

CEO REPORT 2022



Introduction

In the initial, post covid years, there is no doubt that for the tourism sector there have been and continue to be many challenges to navigate. Across Argyll & the Isles, some of the issues are acute, particularly staffing and the cost of doing business in a rural destination. As the strategic organisation for the destination, AITC has worked over the last twelve months to support the industry with these challenges as well as to market the destination utilising a mixture of public and private funding. This report sets out for its members our achievements in the last twelve months and sets the tone for the work to come in the following years.

Ardkinglas, Cairndow

First, I want to thank our members, funders, and supporters. Primarily in 2022; Highland & Island Enterprises (HIE), Argyll & Bute Council (ABC), Visit Scotland (VS), Calmac, Scotrail and NatureScot. Without these businesses and public sector organisation support AITC would not exist, and much of the work of promoting and supporting the destination would not be possible. I also want to commend our local DMOs and sectoral groups, many of whom are volunteers and work hard to promote their specific area. We are enjoying an ever-improving working relationship with them and AITC values their input. We have three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) within Argyll and AITC enjoys a productive relationship with each of Bid4Oban, Dunoon Presents and Bute BID. Equally, I would like to say thank you to our Community Engagement Agents (Ciorsdan Taylor, Nikki Jones, Heather Thomas-Smith, Linda Battison, Iain Johnston and Sarah Froud) who work in destination, funded by HIE, to support the development of community led product development. They have been actively involved in many projects over the last twelve months and support the AITC team in understanding where the priorities lie and in the development of the destination's promotion.

I want to take the opportunity to thank our volunteer board who contribute hours of their time and consistent support for Argyll & the Isles – some of our board members have been contributing to AITC for the ten years of its existence to date and remain committed to its success. Our HIE 3-year DMO Recovery funding has enabled AITC to create new jobs and I have been delighted to serve as its first CEO alongside my small and committed team, significantly upweighting the activity and content development we have been able to achieve over the year.

And finally, without wanting to sound like an Oscar acceptance speech, I want to recognise Carron Tobin of Rural Dimensions who has carried the AITC torch for ten years and achieved so much on its behalf. Carron has stepped back from working with AITC to pursue other destination interests although she remains a committed Argyll & Isles advocate.

Membership

Since its inception in 2021, AITC's new membership model has attracted more than 200 direct members which include individuals, businesses, DMO's, trusts and community groups. Recently we have employed a new Membership Services Manager – Caroline Gould, whose primary role is to provide support to members of AITC. Marketing support will be provided by Lara Ehmler (previously Membership Executive) who has been instrumental in achieving the significant growth in our social media channels. In December '22 we will be issuing our first membership survey to understand how we can continue to develop the membership services and to provide you with an opportunity to provide your feedback.

Membership fees not only pay for individual businesses to be marketed, but they also enable us to remain in business and to access public sector funding which can be invested into Argyll & the Isles promotion and

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product development. **For every £1 received in membership fees in FY 2021/2022, we have been able to secure £4.3 in funding from other organisations.** Additionally, membership means you can get early access to free or discounted training, funds and support. AITC scan all the relevant public sector and trade bodies and signpost via the Signal channel any which are relevant to AITC businesses. Since 2021, AITC have signposted our members to over 150 different funding, training and consultation opportunities. If you are not signed up for Signal, you could be missing out. Email members@wildaboutargyll.co.uk for details.

On your behalf

AITC does much more than market the destination. On behalf of our members, our individual destinations and our communities, we actively work with government and public sector agencies on policies and matters which directly impact our areas. During 2021 and 2022, we have been lobbying and actively involved in: resolutions for the A83, working side by side with ABC and Association of Self-Catering Scotland around the short term let regulations, taking part in numerous consultations around UK Government investment funding, input to local infrastructure development with ABC, feeding in issues and challenges for Argyll & Isles to the Scottish Tourism Alliance to support the development of policy & business support, HIE Fair Work programme and representing our island needs to partners Calmac.

Together with our partners in the Argyll & Isles Strategic Partnership (HIE, ABC & VS), we have developed a 3-year strategy which sets out a roadmap for supporting the destination with:

- Extending the season and spreading visitors across the destination
- Reaching new audiences
- Improving the offer
- The journey towards net zero

Currently, we are working with several agencies around the chronic shortage of staff for Argyll & the Isles destination which will result in specific action designed to improve the skills provision and access to staff in the coming years.

Outside of the destination's priorities, we also work on wider Scottish issues and opportunities, contributing either as a specific destination or as an organisation who can execute national strategy at a local level. These include the national Gaelic plan, the Love Local schemes, visitor management, responsible tourism, and international visitor development.

Promoting our destination

In 2019 we achieved our highest number of visitors to Argyll & the Isles – 2.885m¹ after many years of working with partners to showcase all that we have to offer. In 2022, the latest survey (to end 2021) indicates 1.5m² visitors which is an 80% improvement on 2020. However, collectively we have a great deal of ground to recoup as visitor patterns remain uncertain and every Scottish destination is competing for the same visitors and especially with a predicted UK recession. The best opportunities lie with our older generation visitors (less likely to be impacted by recession) and our international visitors (early evidence suggests they are staying longer and spending more). VS and AITC will be building our marketing plans around likely markets and promoting value for money and 'treat yourself' type messaging to tap into current visitor sentiments. We will also continue to promote responsible tourism.

¹ From STEAM data produced by Global Tourism Solutions (UK) Ltd on behalf of Argyll & Bute Council

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Over the last 12 months, working with our local DMOs, BIDs, Community Agents, and members, we have achieved the following:

- Partnership with Global Cycling Network; wholly funded by CalMac & Argyll & Bute Council – reach of 1.1 million
- Launch of Highland Explorer; wholly funded by Sustrans & Scotrail
- Loch Awe Project (funded by local community & businesses); production of a new map and ways in which to enjoy the area
- West Coast Waters; led by AITC and funded through a number of west coast DMOs and CalMac; formal launch in January 2023
- Taste of place trails (funded through membership fees and Visit Scotland) – reach of 1.3m and generated £53k worth of press coverage
- Rail & Trail campaign (funded in part by ScotRail)
- Oban Summer Marketing campaign (funded by Bid4Oban)
- Provision of 5 ‘Collaborait’ product development workshops (funded through membership fees and HIE Leadership Fund)
- Various PR activities; influencer trips, new social media content & advertising for Argyll & the Isles in publications and press. Contribution and / or commissioning of 23 articles in mainstream press
- Upweighting of Wild About Argyll & Love Oban website content and improving SEO & website navigation to increase reach and useability
- Complete refresh of our social media approach resulting in the following improvements:

Love Oban Facebook	3,784 additional followers	Wild About Argyll Facebook	1,191 additional followers
Love Oban Instagram	571 additional followers	Wild About Argyll Instagram	738 additional followers
		Wild About Argyll Twitter	529 additional followers

Some of our members have asked why we focus so much on reach. The simple fact is that if we are not discoverable, visitors will not even consider Argyll & the Isles as a potential destination. Over the last 12 months we have been focusing on being highly discoverable and relevant for visitors.

Additionally, AITC uses blogs and user generated content across its social channels to cut through the competition for visitors. This approach enables our social channels to perform much better than when we post our own assets as the platform algorithms seek out user generated and promote it over and above ‘advertorial’ type posts. Over the last 12 months our members have been mentioned 297 times in our blogs and 231 times in our social posts.

Events are a key driver for visitors to choose to come to Argyll & the Isles. To ensure that our events have the greatest reach, in 2021 we partnered with Data Thistle to extend our promotion. AITC pays for this service with a mixture of membership and ABC funds. Anyone listing an event using the provided link will also have their event promoted automatically on Wild About Argyll, Love Oban (as appropriate), through Data Thistle channel with a reach of 9m and on Visit Scotland event channels. Since the start of the partnership, we have promoted over 160 individual events.

AITC actively seeks out opportunities to collaborate with our members and we have been delighted to work with Culture, Heritage & Arts sectoral group this year on the commissioning of a stunning pantry set

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which will be showcased at a fantastic event in London in November '22. The pantry set development was part of a project, funded by HIE, to bring together businesses to create new products for Argyll & the Isles. It will feature in new visitor experiences in 2023 alongside another collaboration between Beinn an Tuirc in Kintyre and The View, Oban. Through workshops presented by AITC, other businesses have gone onto collaborate such as Dan the Merman and The Pierhouse Hotel to create new products.

The majority of our funding is re-invested in marketing the destination, meaning the greater the number of paying members, the more we can do to support the whole destination promotion and supplement any public sector funding we receive. All our public sector funders are unlikely to be able to continue at the levels that have been previously provided. AITC must continue to seek ways in which to become financially sustainable to continue its work in supporting and promoting the destination and its businesses and communities.

Argyll & Isles in the Press

In 2022, AITC contracted a PR specialist, Kirsty Innes, to improve and create opportunities for Argyll & Isles destinations and businesses to appear in mainstream press. This work is funded by ABC. Together we have developed a refreshed strategic PR approach to drive new and existing visitors and build a sense of belonging to Argyll & the Isles. Informed by up-to-date tourism, news and media trends, activity will focus on the destination's unique selling points and adding value to existing promotions. Working closely with members and influential ambassadors, we will develop and distribute newsworthy content that promotes the whole destination and ensures Argyll and the Isles is considered for impactful media opportunities.

We have secured multiple items of media coverage for the region in 2022 alone, including features in The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, iNews, Coast Magazine, The National, The Daily Record, the Daily Mirror, The Courier, The National, The Scotsman, The Herald, specialist cycling magazines and more. We look forward to continuing to build our press presence in the months ahead.

AITC also regularly receives a significant volume of national, local, and sometimes global media enquiries. Our PR consultant, Kirsty Innes, will share some media requests with members on Signal, however, to maximise opportunities and to meet often very tight media deadlines, it is important that we stay ahead of the news wherever possible. AITC would like to build a bank of members' news content, so we can respond quickly and reactively to relevant media requests as they arise. If you are aware of any forthcoming tourism developments, new products, offers or experiences please send more details to kirsty@kirstyinnespr.com.

Improvements to our websites

Over much of 2021 and 2022, we have been investing funding and time into improving our Wild About Argyll and Love Oban websites with a view to ensuring that both are discoverable and meaningful for visitors. These improvements have included the following activities and have been funded through a mixture of HIE, VS and member funding. Ably led by Daniel MacIntyre, we are continuing to develop the functionality and performance of our websites.

- A full audit of our sites by VisitScotland and the implementation of the recommendations
- A restructure of the data so that direct members can be found in multiple locations on our website
- An upweighting of destination content, supported by our DMOs and BIDs to ensure information is up to date and relevant for the visitor
- Improvements made to blogs, photographs, and business listings to ensure we are showcasing the destination in its best light

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- Improvements to SEO to ensure Argyll & Isles can be easily found when searching for certain activities, types of holiday and themes
- Building new members and travel trade areas which will be further developed over time
- Implementation of a direct booking pilot for accommodation providers using Freetobook and Supercontrol
- Improved tagging of pages to increase discoverability and AITC's ability to report on performance

In early 2023, we will be launching an updated version of the website on an updated platform which will provide future proofing and improved performance. All the updated content will be transferred to the new site and all our members will be asked to update their listings with us. As a part of that exercise, we will ask businesses for more information which means when we get press or travel trade enquiries, we can respond quickly and better promote our member businesses across our social channels. If you have any updates about your business, email us on members@wildaboutargyll.co.uk.

Support for individual member businesses and community groups

A key part of the AITC remit is to support businesses to 'improve their product' through the provision of leadership and direct skills development. Over the last 12 months, we have delivered numerous webinars and workshops, and developed 'How to Guides' which are available to members in our new Members area on Wild About Argyll website. We have collaborated with individual members to improve their listing on our website, provided strategic marketing advice to individual businesses and community groups and undertaken a pilot project to look at how AITC could support direct booking from its websites. Through our Community Engagement Agents network (wholly funded by HIE), we have taken part in over 20 community led projects all designed to improve our visitors' experience of our destination. Examples of this include:

- Development of destination information & festival for Island of Gigha Trust & the Dark Skies group
- Support for the development of the Dalriada Way walking route
- Launch of Unexpected gin; collaboration with Cove Park & Sailing Club
- Consultancy support for Tarbert Castle Trust visitor experience development
- Development of a QR code trail in Oban & Tobermory

Going forward, we will continue to develop and offer skills and leadership opportunities to our businesses and community groups. If you have particular topics you would like us to provide, please email us on members@wildaboutargyll.co.uk.

Improving Argyll & Isles Travel Trade Business

In March 2022, AITC contracted a specialist Travel Trade consultant with the remit of presenting Argyll & Isles as a viable destination for domestic and international visitors via Travel Trade. Our specialist consultant, Yvonne Wagoun has created a Travel Trade directory featuring Argyll & Isles businesses and providers and a dedicated travel trade webpage has been set up with inspiration itineraries, as well as an image and video library. These trade resources have been launched to key Travel Trade buyer at VisitScotland – Discover Scotland event, UK Inbound Conference, and a Domestic Coach Tourism event. Marketing communications have also been sent to launch the information to over 130 existing and new buyers in our database. As a result of this, we have had some early 'wins' with up to 5 operators confirming they will put Argyll & the Isles on their itineraries going forward.

We also partnered with a local agent in Germany – our primary international market, to issue four specially designed articles to their network with a significant reach across website, socials, Global Scots network and 3,500 travel trade connections.

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In September '22, we supported a VisitScotland familiarisation trip with 30 travel businesses. Working with Visit Bute, our cohort enjoyed a great day out and a number are actively considering adding Bute to their travel itineraries. In the next few months, AITC will be showcasing Argyll & Isles businesses at the VS North American BDM to London in November, Britain and Ireland Marketplace January 23 in London and Scotland Connect in Aberdeen April 2023.

AITC has delivered a number of Working with the Travel Trade workshops and utilised HIE funding to provide support for individual businesses to develop their products to be Travel Trade ready. If you would like to understand how Travel Trade can bring you more business, get in touch with yvonne@wildaboutargyll.co.uk to understand how your businesses could benefit.

So, what's next

We are planning the marketing and destination support plan for the FY 2023-24 together with partners ABC, VS, HIE and other Argyll & Isles partners. We will showcase all our destinations have to offer across all themes and promote member businesses in campaigns, socials and PR opportunities. We will set out our plans at the AITC '23 summit – date and venue to be confirmed.

We need to talk about climate change. AITC will be looking to work with AISTP, DMO partners, trusts and BIDs to create our destinations climate action plan. We will be offering businesses workshops and tools to assist them in making practical changes to reduce carbon and operating costs. There are many businesses doing great things around sustainability, and we will be showcasing these across the next twelve months.

We will continue to lobby around matters affecting our destinations, businesses and communities and provide practical support and signpost to funding and training opportunities. If there is an issue we can support you with, email us at members@wildaboutargyll.co.uk.

The future

It's clear from all the data sources AITC uses and predictions from the sector heavyweights that no-one really knows how quickly the tourism sector will recover from the pandemic. And now with the added context of increasing cost of doing business, increasing regulations, decreasing public funding and the significant environmental concerns we all face, for some it could be hard to see the way forward. It is also clear however, that the future will belong to the innovators, those who readily collaborate and seek new ways to achieve great outcomes. Many Argyll & the Isles businesses have won awards in the last two years which is testament to the quality of visitor provision and our ability to drive forward against the odds. Huge congratulations to all our award-winning businesses.

The AITC board, team and I are committed to deliver the best value membership, timely & appropriate representation on important matters for Argyll & the Isles and quality visitors for the destination we all love. We will not and cannot do this alone, we will rely on our many partners and members to get involved and engaged in our activity. We need to continue to work together to keep Argyll & the Isles front of mind for visitors. Together, we can and will overcome our challenges and secure responsible visitors for destination economic, community and environmental success.

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