardson celebrates National Fish and Chip Day, and the importance of sourcing ingredients the right way.”

The Bay’s Calum Richardson celebrates National Fish and Chip Day, and the importance of sourcing ingredients the right way.



“The Bay fundraises a total of £8,366 for the local community.”

July 14, 2022

The Bay fundraises a total of £8,366 for the local community

We're big believers in giving back at The Bay Fish and Chips, which is why we launched our community fundraising initiative in 2020. We're donating every 20p bag charge we receive for online orders at The Bay Fish and Chips to charity or local groups. Thank you to everyone who nominated charities, community groups or [...]

READ MORE...

Check out their website here: [The Bay website](#)

Social media

Viktorija explained their approach to social media:



“We plan our social media one month in advance, with 2-3 ideas for each day. We update this in a shared Google document so the whole team have access to the plan.

Anyone who is working in the shop that day can use the company's phone to do social posts, and we also encourage the team to improvise.”



On social media, The Bay strike a good balance between sales and marketing messages, and being entertaining and informative, while using fantastic images to grab attention.

They also make their hashtags easy to read by capitalising each word, which makes them more accessible for screen readers, and they write in a way that is both easy to understand and engaging.

Here are some examples of how they tell their Responsible Tourism story on Instagram:





Locally sourced food

A great example of making it personal by sharing a photo of the fishermen who supply their locally sourced fish.

Catering to people with food allergies or intolerances

They highlight that they offer gluten-free alternatives, making it clear it tastes just as great as regular fish & chips.



Cycle to work scheme

On Cycle to Work Day, they shared information about a scheme they are part of called Bike2Work, which promotes sustainable commutes.



Supporting the local community, local partnerships and events

The Bay support the local community in many different ways – sponsoring events, fundraising, buying locally and more, which they regularly share with their followers.



Making it personal

They celebrate their team's milestones, and introduce new team members, which means their followers and potential customers get to know the people behind the brand.



Follow their Instagram page here: [@thebayfish](https://www.instagram.com/thebayfish)

Final advice

Viktorija's advice to other tourism businesses is to try to be 1% better each day - small improvements will make a huge difference. It does not have to be a big thing - smile at your customers a little more, research the products you use, ask why and how more often, get involved in community events.

As Calum always says: "You are only as good as the last fish supper you served".



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