



In association with  
**CALEDONIA PARK**  
DESIGNER OUTLET

Celebrating the  
success of the South

# South of Scotland Thistle Awards 2024



## **Agenda**

2pm – Introductions, a South of Scotland perspective

2.10pm – Gordon Smith, VisitScotland

2.30pm – Andrea Nicholas, Green Tourism

2.40pm – Insights from a National Thistle Winner

2.50pm – Questions

3pm - Close



## Why the South of Scotland?

- Spotlight on region
- Sharing best practice
- Driving up quality
- Securing national profile
- Unifying the region





# South of Scotland Thistle Awards

## Key Successes Year 1:

- SSDA agreed to deliver Thistles in **April 2023**
- South of Scotland Thistle Awards saw **200+ nominations and 112 entries** (national: circa 1,000 nominations & 600 entries)
- **South of Scotland Thistle Awards:**
  - 33 Finalists and winners in 13 categories
  - Truly local event at The Cairndale Hotel, Dumfries
  - All suppliers locally based
  - 150 attendees
- **6 South of Scotland national winners!**
  - Silver Thistle Winner - Wilma and David Finlay
  - Tourism Individual of the Year - Melanie Allen
  - Best B&B or Guest House Experience - Nithbank Country Estate
  - Best Self-Catering Accommodation Experience - Arden Holiday Cottage
  - Best Luxury Experience - Airhouses
  - Best Bar or Pub - The Cross Keys Inn
- Successful working partnerships with SSDA, SOSE, VS and Industry Panel



## South of Scotland Thistle Awards 2024

### Key Milestones

1st March: Nominations open

18th March: Entries open

31st March: Nominations close

28th April: Entries close

Mid July: Finalists Announced

3rd October: South of Scotland Thistle Awards

November: National Final Award Ceremony







## Why should you apply?



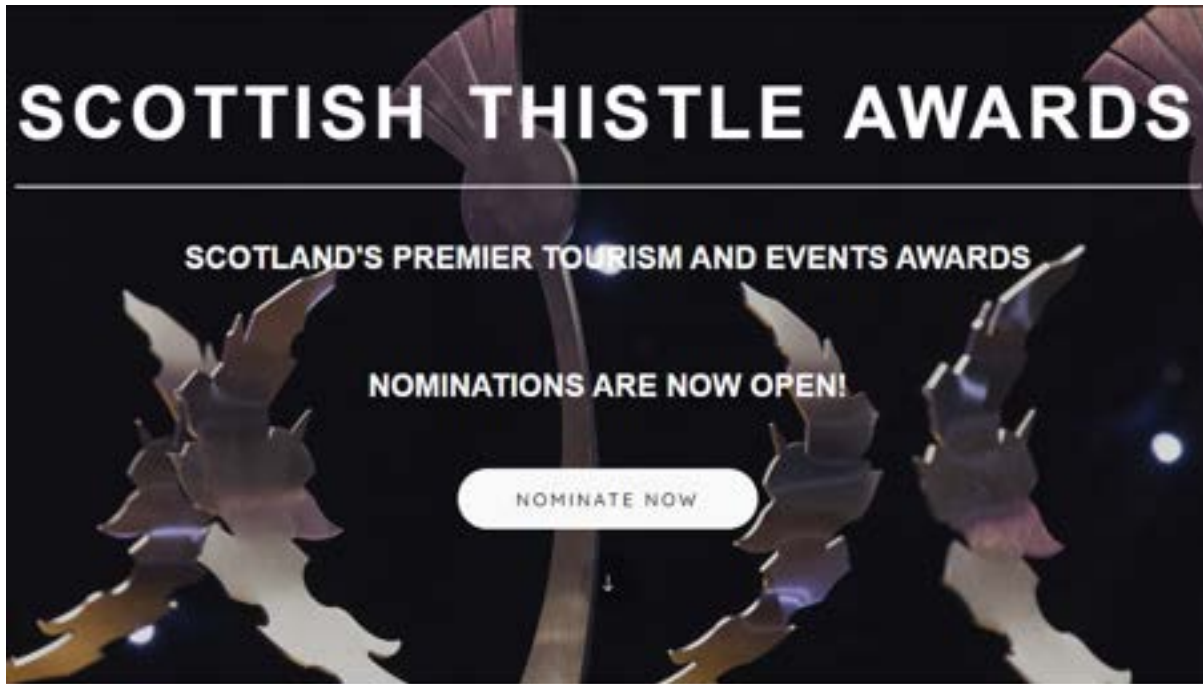
## Why should you apply?

- Recognition amongst peers
- Providing a sense of pride amongst staff
- Opportunity to review own business plan
- Shout out about achievements and developments
- Marketing opportunities
- Rewarding staff and volunteers





## Things to think about:



Entries open in...

Days Hours Minutes Seconds

1 1 : 1 3 : 3 0 : 4 4

- What award category should you be applying for?
- What evidence do you need to gather, do you have enough?
- If giving time, then commit properly
- Create a draft offline, DO NOT write directly into website.
- Are you ready to apply?



# Thistles 2024 Categories

## Regional progressing to National

1. Best Bar or Pub
2. Best Eating Experience
3. Best B&B or Guest House Experience
4. Best Hotel Experience
5. Best Self-Catering or Unique Stay
6. Best Visitor Attraction
7. Best Outdoor or Adventure Experience
8. Outstanding Cultural Event or Festival
9. Celebrating Thriving Communities
10. Inclusive Tourism Award
11. Climate Action Award
12. Innovation in Tourism
13. Tourism & Hospitality Employer of the Year
14. Tourism Individual of the Year
15. Rising Star Award

## National only

16. Best Luxury Experience
17. Best Business Event
18. Outstanding Sporting Event





- 25 pieces of media coverage
- 136M audience reach
- 313,000 estimated views

## Recognition and promotion:



### Eateries Worthy of a Mention

Prepare to embark on a journey where delectable dishes meet award-winning excellence. From charming pubs to modern bistros, each venue boasts a culinary experience that...

12TH FEBRUARY 2024



### Unmissable experiences, events and attractions

Whether you're a newcomer to the South of Scotland or a seasoned visitor, there's a plethora of events and attractions awaiting your discovery! Be it...

5TH FEBRUARY 2024



### Championing Thistle Finalists

This year the South of Scotland is proud to have its own dedicated regional tourism awards, the South of Scotland Thistle Awards. As regional award...

16TH OCTOBER 2023







**Gordon Smith**  
**VisitScotland**



# South of Scotland Thistle Awards



Gordon Smith  
Destination Development Director, VisitScotland



Thursday 7 March 2024





# priorities and ambitions



## Regional ownership

- 3 out of 5 regions are now regionally owned
- Focus on ensuring the local brand and feel is captured regionally through each programme and event



## Responsible Tourism

- Continue to support the aim for Scotland to be recognised globally as a leader in this field through practice and education
- Instilled throughout the awards in entries, judging, comms messaging
- Responsible event delivery



## Finalists and Winners

- Providing support to industry on how to become a winner
- Promotion of Thistles' finalists and winners and ensuring they are considered as first point of call for activity where relevant

# Starting your entry

Review the categories and related questions and criteria before you begin. Have a think about what information you might need to gather before beginning.

Questions and criteria for every category are on the Scottish Thistle Awards website now if you want to get ahead!

## What's the Format?

There is an **executive Summary** and **3 scored questions**, each with a **max. 500 words**

The executive summary is **not** scored – it's a quick summary to provide context for the judges.

## What are the judges looking for?

- What are you doing that sets you apart?
- Be authentic and tell your story from the heart – let your passion shine through!
- Have evidence, facts and figures ready to demonstrate and back up what you are saying in your answers.
- Assume the judges don't know your business – what do you *want* them to know?
- All three answers need to be strong, not just one or two.



# Top tips for completing your entry

1

**Take time to read and understand** what the questions are asking of you and ensure you begin the process as early as possible.

You could complete the answers **offline** or try **reading out loud**.

Ask someone that knows your business to **proof-read** your entry before you submit.

2

Make it **easy and clear** for the judges to read and understand the key points.

Judges aren't looking for perfectly polished answers, but make sure you use spell check!

3

No additional supporting evidence is accepted so use the opportunities provided on the entry form to **include weblinks** when they are asked for.

If there's something specific on those links that you want to draw the judges' attention to, **include it within one of your answers to the questions**.

# Answering the questions

*Example Question:*

**Q. What actions are you currently undertaking to develop your business? What do you hope to achieve and how are you measuring success?**

You should provide **clear evidence** of current developments and how benefits will be **monitored / measured**, **e.g. through visitor feedback, increased revenue, target market statistics.**

Please cover any areas you think are relevant although you may wish to include aspects such as:

- Plans for new and innovative products/services
- New collaboration and/or partnership working
- Intentionally targeting new markets or increasing footfall
- Obtaining awards or accolades

**How would you go about answering this question? Let's break it down...**



# Answering the questions

*Q. What actions are you currently undertaking to develop your business? What do you hope to achieve and how are you measuring success?*

Ensure you are answering all parts of the question. This example is asking for 2 things: **actions** and **measurement of success**.

Consider using **headings** to clearly signpost how you are addressing each part.

You should provide **clear evidence** of current developments and how benefits will be **monitored / measured, e.g. through visitor feedback, increased revenue, target market statistics**.

**Clear evidence** is bolded – don't just tell, show! What can you provide to back up your answer?

# Answering the questions

Please cover any areas you think are relevant although you may wish to include aspects such as:

- Plans for new and innovative products/services
- New collaboration and/or partnership working
- Intentionally targeting new markets or increasing footfall
- Obtaining awards or accolades

These bullet points are just examples but are a great starting point to get you thinking.

Could you utilise these points as **headings** within your answer?

# How are your answers scored?

SCORE	DESCRIPTION	GUIDANCE NOTES
9-10	Outstanding	This rating should be reserved for entries which have fulfilled the criteria to the highest level and to which other entrants might aspire.
7-8	Exceeded Expectations	There should be clear, consistent and recognisable evidence that the judging criteria have been exceeded.
5-6	Meets Expectations	This rating demonstrates entry criteria have been clearly demonstrated and met.
3-4	Too early to rate/ insufficient evidence	This rating indicates the entry criteria have not been met or demonstrated but it is anticipated they are on track to achieve them.
1-2	Does not meet requirements	If the judging criteria have not been achieved.
0	No evidence provided	Entrants should be given a zero score if they have failed to answer the question.



## In summary

- Be authentic – the judges want to know what you think makes your business special and feel your passion shine through.
- Read the questions carefully and make it as easy as possible for the judges to understand your answers.
- If there's something you want the judges to know, say it explicitly – don't rely on your website or social media to do it for you!
- Don't be shy to ask for feedback! If you're not successful on this occasion, request feedback from the judges to help you improve your entry for next time.



**Andrea Nicholas**  
**Green Tourism**



# THISTLE AWARDS – RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

All questions are scored equally

Responsible Tourism Question - Four Priority Areas / Sub-Sections

1. Supporting Scotland's transition to a low carbon economy
2. Ensuring tourism and events in Scotland are inclusive
3. Ensuring tourism and events contribute to thriving communities
4. Supporting the protection and considerate enjoyment of Scotland's natural and cultural heritage

Demonstrate evidence-based activity in as many of the **4 areas** as possible



# RESPONSIBLE TOURISM – SCORING

- 9 - 10 Evidence – based activity in **ALL 4** areas
- 7 – 8 Evidence – based activity in **AT LEAST 2 OR MORE** areas + reference to some activity in **AT LEAST ONE** other area
- 5 – 6 Evidence – based activity in **AT LEAST 1 OR MORE** areas + reference to some activity in **AT LEAST ONE** other area
- 3 – 4 Limited evidence of activity in **AT LEAST 1 OR MORE** areas
- 1 – 2 No evidence of any activity in **ANY** of the areas
- 0 Question not answered

Include measurements / facts

Include links to relevant information on your website / social media

# 1. Supporting Scotland's transition to a low carbon economy

Evidence sustainable practices undertaken in your business to reduce carbon / net zero

Actions to reduce energy / decarbonisation

Lighting / equipment / boilers

Staff training / switch off campaigns

Information for guests

Low carbon activities

Staff / business travel

Experiences for guests – walking / cycling

Reducing waste

Food

Packaging

Recycling

## 2. Ensuring tourism and events in Scotland are inclusive

Evidence how you are making your business more inclusive

Providing for visitors with access requirements

Physical disabilities

Hidden disabilities – dementia / autism friendly / quiet places

Catering for various dietary requirements

Religious

Allergies

Vegan / Vegetarian

Providing facilities for staff and or visitors wellbeing

Mental health first aiders

Meditation areas

Actions to embrace diversity

LGBTQ+



### 3. Ensuring tourism and events contribute to thriving communities

Evidence actions on how your business is helping the local community

Local purchasing

Food & Drink

Crafts / artists

Employees

Tradesmen

Community Support

Festivals / events

Charities

Schools

## 4. Supporting the protection and enjoyment of Scotland's natural and cultural heritage

Evidence actions taken by your business to protect, conserve, promote wildlife, biodiversity, history and Scottish culture

Local visitor attractions / outdoor experiences

Nature reserves

Historic monuments

Promoting or hosting Scottish traditions

Music / dancing

Stories

Food / dishes

Helping nature

Habitat creation

Wildlife watching

Grounds maintenance

Supporting wildlife charities / organisations

**Rory Steel**  
**Cross Keys Inn,**  
**Ettrickbridge**







BEST BAR OR PUB

2023 SCOTTISH THISTLE AWARDS  
**NATIONAL WINNER**



BEST BAR OR PUB

**CROSS KEYS INN  
ETTRICKBRIDGE**

**2023 WINNER**  
SOUTH OF SCOTLAND THISTLE AWARDS



Rory Steel, Cross Keys Inn Ettrickbridge





**Cross Keys Inn Ettrickbridge**  
Published by Vicki Steel · 2 December 2023 · 🌐

We're feeling very proud and very humble this morning to have won Best Pub at the Scottish Thistle Awards!! 🥳

Thank you to everyone who has helped us pick up such an awesome accolade - the lovely folk of Ettrickbridge, all our guests from near and far and above all our A team of staff. We couldn't have done it without you all. 🍷🍷🍷





Travel > UK Travel  
**BEER WE GO** Best pub in Scotland revealed as winner crowned at glittering national awards



SCOTTISH THISTLE AWARDS  
**Meet the winners of Scotland's tourism Oscars**



R Scotland Now • Borders

**Tranquil Scottish inn nestled amid stunning scenery named best in the country**



**Thistle Awards: Borders pub and accommodation win top awards**

4th December 2023

- VISIT SCOTLAND
- BUSINESS
- EVENTS
- FOOD AND DRINK
- LEISURE
- PUBS AND BARS



Rory and Vicki Steel from The Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge (centre) at the Thistle Awards. Photo: Connor Mollison



# Questions





**Here to support:**

**Sarah Macdonald**

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