

Members of the public are invited to participate in consultation on the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve Boardwalk and Active Travel Route

Highland Council, and partner Sustrans, have today published plans and visualisations for the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve (MLNR) Boardwalk project to commence the public consultation process.

The project involves the upgrade of the route between Carnarc Crescent and the railway crossing to an all-abilities standard, which will be suitable for wheelchairs and mobility scooters, as well as pedestrian and bikes. It will include the replacement of the existing ageing boardwalk, and will tie in with the access improvements currently being carried out by Scottish Canals. Together they will form an Active Travel Route connecting South Kessock with Merkinch and the city beyond. The route will also provide greater access opportunities for locals and visitors to reconnect with nature and enjoy the high-quality, waterside settings provided by the Caledonian Canal and Merkinch Local Nature Reserve.

The project design stage has been funded by Sustrans through their 'Places for Everyone' funding stream, and they are also set to be the main source of funding towards the £560K construction stage budget. Highland Council has also allocated £100,000 Capital funding towards the project, and been successful in obtaining additional funding from Inverness Common Good Funding (up to £45,000); Highland Coastal Communities Funding (up to £12,000) and Smarter Choices Smarter Places funding (£5,000).

To further enhance the reach of the consultation and encourage public engagement, the drawings and visualisations are on display at the Merkinch Community Centre and will remain available to view there until Tuesday, 17 August.

Once Highland Council's project team have received and reviewed comments from consultees, the design will be refined and a Planning Application submitted by early September. This will provide a further opportunity for comment.

The contract will be tendered once the planning application has been approved and the Sustrans Construction Phase funding is in place, with a view to a contractor being appointed early in the new year.

The main elements for consideration are as follows:

Boardwalk:

- In order to accommodate cyclists and meet the Sustrans requirements, it should be noted that the boardwalk structure will be considerably larger and higher than existing (3.0m width compared to the existing 1.4m) and that the railings require to be min 1.4m in height (compared to the existing 1.0m).
- Our proposal shows a realignment of the boardwalk to form a sweeping curve which rises at a continuous but gentle gradient to the sea wall level. This would cut out the requirement for steps and a separate ramp, and should allow a generous landing with good views and a potential seating/information area.
- The structure will be constructed using recycled plastic to reduce maintenance and improve longevity.
- The drawings show the parapets as a standard three rail construction, but there may be options to include infill panels to prevent young children from climbing through, however, consideration would also need to be given to the visibility ahead, potential reduction in views, and the safety of cycle handle bars catching.
- Although not included on the drawings, there may be scope to add a separate pond dipping platform at a lower level, which would extend from the passing space at the woodland end of the boardwalk. This will depend on available budget.

Path:

- The path will also be increased in width to 3.0m along most of its length.
- The sea wall path between the boardwalk and the railway will be slightly increased in width to 1.5m.
- Paths will be hard surfaced using tarmac with a spray and chip finish.
- Although the path between the residences at Carnarc Crescent is only 1.8m width, there is scope to create an 'entrance' area where the path meets the reserve, where a map panel or welcome sign could be located. This would also include a lighting column.

Lighting:

- It is proposed that at least one lighting column is introduced at the Carnarc Crescent entrance, to the rear of the gardens.

- It is proposed that ground level solar powered markers are incorporated within the path surface and boardwalk.

Signs & Interpretation:

- We have a modest budget set aside for a couple of interpretation panels and/or features along the boardwalk route.
- We will position directional Finger post signs near the entrance and at the sea wall junction.
- We also plan to install/ replace directional finger post signs at the snaky path and at the end of the sea wall.

Vegetation clearance and Replanting:

- There will be an opportunity to involve FMLNR and TCV in the preconstruction vegetation clearance and post contract tree and wildflower planting along the route.

The current plans and visualisations for the for the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve (MLNR) Boardwalk project are available to view [here](#).

The public consultation is active now and will remain open until 17.00 hours on Friday 20th August. Comments should be submitted by e-mail to: PDU.DT2@highland.gov.uk

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