

Hi-tech boost for Scottish tourism

A new organisation launches today to help Scotland's tourism sector make a sustained recovery driven by tech.

The solution will build a support network for travel technology pioneers whose ingenuity could help turn the sector around following the devastating impacts of Covid-19.

The venture will create opportunities for businesses, including digital tour operators, online booking providers and companies developing robotic devices that improve the hotel experience.

Traveltech for Scotland, led by the University of Edinburgh, will foster an online community of entrepreneurs, promote industry events and create a digital marketplace to encourage growth in the sector.

The new body builds on the country's traveltech leadership, demonstrated by pioneers such as flight-booking giant Skyscanner, hotel guest app provider Criton and trip-planning company Whereverly.

The £342,000 initiative is funded by The Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise, and it will tap into Scotland's research excellence and seek to nurture the country's tech graduate talent.

Traveltech for Scotland involves two strands of the university – its commercialisation service, Edinburgh Innovations, and

the Edinburgh Futures Institute, which has a particular focus on harnessing big data and digitisation to promote social good.

Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing, said: "The tourism and hospitality sector has been hit hard by this pandemic and we do not underestimate the crisis this has created.

"Protecting jobs and businesses is a key focus of the Scottish Government's efforts to respond to the pandemic.

"As we start to see more and more of the sector re-opening, the launch of Traveltech for Scotland will support the sector further in its road to recovery. I welcome this innovative approach and look forward to seeing how the community is strengthened as a result."

The Chief Executive of Scottish Enterprise, Steve Dunlop, is confident Traveltech can support economic recovery in communities that rely on tourism and help the sector to 'build back better' by developing sustainability and resilience.

Mr Dunlop said: "By bringing together our digital and visitor economies, there's a real opportunity for the Scottish technology sector to lead the way in creating innovative solutions to the challenges faced by the tourism industry on a global scale."

The newly appointed Director of Traveltech for Scotland, Joshua Ryan-Saha, of the Edinburgh Futures Institute, believes it is in moments of great crisis that new ideas are born.

He said: "The travel industry faces unprecedented challenges and we need to invest now in Traveltech to build a better, more resilient and sustainable future for Scotland's travel industry."

COVID-19 has impacted heavily on the travel, tourism and

hospitality sectors, forcing redundancies and reduced operations for airlines, hotels, bars, restaurants and tech businesses, and leading to the cancellation of Scotland's major events and festivals in 2020.

In 2018 Scotland's tech industry was valued at £4.9 billion, with over 100,000 people employed in the sector. Demand for tech recruits continues to grow rapidly: it is estimated that Scotland needs around 13,000 new people to work in tech every year.

The CEO of the Scottish Tourism Alliance (STA), Marc Crothall, said the launch marks a vital step forward in providing Scotland's tourism businesses access to new technology solutions, which can build customers' trust around virus control and safety.

He said: "It will offer reassurance that challenges can be overcome to aid a sustainable recovery for the industry and, I hope, put Scotland on the map as a leading destination for travel technology."

Traveltech for Scotland is initially a three-year project funded under Scottish Enterprise's Cluster Builder programme – supported by the 2014-20 European Structural and Investment Fund through a programme of jointly funded projects with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and managed by the Scottish Government.

A total of up to £342,000 has been allocated towards creating a Cluster Builder for traveltech in Scotland over three years. The ERDF contribution is up to £171,000.