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**PRESS RELEASE: For immediate use**

**Skye community organisation awaits imminent decision on historic Old Man of Storr bid**

A HISTORIC decision on whether a north Skye community organisation gets the green light to purchase land at one of the island’s most popular landmarks, the Old Man of Storr, is looming.

Staffin Community Trust (SCT) will find out within the next fortnight if its bid to buy roadside ground at the Storr, which is on the A855 Portree-Staffin road, will be approved by the owner, Highland Council.

SCT plans to build a new off-road car park, public toilets and provide interpretation/local business information at the site in a major development, which has attracted significant local and national support.

Islanders have voiced concerns about road safety and sanitation at the site as visitor numbers have soared in recent years.

There were 150,000 visitors to the Storr last year. Back in 2005, 63,000 visitors were recorded.

SCT submitted an Asset Transfer Request (ATR) to the council in March – the first in the Highlands under new Community Empowerment legislation, which became law in January – and will find out if it has been accepted by Wednesday, September 6.

It comes as tourism pressures and concerns about the island’s infrastructure were highlighted across the national media following the unprecedented surge in visitor numbers.

SCT’s proposals and business plan for the site were developed in consultation with the community by an experienced consortium, led by Athena Solutions, and followed a full options appraisal. It will create employment (1.8 FTE per year) and a direct economic benefit to north-east Skye and the wider island community.

A fee for using the car park would be charged, a proposal which was supported by local residents. Almost 86% of respondents to a major consultation in Staffin supported SCT’s direct involvement at the site.

The council’s planning, development and infrastructure committee agreed in Inverness last November to set aside £400,000 of development funding for car park improvements at the site. In a report to councilors, SCT’s project was described as “exciting” and had “the potential to deliver significantly” on the authority’s priorities.

Committee members heard of the dangers of widespread verge parking for drivers and pedestrians and that the £400,000 would help SCT deliver the development, including urgently needed public toilets. This encouraged SCT to develop its site plan. The local authority has stated it has no intention of providing toilets.

If the ATR is granted, SCT will seek match funding from a variety of sources to deliver the proposed site capital works, which are currently estimated at up to £900,000. Following the SCT community consultation in January 2016, the consultant team carried out an options appraisal on the 82-hectare site, which includes a felled commercial forest and was purchased by the local authority in the mid-1990s.

SCT is grateful to have received funding from the council’s Eilean a’ Cheò’s Ward Discretionary Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Land Fund for the Storr Project options appraisal and business plan. It has also received excellent support and guidance from HIE’s community assets team and the Community Ownership Support Service.

**SCT chairman Sandy Oglivie said:** “It is vital Highland Council continues to support this game-changing project with the same commitment and enthusiasm it has shown over the past few years. A considerable amount of time and effort, along with a substantial feasibility budget, has gone into producing these substantial enhancement proposals to one of Skye’s major tourist destinations. It is clear no one organisation or group can provide the capital to achieve what is desperately needed at the Storr in terms of infrastructure improvements. A continued innovative partnership between the council and SCT to progress this Asset Transfer, and embrace the spirit within the new Community Empowerment legislation, is vital, if we are to see the desperately needed improvements to this Internationally popular attraction.”

**Jen Shanks, chairwoman of Staffin Community Council,** said it was in full support of the development. “The issue of parking and road safety at the Storr has long been a concern for the people of Staffin,” she said. “A sensitively designed larger main car park would significantly improve the current dangerous situation. Building toilets is vital to ensure one of our most valued tourist attractions remains as such. Furthermore, the inclusion of an information/interpretation shelter at the site, which would entice visitors further north, would be greatly welcomed by the community and provide an economic boost to the area.

The community council is looking for Highland Council to step up and deliver the development funding it had set aside for this site and secure much needed infrastructure investment for Skye.”

**Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch Kate Forbes MSP** said: “I have been following the progress of the Storr parking project with great interest, since I first discussed it with Staffin Community Trust. This summer has highlighted the pressing need for additional parking at the Storr, and I fully support the Staffin community delivering it, with support from Highland Council.  I would hate to see any unnecessary blockages to this plan because time is of the essence and the need for parking and toilets has become more and more critical.
“I have full confidence in Staffin Community Trust and I hope that all public bodies can offer their full support.”

**Highlands and Islands MSP David Stewart** said: ““The trust’s plans seem eminently sensible and forward thinking. The community is obviously anxious to move this project on and hopefully it will get the support it deserves.

“On a visit to Staffin, I experienced the problem of indiscriminate parking and tourists wandering into the road around the Old Man of Storr. There is no doubt the problem needs to be tackled to help preserve the area’s beautiful environment.”

**Ian Hepburn, chairman of Community Land Scotland**, said: “The recently well publicised challenge of providing some of the essential infrastructure for visitors and locals in Skye has a cost-effective answer by allowing willing communities to take on the responsibility through land-ownership.

“With adequate initial funding, communities elsewhere on the islands and across Scotland have already turned what some consider liabilities into revenue generating opportunities for further local use. The proposed project from the Staffin Community Trust fits that scenario perfectly to the benefit of all.”

**Shirley Spear, a director of the island tourism organisation, SkyeConnect,** said: “SkyeConnect is full of admiration for the work achieved by the Staffin Community Trust in recent times.  The Old Man of Storr is one of the top five visitor destination sites in Skye and as such, has seen a constantly increasing flow of visitors over the years. There is no sign that the worldwide tourism industry will abate in future and undoubtedly, communities such as our own must develop our infrastructure with due diligence, to meet the changing needs of our rural communities.

“The trust’s solution to improving the visitor experience together with the challenges that affect local residents every day, is excellent.  It may not be possible to run-out similar projects in other areas of Skye, but SkyeConnect intends to work closely with those managing other local development projects, all community councils, our local elected councilors, Highland Council and the Scottish Government, to affect more improvements to help protect our beautiful island for the future.”

**NOTES TO EDITORS**

* The Community Empowerment Act came into effect on January 23, 2017
* Community bodies can now submit Asset Transfer Requests for any publicly owned land or buildings which they believe they can make better use of. They can request ownership, lease or other rights, as they wish.  The Act requires those public authorities to transparently assess requests against a specified list of criteria, and to agree the request unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal.
* SCT has worked closely on the Storr Project for three years with Highland Council and its own advisers. More information here: <http://staffin-trust.co.uk/the-old-man-of-storr>
* SCT published the results of a major consultation involving all households and businesses in the Staffin Community Council area, which includes residents living near the Storr, and is home to more than 500 people, in January 2016.
* Highland Council’s planning, development and infrastructure committee met on 2.11.16 and agreed that £400,000 should be allocated to the Storr site. Toilets were described as “absolutely essential”. Minute of meeting, here: <http://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/3768/planning_development_and_infrastructure_committee/attachment/71370>
* The Storr is a key gateway to Staffin and vital economic driver for shops, cafes, accommodation providers and other businesses. Council-led traffic surveys have estimated that approximately 70 per cent of Storr visitors continue north on the A855 road to Staffin.
* SCT sees it as an opportunity for the local community to create local employment and market Staffin and local businesses far more strongly.
* The SCT has developed economic, social and cultural projects on behalf of the Staffin community since 1994. The organisation was set up after a decline in the Staffin population and primary school roll.
* The SCT is a company limited by guarantee with a board of eight directors, who all live in Staffin, and more than 90 members.

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