

Agenda Item	17
Report No	ECI/38/22

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Environment and Infrastructure

Date: 10 November 2022

Report Title: Achmelvich Car Park

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The capacity of the car park at Achmelvich is not meeting demand during the tourist season. This results in visitors to the site parking beyond the car park, obstructing traffic flow and negatively impacting on local businesses and the environment.
- 1.2 The toilet block was removed as it was beyond its serviceable life. A temporary single occupant unisex unit was moved from Gairloch to offer a facility. This does not meet current demand.

The paper explains the current site and funding position and seeks Members approval to use capital borrowing to complete the overall funding package.

- 1.3 The Highland Council and Assynt Development Trust have a joint aim to redevelop and expand the Achmelvich beach car park and replace the current public toilets unit with a larger unit incorporating toilet and external shower facilities and modest space for tourist interpretation/education/good practice resources.

The project was granted planning permission in November 2021. Project aims to create:-

- 36 Additional parking spaces, on top of reinstatement in durable surfacing of 40 existing spaces (of which 5 are disabled);
- 1 New toilet facility with 7WCs (of which one for disabled use);
- 1 External shower – cold supply;
- 1 Baby changing facility;
- 3 Waste bins (240 litre);
- 2 Interpretation Panels

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Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **approve** the investment of £1.046m in Achmelvich Beach Car Park and Public Toilets funded by £0.500m RTIF, £0.250m Community Regeneration Funding and £0.300m Highland Council loan funding with associated loan charges to be fully funded from income generated from parking charges from the car park.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – Highland Council will be responsible for ongoing maintenance to all works. Income from compulsory charging for parking (subject to agreement at Sutherland County Committee) will cover loan charges and running costs and in the longer term deliver significant income. Council Policy ensures that 50% of all surplus income will be allocated to the Sutherland County Committee.
- 3.2 **Legal** – The site is owned by Highland Council. Planning permissions have been granted (Reference Number: 21/04323/FUL).
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – The project is supported by the local community and results from several years' worth of partnership between the Council and the community to resolve the issues at Achmelvich. The initial design works and consultation were conducted by Assynt Community Trust.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – Appropriate design and construction will provide fit for purpose car parking and toileting arrangements which will reduce visitor impacts upon verges, sand dunes, machair and improve control of current waste issues. Funds generated will be used to service the loan but also maintain the new parking infrastructure.

The Highland Council and the Assynt Development Trust have explored the possibility of at least one E-charging point on the site. This is understood not to be immediately possible due to grid constraints/unknowns, and so has not been included and costed in the project works. However, THC will ensure works allow for ease of addition of this element at a future point, to facilitate the increasing number of electric vehicle users.

The project is committed to the most sustainable materials available to ensure the site is developed to as near net zero as possible. Detailed design work was based on a brief of maximising sustainability in building construction, material choices etc. Any landscaping to the site will be minimal to not interfere with the existing landscape.

- 3.5 **Risk** – Failure to upgrade the facility will result in deterioration of site condition due to the impacts of visitor numbers and behaviour and prolong the significant disruption to the local community bringing ongoing reputational damage to Highland Council. A contingency and location percentage has been factored into the overall budget to mitigate any budget overspend.
- 3.6 **Gaelic** – All interpretation will be compliant with Highland Council policy.

4 Background

- 4.1 Achmelvich Bay in Sutherland is a busy destination for visitors. A campsite, youth hostel and other accommodations are available adjacent to the Highland Council site. It is a popular destination for day visits which have increased since the development of the NC500. Achmelvich is identified as a priority in the Highland Council Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan (2022).
- 4.2 The Highland Council owns and operates the car park and owns the surrounding land. The car park surface is in poor repair with potholes and following rain large puddles form. There is a maximum of 40 spaces in the car park, but on the busiest days there can be up to 150 cars trying to park. This leads to parking on verges, entrances to fields, properties, gateways, passing places and other inappropriate locations. This makes access for residents, emergency services and other visitors problematic. The former public convenience block was an old Portakabin style unit, but this was condemned and removed at the start of the 2022 season. Current toilet provision is a temporary single unisex unit which is inadequate for demand.

5 Achmelvich Car Park - Funding Proposal

- 5.1 In 2021, Highland Council in partnership with Assynt Development Trust was awarded a Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund Design Grant of £6000 which enabled the development of a project to extend the carpark to 78 spaces and construct new public conveniences and tourism related infrastructure (external interpretation, bin stores). The project design and costs have been reviewed by Highland Council Property and Housing service which has appointed a Project Manager. The project is shovel ready pending a full funding package of £1,046,298.
- 5.2 The Highland Council and Assynt Development Trust applied for £500,000 from the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund. On 14 October 2022 the full £500,000 grant request to RTIF was approved subject to conditions. The Highland Council and ADT have also applied for £250,298 (which includes an additional request for a separately funded ranger hut) in match funding from Highland Council Community Regeneration funding (Highland Coastal Communities Fund Community Led Development Fund and Place Based Investment Programme), leaving a funding gap of £300,000. This funding decision is expected by February 2023 but may be made sooner if the funding process allows.
- 5.3 It is proposed to fill the funding gap with capital loan finance to be repaid over 20 years from parking income earned at Achmelvich car park. Parking charges will be compulsory, and the necessary orders are being worked on to be in place once the car park opens. The planned tariffs are up to 4 hrs £3; up to 6 hrs £4; up to 8 hrs £5 and it is estimated that the annual income will be between £32,109 and £50,050, which is sufficient to cover car park operational costs estimated at £2,300 per year and loan repayment charges estimated at £23,200 per year for 20 years (total £25,500). There is already budget provision for the operation of the public conveniences. Council Policy ensures that 50% of all surplus income will be allocated to the Sutherland County Committee.

5.4 Local Members have been briefed during the development of this project and are fully supportive, including having provided financial support from Ward budgets for the design phase. A paper detailing the orders needed and charges to be levied was presented to the Sutherland Committee for 7 November 2022 and Members have been asked to agree the recommendations above. A verbal update will be provided at this committee as at time of writing the Sutherland committee had not met.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 19 October 2022

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