

MAIRI GOUGEON SPEECH

SCOTTISH AGRITOURISM ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

Thank you, Caroline, for the warm welcome. I'm delighted to be here for, sadly, my last conference as Cabinet Secretary. It's been a great 4 years as I've watched agritourism go from strength to strength, all thanks to Caroline. It's been an honour to work with her over the years. I wish I could package her drive and enthusiasm. Caroline is not a lady to accept the word no!

Challenges and Resilience

I acknowledge the significant challenges facing the sector. Recent years have tested every part of our visitor economy, from the pandemic's disruption to ongoing cost pressures and workforce shortages. Rising national insurance contributions, inflation, and labour constraints continue to create a difficult operating environment. We are listening carefully to the challenges you raise.

Agritourism Strategy

One thing that strikes me about Scottish Agritourism is that you are not a sector that sits back and rests on your laurels. One look at the Agritourism Strategy proves this.

The Strategy sets out your, and our, ambitions for the sector. A key aim is to encourage and support new entrants into agritourism. For example, earlier this month, I met with a number of inspiring under-35s working across our agritourism sector who are proudly flying the flag for the next generation. They spent the day in Parliament sharing their backgrounds with representatives from every political party and demonstrating the passion and innovation that make our sector so vibrant.

I am heartened that we are on track to achieving many of our 2030 National Strategy targets, which is testament to the drive and ambition of farmers and crofters in Scotland's Agritourism network.

Agritourism Sector Census

Most of you will know that the Scottish Agritourism Sector Census was launched in August to measure the value of agritourism and farm retails through investment, profitability, employment, visitor and customer numbers. The results will influence future policy and sector support, locally and nationally, and will be pivotal in gaining support for the continuation of the successful Agritourism Strategy work.

I'm pleased to announce that two key 2030 targets have been met five years ahead of schedule.

Sector Value: The sector has already surpassed its 2030 target of £250 million, reaching £292 million - up from £110 million in 2021.

Visitor Numbers: Annual visits to Scottish farms and crofts now stand at 2.5 million, exceeding the 2030 goal of 2 million.

Further progress towards National Strategy targets:

- We have reached 888 farms or crofts actively engaged in agritourism, keeping us on track to achieve 1,000 by 2030.
- In 2021, only 15 farms were prepared for international travel trade. Our target was 40 by 2030 and we've already surpassed that – 88 farms are now ready to welcome global

visitors. This achievement strengthens Scotland's ability to attract international visitors and showcase our world class agritourism experiences.

- Our Employment Strategy set an ambitious target: to grow from 4,000 full-time equivalent roles to 9,447 by 2030, supporting both family farms and external employment. I'm delighted to report that we've already reached **8,076 jobs** - a remarkable achievement that puts us well ahead of schedule. This progress reflects the vital role agritourism plays in sustaining rural communities and creating new opportunities.

Additionally, Scotland will host the Global Agritourism Conference next year—another ambitious target met early—with 1,000 delegates expected from 100 countries.

Although 2 key targets have been surpassed in the 2030 strategy, there will be a continued focus on the sector and we can build on delivery and focus on the next growth targets.

These achievements reflect the dedication of everyone involved in the sector. Thank you for your outstanding contribution.

Agritourism Investment Scheme (AIS)

In terms of capital support for Agritourism, you have told me that there is a requirement to access capital. I would like to thank Caroline for raising these issues, collecting case studies and pulling together an excellent business case in support.

I have listened and I am delighted to announce today that the Scottish Government will be launching a new £1 million capital grant scheme, the Agritourism Investment Scheme (AIS).

This investment scheme is being finalised and will be open for applications early in the new year. We are still working on the mechanics of the new scheme so watch this space

This will provide £1million of investment through flexible capital support to help you invest in your agritourism businesses and build financially sustainable, profitable, and resilient businesses to play a key role in sustaining the future of Scottish agriculture.

These capital grants for Agritourism projects will contribute further to the Scottish Agritourism Strategy 2030 targets for Sustainable Growth.

Agritourism Monitor Farms

Two years have passed since the Agritourism Monitor and Satellite Monitor Farms were launched at the Scottish Agritourism Conference. In year two, the programme recorded 811 registrations with an average of 34 people registered for each meeting. 24 in person and online meetings were delivered on a range of topics relevant to the needs of the programme participants and have ranged from managing large capital projects, pricing strategy, building a team and farm retail masterclasses.

A two-day Business Bootcamp brought together 52 monitor farmers and core community members to share business and personal goals. Additionally, 29 business owners and managers participated in a three-day learning journey to Skye and South Uist, with a further visit to the Isle of Mull marking the start of year three.

Examples of what the Agritourism Monitor Farm is doing

1. Kinclune Estate in Angus have invested £1.5 million in a new wedding and events venue and have been supported by their peers with areas such as pricing strategy, managing staff and marketing.
2. Ernespie Farm in Dumfries and Galloway have made a much more direct link between the farm and the agritourism business by selling their own beef in the farm café, starting to produce ice cream and using that to entice customers to visit and are now starting to sell other local farm produce in a farm shop. They have been supported with farm café and farm retail experts and human resource support to build a stronger team.
3. Fearn Farm are revitalising the local community of Balintore, 3 miles from their farm in Easter Ross with a £1 million investment in transforming a rundown pub and hotel into a new restaurant and pub with rooms overlooking the sea. This will attract new day visitors from Inverness and other areas in the Highlands as well as visitors from across the UK and internationally. Scotch Beef and Scotch lamb from Fearn Farm will be on the menu alongside other freshly caught seafood from Balintore. A focus on sustainability and local food and the connection back to the farm. This is a major project for the family who have been given moral support by their peers, sharing knowledge about managing similar large scale projects, branding and obtaining finance.
4. Westerton Farm in Angus, the fourth monitor farm has been developing a focused approach to their offering and has invested in dedicated kitchen facilities to extend the food offering. The focus going forward will be on food and wellness and health and being able to eat healthy high protein and lower calorie food as part of an eating out experience which very few cafes are offering. This also links back to vegetable production on the farm.

One of the main benefits of the monitor farm programme is the support that people receive from the network and their peers through difficult times and challenging times both from a business but also a personal perspective. This allows people to find solutions and to move forward and we have seen many examples of this.

World Conference

Scotland is embracing agritourism and I cannot wait to showcase the vitality of the sector to the Global Agritourism community. Hosting the Global Agritourism Conference in Scotland is a great opportunity to bring focus and attention to what we have to offer and create opportunities for Scottish businesses to meet, learn and share their experience with their international peers.

The Conference will take place in Aberdeen in June 2026. This three-day event includes pre- and post-conference tours, such as a visit to the Highland Show.

We anticipate 1,000 delegates from over 100 countries and participation from 300 Scottish businesses. Approximately 400 attendees will join curated tours across all rural local authorities, showcasing 150 farms and crofts. Strong ticket demand highlights the significance of this landmark event.

Closing

It's time for me to close my final speech as Cabinet Secretary at a Scottish Agritourism Conference. So I think it is apt to look back over the last four years and see where we have come.

I made my first speech to you in 2021 when I helped launch the Agritourism Strategy – who would have believed then, that within a few years Scotland’s worldwide reputation for Agritourism would see us as hosting the very first Global Agritourism Conference.

It is no exaggeration to say, none of us would be here without Caroline’s hard work and perseverance in promoting and organising Agritourism in Scotland.

Not just Caroline, but huge thanks to your Chair Riddell Graham and all the destination leaders past and present who have all been putting in some fantastic hard work and I bet some very long shifts over the years....and all of it voluntary.

Agritourism has always had a special place in my heart and although in a few months I will no longer have Ministerial responsibility for the sector, I will still keep an eye out on what is happening in the sector.

So to all of you, for all your hard work and for all the hours you have put in, from the bottom of my heart I want to thank you.