

# The Highland Council

Agenda Item	<b>5</b>
Report No	<b>CIA/02/26</b>

**Committee:** City of Inverness Area

**Date:** 2 February 2026

**Report Title:** Visit Inverness Loch Ness Annual Report

**Report By:** Assistant Chief Executive - Place

## **1 Purpose/Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report updates Members on the annual progress of the Visit Inverness Loch Ness Tourism BID.
- 1.2 The report provides an overview of the progress of the Business Plan voted for at ballot in March 2024. It is broken down by the departments included in the plan and supplemented by more detailed information on key projects.

## **2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members are asked to **consider** and **note** the annual report of Visit Inverness Loch Ness (VILN).

## **3 Implications**

- 3.1 **Resource** - There are no direct resource implications because of this report. Appendix 1 summarise the financial support given to VILN via grants agreed to be funded from the Inverness Common Good Fund (ICGF).
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising from this report.
- 3.3 **Risk** - There are no risk implications arising from this report.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** - VILN are liable for implementing all health and safety aspects in terms of any projects that are responsible for delivering funded by the ICGF.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report

## **4 Impacts**

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

## **5 Business Plan General Updates**

- 5.1 The Visit Inverness Loch Ness Business Plan saw significant progress since its approval in March 2024. Improved reporting means that now all objectives are in progress measuring at 35% of completion as of January 2026 – this includes single completion items and ongoing regular items such as maintaining the website and networking events. This means that VILN is delivering its objectives on time and within the parameters outlined in its Business Plan.
- 5.2 The total membership numbers have increased greatly since the time of ballot when member numbers totalled 473 members of which 403 were levy and 70 were opt-in. Following the ballot in March 2024 when the threshold over RV was raised to £5000 levy-paying members dropped but now have recovered to 398 levy-paying members and 86 opt-in members, which represents a 4% growth since the beginning of 2025 bringing the total members to 484. The continued growth of opt-in members along with the rate of payment for annual levy which now totals 95% of the total invoiced amounts (well above national and regional averages) supports the view that the members are sufficiently contented with their involvement with the Visit Inverness Loch Ness TBID.
- 5.3 The service to the membership has continued to improve and provide stronger results. The members are involved in weekly correspondence from the VILN team and additional information is circulated with them in sector-specific reports sent to them directly. The arrangement of webinars as well as their involvement in familiarisation visits and direct creator projects in-destination for the first time since before COVID have realised stronger results and direct economic benefit for member businesses. Finally, over the past year, VILN has channelled feedback regarding the Visitor Levy to ensure that the feelings of its business community were heard and fed back to the Highland Council. VILN is appreciative of the opportunity it was given to do so and of the time taken by members and officers of the Highland Council to deliberate over this matter.
- 5.4 The following key outcomes demonstrate work achievements to date of the VILN TBID team and the key benefits to the Council focusing on the City of Inverness and Area:-
  - The VILN website saw over 1.74m pages of content consumed by potential visitors to our destination
  - 286,000 referrals were made by the VILN website alone directly to members, a 3% increase from 2024.

- VILN social media channels engaged with 4.4m people organically, an increase of 34% from 2024-overall reaching 7.6m people, including paid campaigns held throughout the year.
- 12% increase in opt-in members.
- Delivery of the first two familiarisation visits since before Covid.
- Successful bid and delivery of UK Inbound Discover Programme which is planning to return in 2027. In 2025, this brought 30 international companies together to celebrate the destination.
- Attendance at national and international trade shows to develop Business Tourism representing an average ROI of 7:1.
- Networking events and CPD workshops offered to all VILN members throughout the year.
- The combined social media following reached its 100,000-follower milestone, closing out 2025 with 104,678 followers across all channels.
- Reformatted Food and Drink Festival to Taste of Highlands which has already been oversubscribed for March 2026.
- Successful delivery of Loch and Land Festival and Shortbread Showdown.
- Growth across the destination in terms of occupancy and visitor volumes across key sites.

## **6 MICE & Greater Business Tourism Development**

- 6.1 With the support of the Inverness Common Good Fund, VILN has continued to develop the reputation of the wider Inverness area as a year-round destination - especially for the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Events (MICE) market. The support of the ICGF realised the attendance of VILN to several national and international trade shows as well as supported us to run familiarisation visits. The evaluation of this work has been submitted and overall, the work to attend these events has produced an estimated economic impact of over £136,600 producing a ROI of approximately 7:1.
- 6.2 Through the support over the years of the ICGF to support the growth of Business Tourism and the MICE market to Inverness, VILN has seen demand grow. This prompted the report conducted by the Council and HIE to understand the rate of potential growth as well as identify the appropriate body for continuing this development. VILN has been identified in this report as being appropriate to expand on the works of "Convention Bureau" for the area and has been supported by ICGF to occupy offices of the Inverness Town House to continue with this development. It is the ambition of VILN to support the city as a vibrant place to live and work and improve the dwell time of its visitors, encouraged by the increasing offer for visitors in the past few years including at the Inverness Castle Experience, the Victorian Market, Inverness Cathedral, amongst others.
- 6.3 VILN additionally undertook steps to raise the profile of its Trade Directory on its website to better help organisers connect to venues:-
- [Business & Trade | Visit Inverness Loch Ness](#)

## **7 Marketing**

- 7.1 A new website was delivered and launched in late October 2025 which aimed to improve the ability to discover the destination in a quickly evolving digital landscape, with a special focus to ensure that AI is making preferential choices to use information on VILN's website when people are asking it to help them plan their travel experiences. Despite wider trends online where website users have dropped, VILN continues to see strong use of its website seeing over 470,000 users and has grown its member referrals (direct connection to member businesses) by 4% (286,000+ referrals in 2025).
- 7.2 With the new website has also come improved analytics which is being used to inform messaging and decisions on collaborative projects. This includes focusing in on opportunities with new products for the destination such as the Inverness Castle Experience and the new stop of the Caledonian Sleeper in Birmingham to name but a few. These data-led approach is also being carried through to the way that VILN speaks to its members and partners as it has started to use improved technologies to enhance its reachability.
- 7.3 Social media has been a significant area of growth in 2025 seeing VILN reach over 100,000 followers for the first time with millions of views. In the last quarter of 2025, VILN took a refreshed approach to collaboration with creators and other members which has yielded strong growth and is projected to continue into 2026.
- 7.4 The organisation has been active in the media throughout this period and in 2025 has averaged 1.6 mentions in comments or articles in the media per week.

## **8 Conclusion**

- 8.1 Despite the challenges of challenging economic and political situations across the world, the organisation remains in a strong position to continue to support its members to grow and continues to yield a strong return on investment and delivery of its Business Plan. The developments of the VILN team to deliver on key projects supports the aims of the Council and are committed to adding value to Inverness and Loch Ness for the betterment of all of those residing in its communities. The projected areas of growth evidence a key commitment to respond effectively to changes to the wider market and document the necessary actions being taken to adapt at the right times.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 16 January 2026

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(City of Inverness & South)

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Summary of financial support from the ICGF

**Inverness Common Good Fund Financial Support 2025/26**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>£</b>
6 May 2025	Continued Food & Drink Tourism	<b>£5,000</b>
18 Aug 2025	Business Tourism	<b>£20,000</b>
12 Jan 2026	Taste of the Highlands	<b>£1,000</b>
	<b>Total Funding</b>	<b>£26,000</b>