

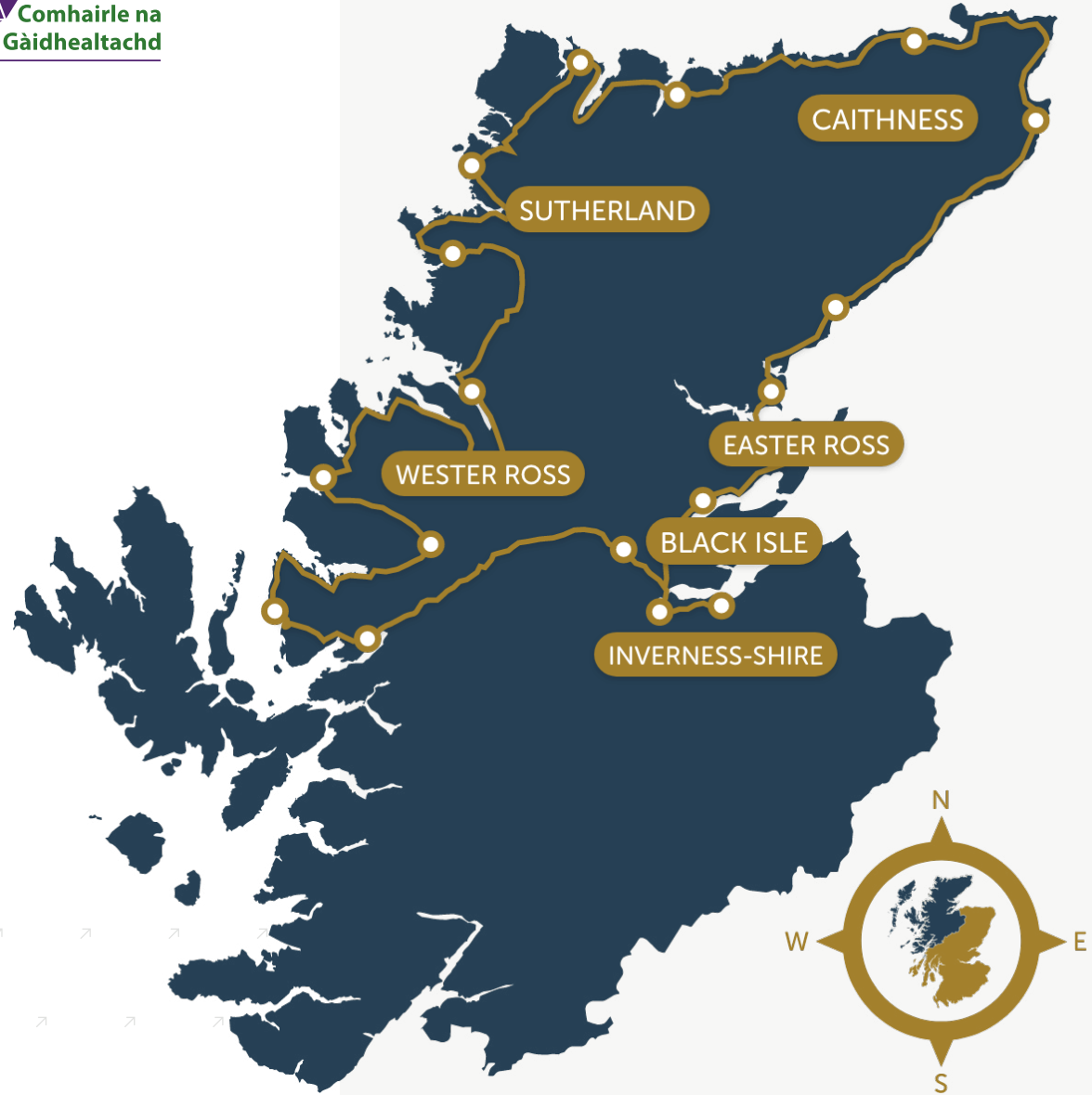


Building a Sustainable Future

for the North Coast 500

An Impact Assessment and Environmental, Social and Governance Framework for the UK's premier driving route.

May 2026



Introduction and Approach

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The North Coast 500 is a
516 mile

coastal driving experience covering the most northerly parts of mainland Scotland.

The route has been credited with enabling a major increase in visitor numbers to the North Highlands. It has also been criticised for creating unsustainable pressure on local communities and infrastructure, leading some to question whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

Since 2015 the NC500 has been promoted by North Coast 500 Ltd, a privately funded destination marketing company established to boost economic prosperity in the North Highlands. The company is proud of the role it has played in bringing the route to a global audience but recognises there are legitimate concerns about the impact the route has on the environment and communities of the North Highlands.

North Coast 500 Ltd is committed to working with partners to address these concerns and commissioned BiGGAR Economics to:

- assess how the route has affected the economy, environment and communities of the North Highlands; and
- develop an environmental, social and governance (ESG) framework that can be used to monitor progress toward a more sustainable visitor economy in the future.

This report summarises the findings from that research.

The analysis in this report is underpinned by evidence gathered from three online surveys undertaken in late 2025.

These surveys received responses from:

828

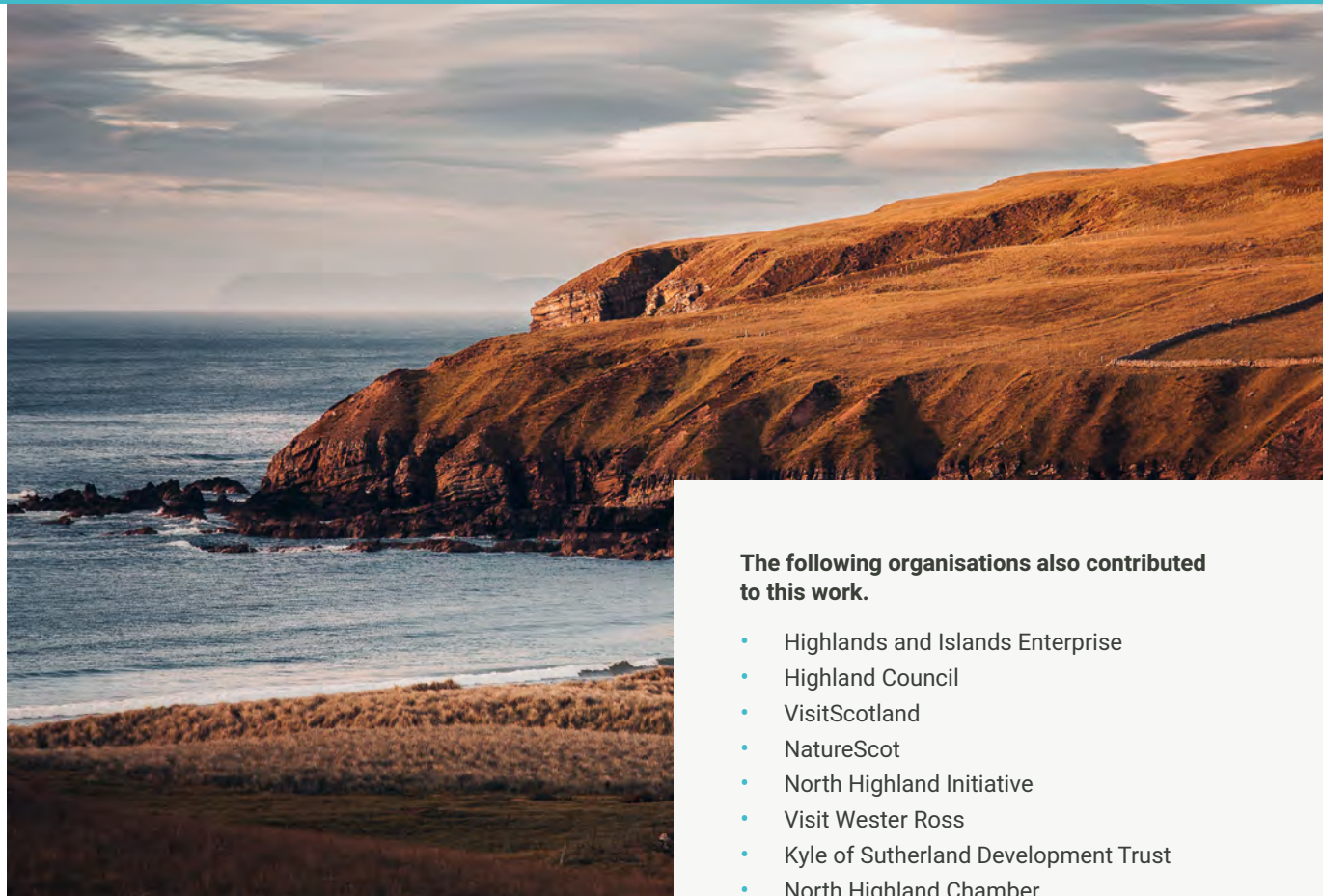
Residents

99

Businesses

617

Visitors



The following organisations also contributed to this work.

- Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- Highland Council
- VisitScotland
- NatureScot
- North Highland Initiative
- Visit Wester Ross
- Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust
- North Highland Chamber
- NW2045

Process for Assessing the Impact of the NC500

Desk Research

Tourism and economic trends, traffic counts, ranger reports, media analysis, international best practice and experience.

Surveys

To understand the lived experience of residents, visitors and businesses.

Analysis

Bespoke quantitative economic model drawing on evidence from local businesses.

Careful qualitative analysis of social and environmental impacts.

BiGGAR Economics is grateful to everyone who contributed for the invaluable insight and advice they provided.

The Benefits of Growth

Tourism in the North Highlands

Tourism is vital to the economy and communities of the North Highlands. It supports more than a quarter of all jobs and one in five businesses. It also provides a secondary income for many residents.

Many 'tourism' businesses are also used by local people. Shops, pubs, hotels and cafes all provide services that are part of the social foundations of rural communities. Income from tourism enables many of these businesses to survive.

68%

Of businesses reported that at least half of the goods and services they buy come from other businesses in the Highlands.

41%

Of businesses reported that NC500 visitors enabled them to open longer hours, extend their operating season and/or offer a wider range of goods and services.

33%

Of residents agreed tourism provided job opportunities in their communities and nearly 1 in 10 earned income from renting accommodation to visitors.



Tourism Businesses in the North Highlands¹

Total Number of Businesses:

1,384

Arts, Entertainment & Recreation

15%

Food & Drink Services

21%

Accommodation

24%

Retail

39%

1. Based on data on the number of private enterprises per 10,000 of the population, accounting for registered and unregistered businesses.

Visitor Numbers Have Increased

North Coast 500 Ltd was established in 2015.

Between 2014 and 2025, the number of vehicles on the NC500 increased by

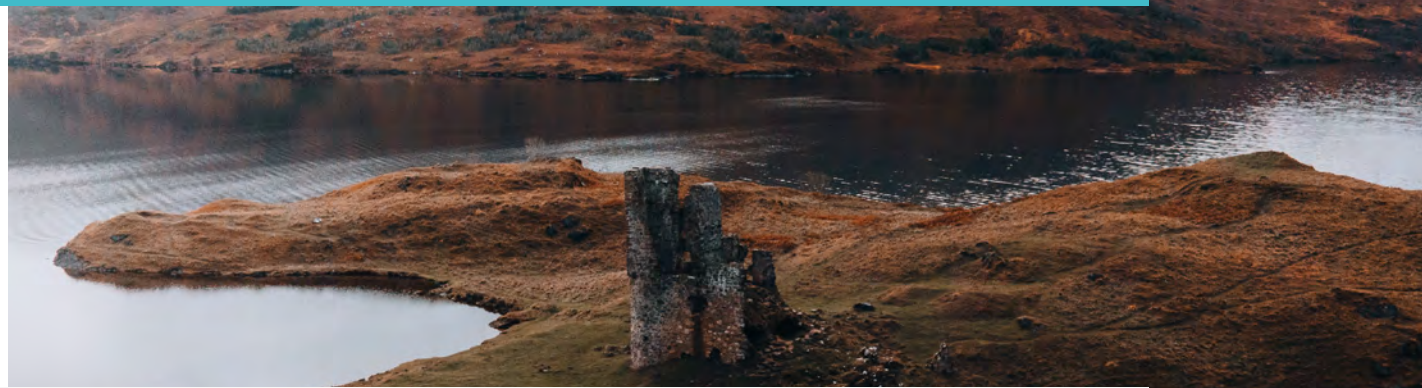
83%

The number of people visiting important local visitor attractions followed a similar pattern.

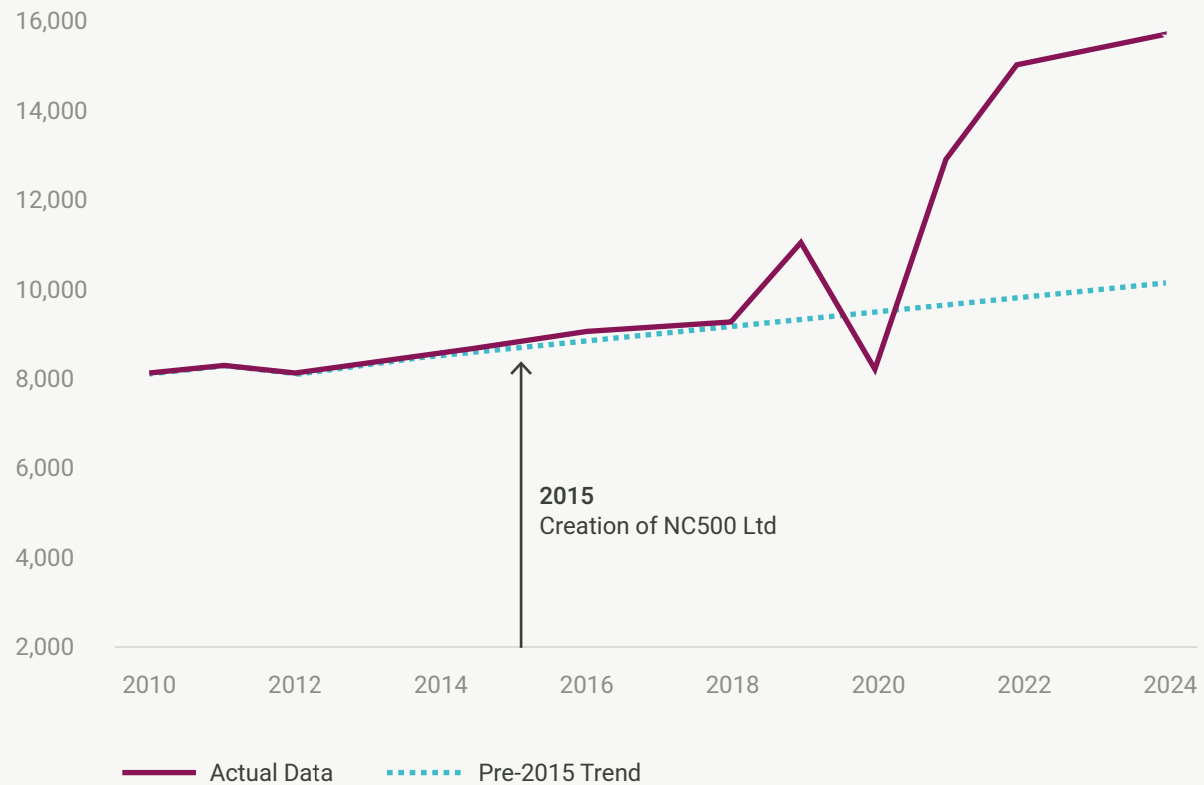
Businesses along the NC500 recognise the value this has added to the local tourism sector.

69%

Of businesses reported that NC500 visitors have helped them to grow.



Number of Vehicles Passing Key Points on NC500



Source: Department for Transport, 2024.

Economic Impact of Tourism

In 2025 tourism businesses in the North Highlands generated £221 million GVA and supported 5,655 jobs².

Survey responses from local tourism businesses suggest between 40% and 50% of this activity can be attributed to the NC500. This means that:

In 2025 the NC500 generated

£98.8M GVA

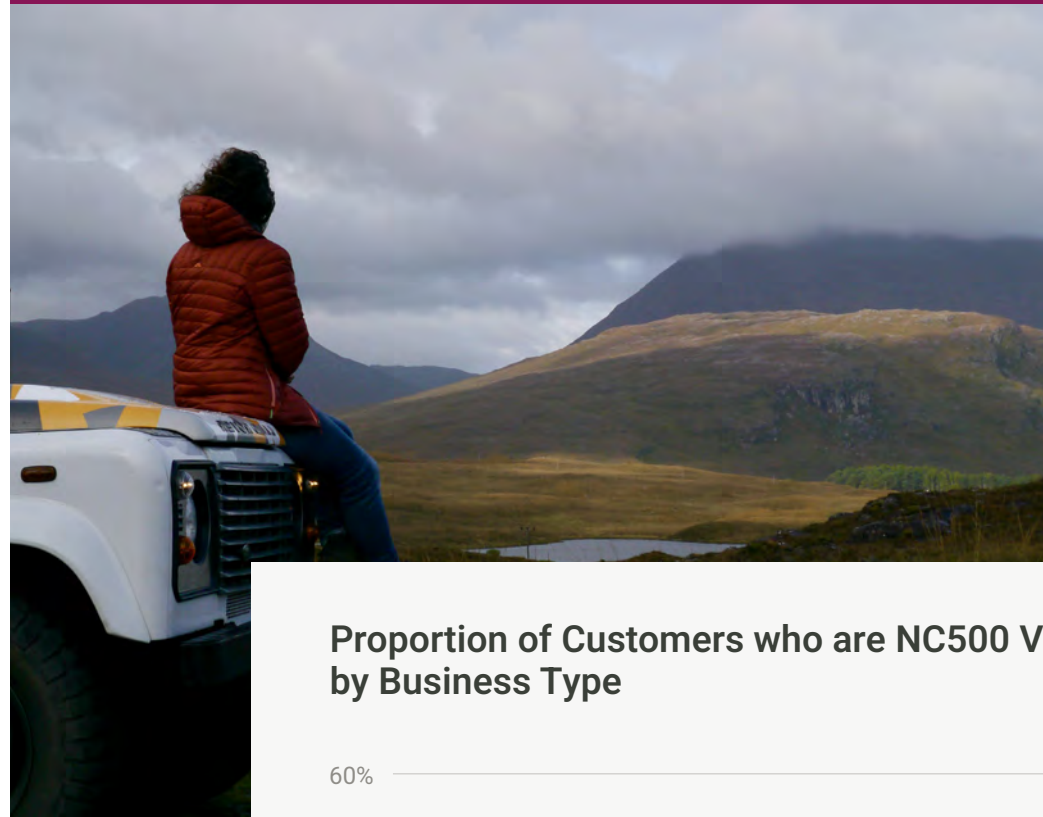
and supported around

1,335 jobs

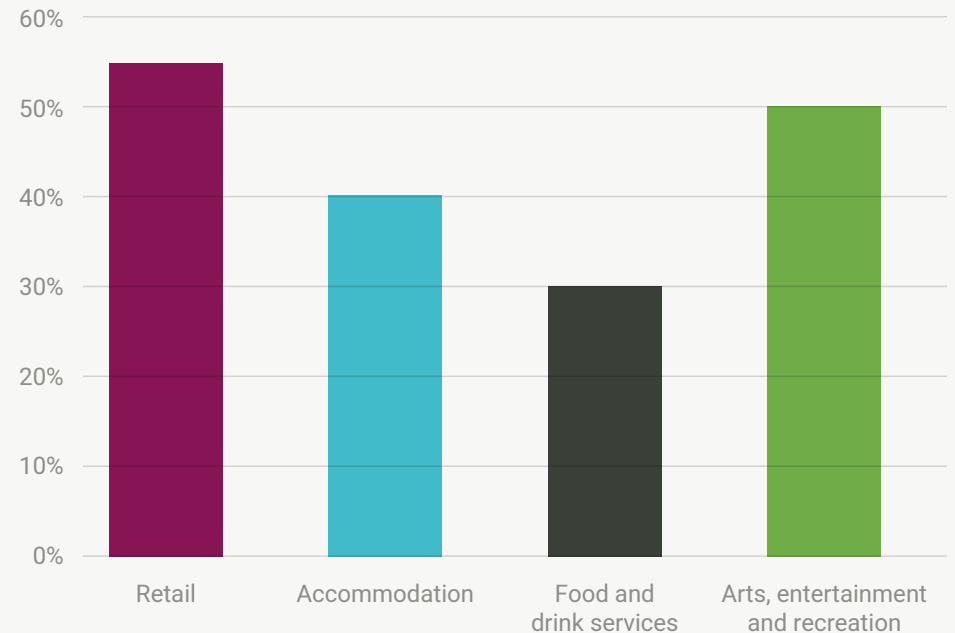
in the North Highlands.



2. Estimates based on the number of tourism businesses in the North Highlands using data published by the Scottish Government on the total number of registered and unregistered enterprises, and turnover and employment information provided by businesses that responded to the survey.



Proportion of Customers who are NC500 Visitors by Business Type



Source: BiGGAR Economics survey of businesses on NC500 route.

The Role of North Coast 500 Ltd

In 2025 almost

1 in 5 visitors

using the NC500 found out about it from North Coast 500 Ltd.

This implies that nearly 20% of the route's impact can be attributed directly to the company. This amounted to £19.8 million GVA and 270 jobs in 2025.

However, this excludes the impact of tourism activity that is *indirectly* attributable to marketing by North Coast 500 Ltd. For example:

- Some people would have heard about the route from others who read about it in content originally produced by North Coast 500 Ltd.
- Some of those promoting the route on social media are likely to be aware of the route because of marketing by the company.

It would therefore not be unreasonable to argue that ALL the economic impact of the NC500 is ultimately attributable to North Coast 500 Ltd.

This impact was not generated in a vacuum. It builds on years of work done by VisitScotland and others to market Scotland as a visitor destination.



Where Visitors Heard about the NC500

31% Word of mouth

19% Social media (other)

25% Other

12% NC500 website

7% NC500 Ltd social media

6% Other tourism website

Source: BiGGAR Economics survey of NC500 visitors.

Since 2015 the principal shareholders in North Coast 500 Ltd have invested more than half a million pounds in the venture.

This means:

every **£1** invested

by shareholders since 2015 generated

£36 of economic impact in 2025

This is in addition to annual returns generated between 2015 and 2024.

During this time shareholders did not receive ANY return on their investment.

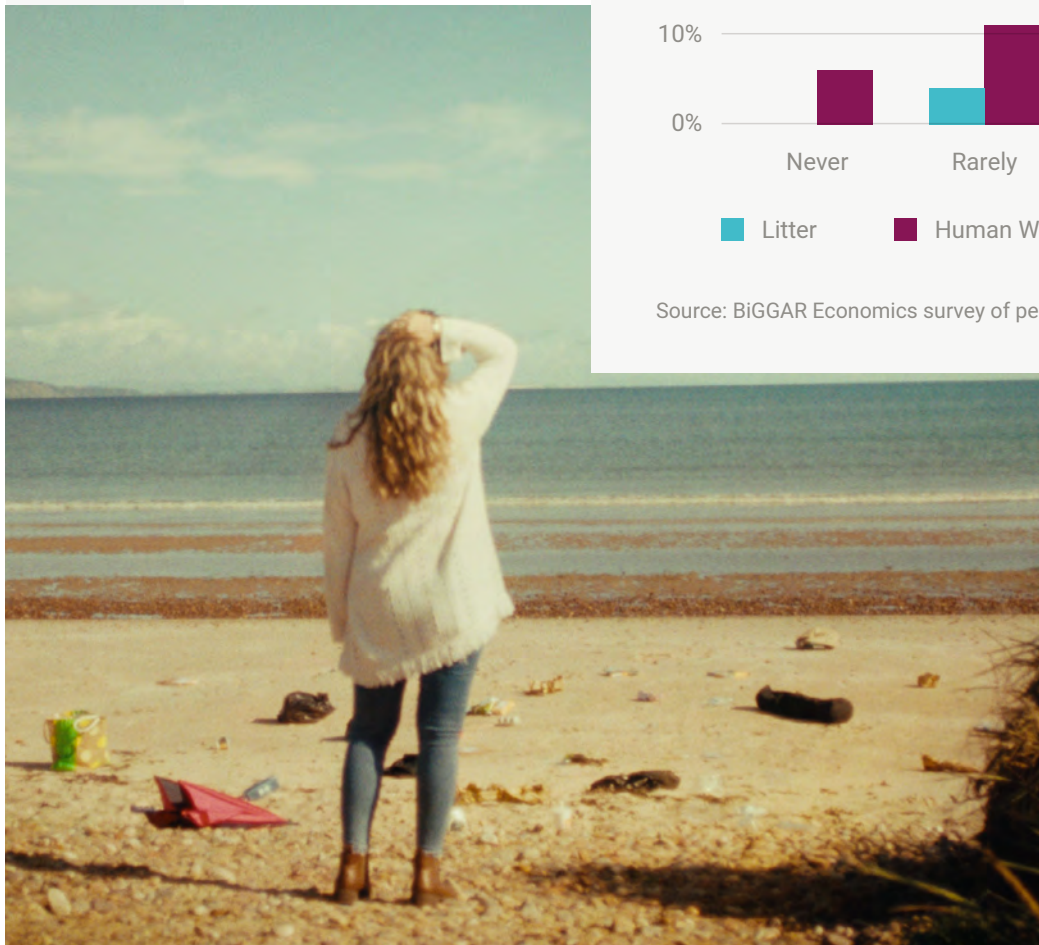
The Price of Success

Litter and Waste

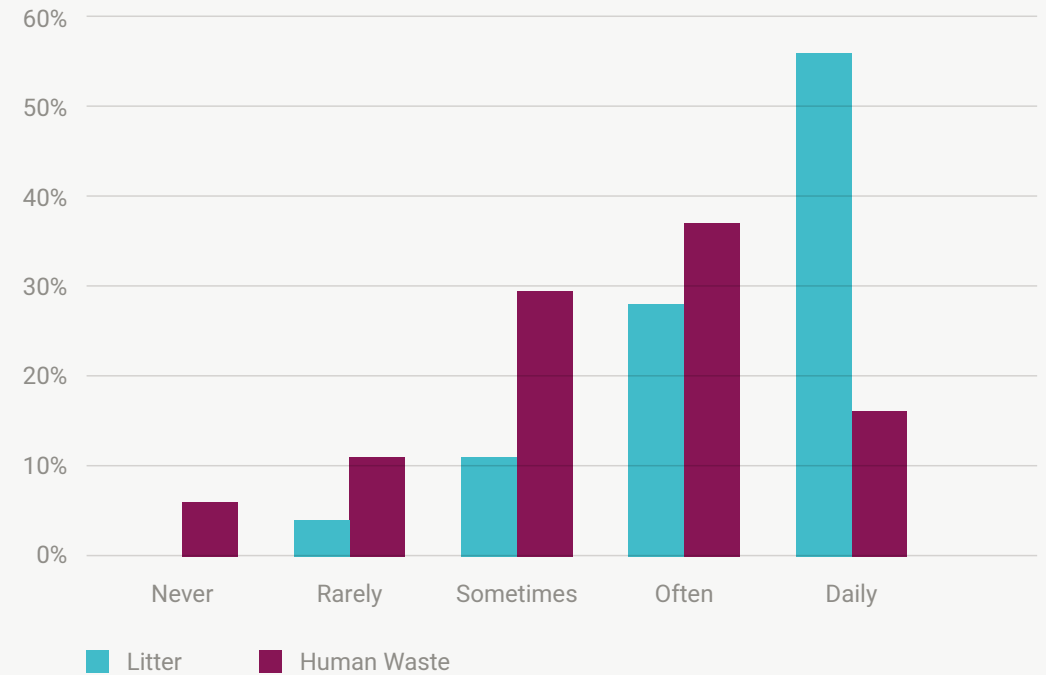
Increasing visitor numbers have brought social and economic benefits, but they have also increased pressure on the environment and communities along the route.

Survey responses consistently identified litter and human waste as major concerns, particularly during peak season.

Staged picture



How Often Residents Report Seeing Litter and Human Waste



Source: BiGGAR Economics survey of people living near the NC500.

85%

of residents reported seeing litter 'often' or 'daily' on the NC500. Just over half said the same about human waste.

Environmental Damage

90%
of residents
and

38%
of visitors

said they had seen signs of damage to the environment along the NC500 route.

“Damage to areas due to campfires including trees and branches cut down.”

“Campfire scars on the ground and on picnic benches.”

“People camping and lighting fires where they shouldn't be.”

“Road verges and footpaths used by cars turned to mud.”

“Off road vehicles ploughing through grassland.”

“Roadside verges are being damaged due to the amount of people parking where they are not supposed to.”

“Multiple campfire scars on local beaches.”

“Trees cut down at beach for use as firewood.”



77%

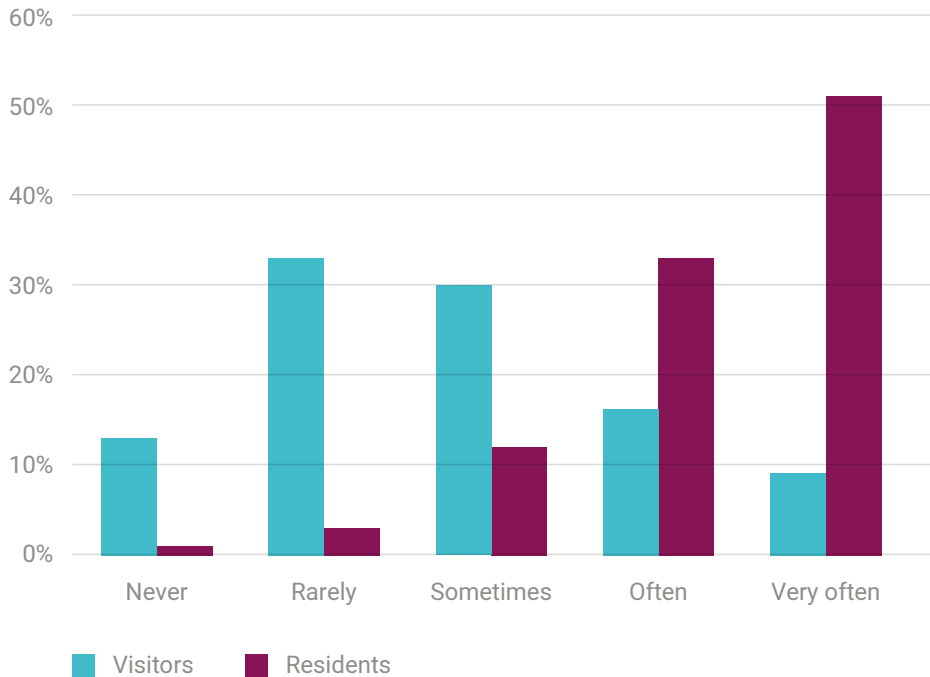
of residents said they had seen behaviour that could lead to a wildfire

(but 88% of visitors said they did not light a barbeque or campfire during their trip).

Driving and Congestion

More than half of residents (but fewer than 1 in 10 visitors) reported observing dangerous or irresponsible driving 'very often'.

Frequency of Observing Dangerous Driving

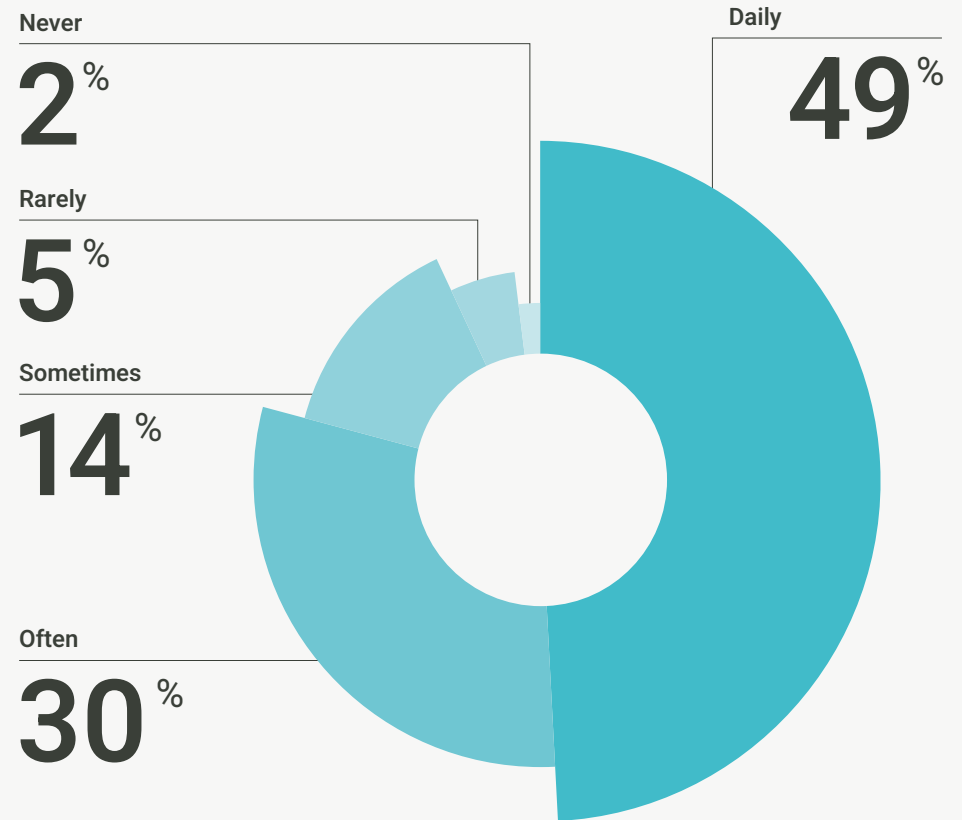


Source: BIGGAR Economics survey of residents and visitors.



Almost four out of five residents reported seeing detrimental traffic congestion 'daily' or 'often'. However, only two in five visitors reported that traffic congestion had detracted from their enjoyment of the route.

Frequency of Detrimental Traffic Congestion Experienced by Residents



Source: BIGGAR Economics survey of residents.

Perceptions vs. Reality

Changing Public Sentiment

Increasing visitor numbers have brought real challenges for communities along the NC500 leading many residents to question whether that their concerns are being taken seriously:

61%

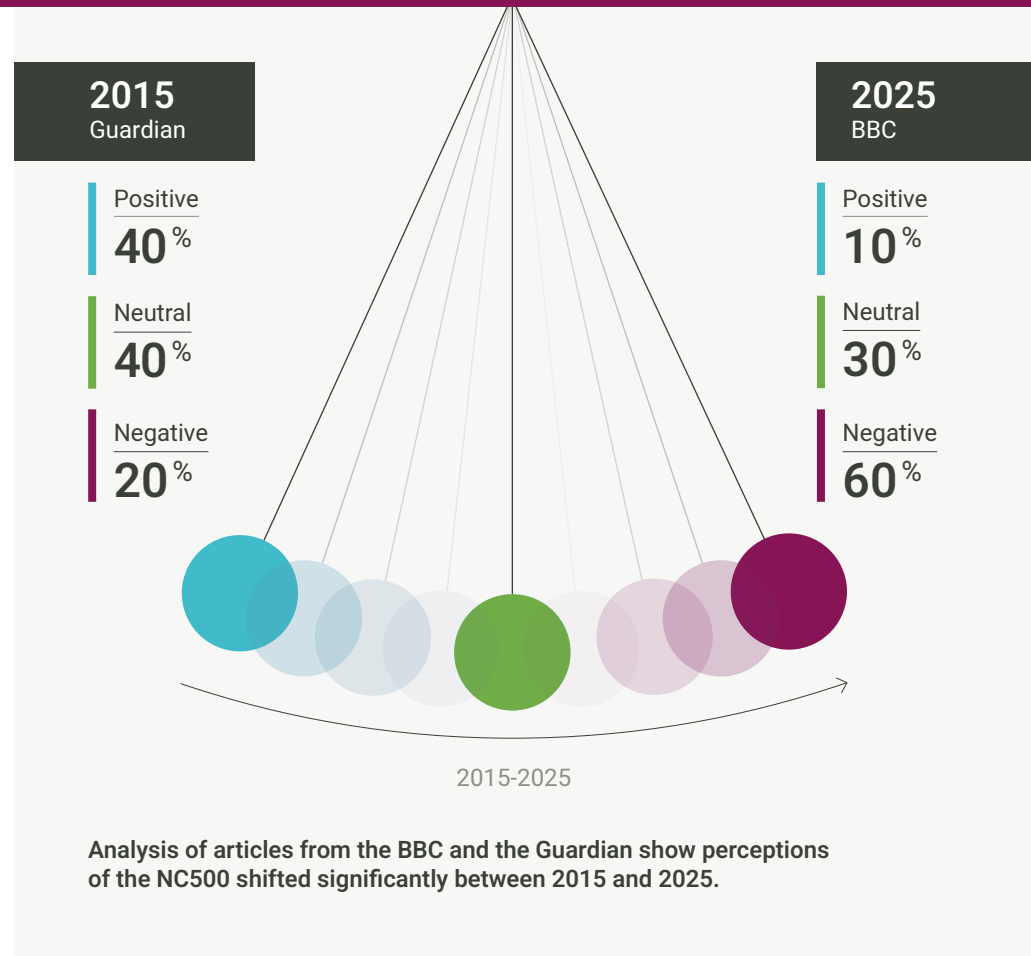
of residents **strongly disagreed** that North Coast 500 Ltd acts in the best interests of the local area.

It is critical to address this. If local people do not support the NC500 it could damage public perceptions of the route and discourage people from visiting in the future.

There is some evidence this is already starting to happen.

Public sentiment towards the NC500 shifted substantially between 2015 and 2025 and in 2025 the route was named on the Fodor's 'no list' – an annual list of destinations travellers are advised to avoid because of over-tourism.

If this is not addressed it could undermine the substantial benefits realised to date and reduce the benefits the route generates for the region in the future.



However, it is important the negative effects experienced by communities along the NC500 are interpreted in the context of wider tourism trends.

Over tourism is a challenge for many coastal communities across the UK and around the world.

Anti-tourism protests made the headlines from Mexico to Mallorca in 2025³ and UK hotspots were not immune with anti-tourist graffiti recorded in Cornwall and reports of a human barricade of a beach in Wales. Common complaints⁴ include overcrowding, housing unaffordability, and damage to physical and natural environments – all issues that have also been raised in relation to the NC500.

Other tourism hotspots in the Highlands also struggle to cope with high visitor numbers.

Every year rangers employed by the Highland Council gather information about informal camping, litter, inappropriate toileting and waste disposal in popular tourist hotspots all over the Highlands. Data gathered in 2025⁵ shows that, while there are issues on parts of the NC500, other communities elsewhere in the Highlands experience similar issues - in some cases to a worse extent than the North Highlands.

Demand for the type of visitor experience provided by the NC500 has increased since the pandemic.

The boom in staycations during the COVID-19 pandemic caused demand for motorhomes and campervans to soar, with registrations of new vehicles increasing by nearly 10% in 2020/21 and sales topping £1 billion⁶.

Around a third of those travelling the NC500 use a campervan or motorhome, so this growth will have contributed to increasing visitor numbers.



3. Media analysis by BiGGAR Economics relating to events reported in 2019 and 2025.
4. Deebiolles F (2025).
5. Data collected by Highland Council Rangers in 2025.
6. National Caravan Council (2021).



A Growing Opportunity

Survey evidence⁵ suggests many of those who have visited Scotland in a motorhome or campervan in recent years are likely to take a similar trip in the next five years, indicating that **the number of people visiting the NC500 is likely to continue to grow.**

This will create both challenges and opportunities for communities along the route: while the potential value of visitor expenditure is likely to increase so too will pressure on local infrastructure.

Encouraging visitors to explore lesser-known parts of the route, visit during quieter periods and spend more money in local businesses would all help maximise benefits for communities. However, while industry intelligence⁶ suggests visitors are keen to 'do the right thing', it also shows they need more information to help them to do that.

73% of visitors want their spending to benefit local people⁶.



7. VisitScotland (2024), Motorhome and Camping Trips in Scotland.

8. VisitScotland (2026), Travel for Scotland.



The Way Forward

Championing Sustainable Tourism

North Coast 500 Ltd is well placed to provide the proactive management needed to harness positive visitor intentions and maximise the benefits the route generates for communities.

In October 2025 the company took an important step towards this by launching a Visitor Pledge to encourage responsible behaviour and reduce the impact those travelling the NC500 have on the environment and the lives of residents.

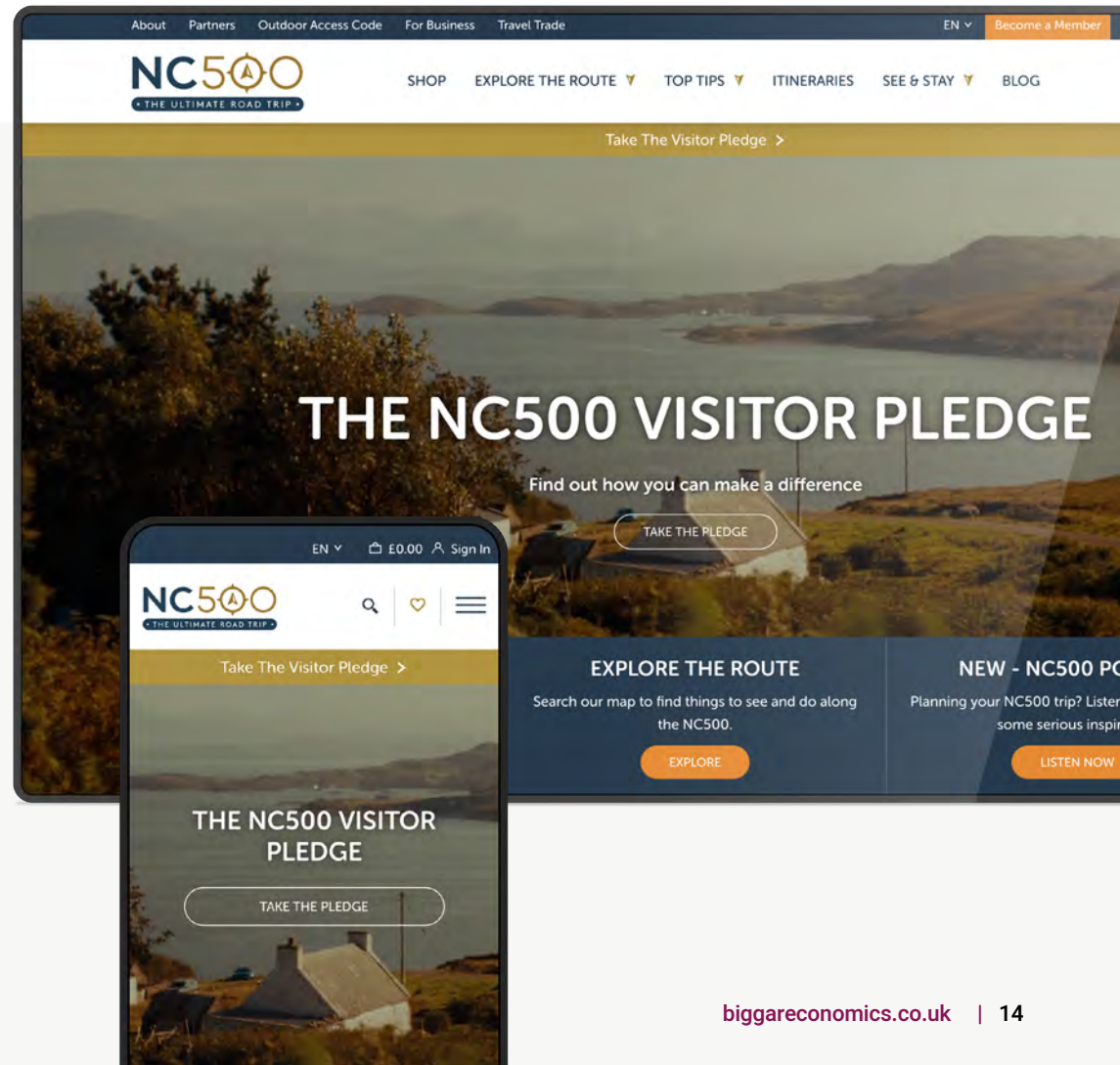
To date, over 6,300 visitors have signed the pledge. Of those, 5,166 went the 'extra mile' by taking part in voluntary actions—like beach clean-ups—designed to have a positive impact.

6,300

people have signed the NC500 visitor pledge since 2024



But North Coast 500 Ltd cannot tackle these challenges alone. Experience from elsewhere shows **effective visitor management requires a collaborative approach** between public bodies, private businesses and communities.



Establishing an ESG Framework for the NC500

Effective collaboration requires mutual commitment to a shared vision. An Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework can provide this.

In the corporate world an ESG framework is a set of criteria used to assess a company's impact on the environment and society, and the quality of its corporate leadership. Standard corporate ESG reporting frameworks are not well suited to destination marketing organisations, because their direct impact is generally negligible.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) was established to help overcome this by translating the standard corporate ESG approach into a tourism context. The GSTC has produced standards for destinations that **focus on the impacts of visitor behaviour** rather than the organisation responsible for marketing the destination. To ensure consistency with international good practice the framework presented in this report was designed to align with these standards and developed to reflect the priorities of North Coast 500 Ltd and all its stakeholders.



Process for Developing an ESG Framework for the NC500

Understand

how local people, businesses and visitors are affected by the route and what their priorities are.

Consider

how this affects North Coast 500 Ltd and what the company's priorities should be in the future.

Translate

these priorities into clear sustainable tourism outcomes everyone can commit to.

Identify

measurable outcomes that can be used to track progress toward these outcomes.



Identifying Priorities

Local people, businesses and visitors were asked what they thought the most important priorities for the NC500 should be.

The priorities identified were similar across all three groups, with three emerging as particularly important:

Engaged communities

Local people are involved in decisions about how the route is developed and managed.

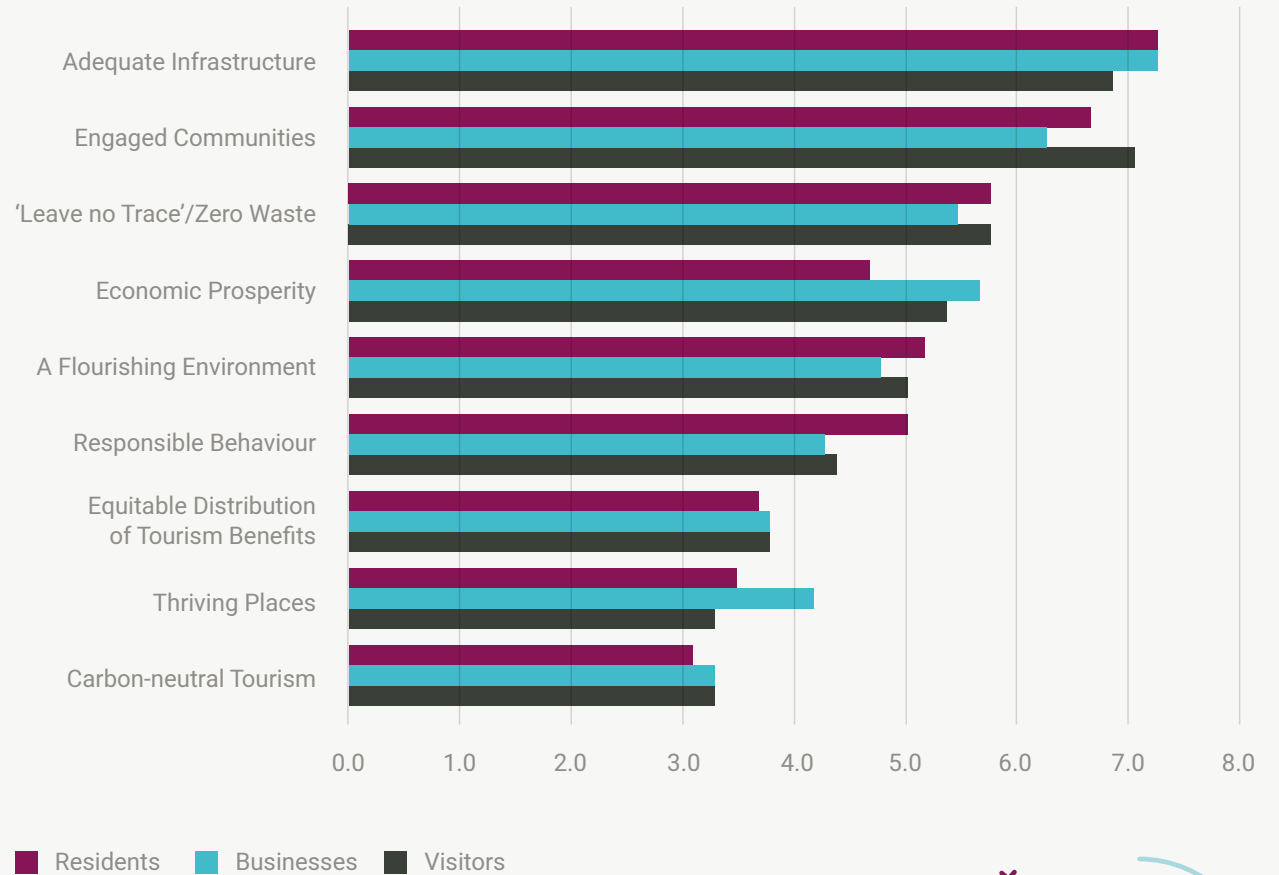
Adequate infrastructure

Local facilities meet the needs of residents and visitors.

Leave no trace

Where litter and waste are disposed of responsibly.

Sustainable Tourism Priorities for the NC500



Source: BiGGAR Economics surveys of NC500 residents, businesses and visitors.



Translating Priorities into Outcomes

The priorities identified were refined during workshops with local stakeholders.

Stakeholders identified **thriving places** and resilient infrastructure as priorities. They emphasised that **maintaining a high-quality visitor experience** is essential to sustaining the benefits of the route, noting that **effective management** is required to mitigate the impact of rising visitor numbers.

The leadership team from North Coast 500 Ltd understand the future of the route depends on the support of local communities and were keen to adopt these priorities.

The priorities identified were then refined into five sustainable tourism outcomes for the route and measurable progress indicators that align with the GSTC destination standards were developed to track progress toward each outcome over time. These outcomes and indicators are the foundation of the ESG framework.



A Leader in Sustainable Tourism

The NC500 is recognised as a premier global driving route.

Resilient Infrastructure

Facilities & services on the route cope effectively with seasonal variations in demand.

Thriving Places

People living along the route feel the benefits of tourism and believe it improves their lives.

Involved Communities

Local people feel invested in the NC500. They are proud of the route and influence how it is managed.

Effective Visitor Management

People using the NC500 have a world-class experience & their spending is spread widely across the north of Scotland.

Progress Indicators

	Indicator	2025 Baseline
A Leader in Sustainable tourism	Public perception of NC500 (as measured by positive comments in media coverage) improves.	16%
	Maintain or increase the proportion of visitors willing to recommend the route to others.	80%
	Performance against ESG framework is monitored and reported on regularly.	No
Resilient Infrastructure	The value of infrastructure improvements on the route is increasing.	n/a*
	The proportion of residents who believe their community is overburdened by visitors is declining.	95%**
	The proportion of businesses that report inadequate infrastructure is constraining their growth is falling.	64%**
Thriving Places	The proportion of tourism businesses reporting that visitors to the NC500 have been important to business growth is increasing.	69%
	The proportion of visitors reporting they spent more than £50/day during their visit (ex. accommodation) is increasing.	66%
	The % of residents who believe visitors make where they live feel lively/positive or make them proud of where they live is increasing.	49%
	The proportion of businesses reporting that NC500 visitors enable them to offer a wider range of goods and services; remain open for longer hours and/or remain open for a longer period over the year is increasing.	41%
Involved Communities	The governance structure of North Coast 500 Ltd enables communities to be involved in decision making.	No
	Feedback from communities is sought regularly (e.g. through an annual survey of residents) and acted upon.	No
	Proportion of residents who trust the NC500 Ltd leadership team to act in the best interests of the local area is increasing.	5%
Effective Visitor Management	The number of people signing the NC500 visitor pledge is increasing.	6,300
	The proportion of visitors reporting they undertake 'extra mile' activities is stable or increasing.	82%
	The proportion of visitors staying in the North Highlands longer than seven days is increasing.	52%
	The proportion of residents who report they observe human waste or litter (daily or often) is decreasing.	86%
	The total number of antisocial behaviour incidents reported by HC Access Rangers is declining (fire marks, bags of litter and incidents of on-site toileting and dumping of motorhome waste).	4,743

*Baseline data not yet available. **Proxy measure derived from similar but not identical questions. To be updated in future years.

Next Steps and Recommendations

The NC500 has generated substantial benefits for the economy and communities of the North Highlands, but it has also brought challenges.



Going forward the priority should be to maximise the benefits visitors bring to the region. North Coast 500 Ltd is an established, effective organisation that is well placed to make this happen. To do this:

01 North Coast 500 Ltd should transition from a destination marketing to a destination management and marketing organisation and set out what steps it will take to help achieve the ESG outcomes identified in this report.

Effective visitor management requires a collaborative approach in which key partners work together to achieve agreed outcomes. To achieve this:

02 North Coast 500 Ltd should convene a working group involving the public bodies responsible for managing key aspects of the route and use this to agree how each partner will contribute to the ESG outcomes.

The continued success of the NC500 depends on the support of communities along the route. Ensuring local people can influence decisions about how the route is managed will be fundamental to securing this. To achieve this:

03 Local people should be consulted regularly about how the route is managed and North Coast 500 Ltd should modify its governance arrangements to ensure they are effectively represented at board level.

Long-term success and continued improvement will require robust processes for monitoring progress and identifying the action needed to improve future performance. The ESG framework set out in this report provides a strong foundation for this. It is therefore recommended that:

04 North Coast 500 Ltd commits to undertaking an annual survey of residents and producing an evaluation of progress toward the outcomes set out in the ESG framework.

**This report was independently
produced by BiGGAR Economics.**

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