

Agenda Item	<b>13</b>
Report No	<b>ECI/22/26</b>

# The Highland Council

**Committee:** Economy and Infrastructure

**Date:** 28 May 2026

**Report Title:** Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan – Update and Amendment

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

## 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on delivery of the [Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan 2022 \(STIDP\)](#) and highlights continued progress in securing Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) support. To date, over £7m has been secured to deliver projects across Highland, improving visitor infrastructure, helping manage increasing visitor numbers, and reducing pressure on communities and the environment.

A small number of targeted amendments to the STIDP are recommended to ensure key priority projects remain aligned with current RTIF criteria and to position for future funding opportunities. The proposed updates relate to projects at Whaligoe Steps and Devil’s Staircase reflecting increased visitor pressures and the need to strengthen the Council’s approach in advance of wider review of the STIDP.

1.2 Looking ahead, a [Sustainable Tourism Strategy \(2024-30\)](#) was agreed by Committee in November 2024 and, in time, a Delivery Programme to support the strategy will be brought forward. The Delivery Programme will build on the STIDP work to date but will also take in a broader and more strategic approach to identifying investment priorities for the sector in Highland. It will be aligned with wider Council priorities, which will provide a clearer and more coordinated framework for managing tourism and supporting sustainable growth across Highland as discussed in Section 7.

## 2 Recommendations

### 2.1 Members are asked to:-

- i. **Note** the positive progress being made in delivering the Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan (STIDP) and in securing Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund support for vital projects across the Highland area;
- ii. **Agree** to the following amendments to the STIDP:-
  - a. Reclassification of Whaligoe Steps to a 'Tier 1' project and the creation of a corresponding 'hotspot', as set out in Section 6 and Appendix 1; and
  - b. Slight eastern expansion of 'Hotspot 1: Glen Etive & Glencoe' and the identification of an additional Tier 1 project at the Devil's Staircase (Altnafeadh, Glencoe), as set out in Section 6 and Appendix 1; and
- iii. **Note** the intent to develop a Sustainable Tourism Strategy Delivery Programme, which will incorporate the revised content of the Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan (STIDP) and, in due course, supersede it.

## 3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - The Council employs a Project Officer who liaises with project leads and submits Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund applications and supporting evidence including for projects not being run by the Council. The costs of this post and activity are met from the Service budget.

3.2 **Legal** - There are no implications arising directly from this report, but all projects funded by the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund or other grants are the subject of a legal agreement between the grant-awarding body and the Council. Similar legal agreements are in place between the Council and any third parties delivering projects.

3.3 **Risk** - There are no implications arising directly from this report.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no implications arising directly from this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no implications arising directly from this report. However, in keeping with the Council's Gaelic policy there can be Gaelic elements to some of the infrastructure projects.

## 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 report provides an update on progress of the Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan (2022). In addition, it proposes two additions to the list of Tier 1 projects and corresponding 'hotspot' mapping changes to recognise the increased visitor pressures since the Plan was approved in 2022 and ensure its eligibility for future RTIF applications. Detailed environmental and other assessments will be undertaken if and when work is taken forward the projects listed within the Plan. Therefore an impact assessment is not required.

## **5 Context and Progress**

- 5.1 Over the past two decades the tourism sector has experienced significant and sustained growth becoming a major driver of the Highland economy and supporting the prosperity of local communities. Visitor numbers have risen almost year-on-year, reaching 9.4 million in 2024. The Highlands is now recognised as a world-leading destination, renowned for its natural environment, landscapes, and distinctive culture and heritage. This success, however, has also created significant pressures on the natural environment, local infrastructure, public services and our communities, as well as on the overall quality of the visitor experience. This has particularly been the case in certain rural areas.
- 5.2 In response to this, the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) was established by the Scottish Government in 2018 to enhance the visitor experience in rural parts of Scotland facing increased visitor demand. Managed by VisitScotland, the fund aims to address pressure on local infrastructure and mitigate any negative impacts on communities. Only local authorities and National Park authorities are eligible to submit RTIF applications to VisitScotland.
- 5.3 The Council developed a Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan (STIDP) to deliver a more coordinated and strategic approach to investment in tourism infrastructure across the region. The STIDP, approved by the Council's Tourism Committee in February 2022, was informed by extensive engagement with Council services, community organisations, Members, partner agencies and other stakeholders.
- 5.4 The Plan identifies areas of the Highlands experiencing the most acute and sustained tourism pressures and classifies these as "hotspots." It then sets out a structured hierarchy of investment priorities, with Tier 1 comprising specific projects within the eight recognised hotspot areas. Tier 2 identifies individual sites outside the main hotspots where infrastructure is already under stress or where improved provision could help relieve pressure on more popular areas.
- 5.5 To date, the Highland Council has secured over £7m in RTIF funding, supporting 35 projects across Highland. Many of these have been delivered in partnership with other funders, community organisations, and local partners, enabling significant match funding alongside RTIF investment. This collaborative approach maximises resources and delivers greater impact, resulting in a total project value of over £12m across RTIF-supported projects in Highland.

5.6 The programme has delivered a range of vital visitor infrastructure, including:-

- new or upgraded public toilet facilities;
- improvements to footpaths and access routes;
- new or enhanced car, motorhome, and coach parking; and
- dedicated motorhome waste-disposal provision

This combined investment ensures high-quality, future-proofed infrastructure that meets current and future visitor needs and enhanced sustainability, leveraging multiple funding streams for long-term benefits. They support economic growth by encouraging longer stays and repeat visits, help protect sensitive environments by reducing erosion, littering, and habitat damage, strengthen community wellbeing by easing pressure on local residents, and build tourism resilience by ensuring infrastructure can cope with seasonal peaks and future demand.

Examples of successful RTIF funded projects:-

- **Stac Pollaidh** - Off-grid toilets and expanded car park, reducing roadside congestion and environmental impacts;
- **Glenfinnan Viaduct**: Improved viewing areas and parking to better manage visitor flow and protect iconic landscapes; and
- **Achmelvich Beach**: Motorhome facilities and waste disposal to protect fragile coastal ecosystems.

5.7 Within funding Round 7, Highland Council submitted three RTIF applications, with two being successful:-

- **Ardreck Castle** - a busy NC500 stop where the parking provision often inadequate to cope with demand. The project expands parking for cars and motorhomes, adds a dedicated bus lane, formalises laybys, and closes unsafe parking areas. It also includes updated interpretation, new bins, and cycle parking. Work is progressing well and on schedule.
- **Glencoe Village Car Park** – strategically located new parking hub which includes, waste disposal and EV facilities. Although delayed due to landowner and crofting issues, these have now been resolved and the tender will begin shortly, with the project expected to be completed in September 2026.

5.6 The Council has also recently secured three RTIF Design Grants, which provide up to £20,000 per project at a 100% intervention rate. These grants support design and planning work, such as surveys, drawings and planning submissions, to help bring projects to a “shovel-ready” stage ahead of full RTIF applications. These include:-

1. Sligachan, Isle of Skye (car park);
2. Sandwood Bay, Sutherland (car park); and
3. Chanonry Point / Rosemarkie, Black Isle (car park)

## 6 Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan - Amendments

6.1 While the STIDP framework has formed a solid basis for supporting RTIF applications, it is recommended that two amendments are made as an interim position.

### 6.2 1) Whaligoe Steps, Caithness

Proposed amendment: reclassify the project from Tier 2 to Tier 1 and identify the site as 'hotspot' area.

Justification: Whaligoe Steps is a dramatic stone staircase carved into the sea cliffs of Caithness's east coast, descending to a historic natural harbour once central to the region's thriving herring industry. The site has experienced a substantial rise in visitor numbers in recent years, with people drawn to its rich heritage value and striking natural setting. This increase has intensified several long-standing issues, particularly the very limited car parking provision, which is unable to meet demand during peak periods. The site is also accessed via a sub-standard and constrained road junction, creating safety concerns for both residents and visitors. Higher levels of congestion, inappropriate parking, and unmanaged visitor behaviour have contributed to continued conflict with neighbouring residents.

6.3 An application to Round 7 of RTIF was made in early 2025 for a new car park at Whaligoe Steps but was unsuccessful. Feedback from VisitScotland indicated that the application scored lower due to the project's Tier 2 status within the STIDP. Some of the match funding which was allocated to the project by the Council from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) was retained to allow the Council's Project Design Unit to advance the design and technical work required to bring Whaligoe Steps to a "shovel-ready" stage. This work is now well advanced, with a planning application having been lodged in December 2025 (reference 25/04617/FUL), strengthening the project's readiness for future capital funding opportunities.

### 6.4 2) Devil's Staircase (Altnafeadh)

Proposed amendment: identify Devil's Staircase at Altnafeadh as a Tier 1 project and expand the existing Glen Etive / Glencoe hotspot area eastwards to incorporate the site.

Justification: Devil's Staircase at Altnafeadh, located within Glencoe is a key access point for popular walking routes, Munro ascents and iconic viewpoints. Its high profile, combined with easy access from the A82, has resulted in exceptionally heavy visitor pressure. Existing parking infrastructure is unable to meet demand. This has led to extensive overspill parking on verges, informal pull-offs and a dangerous private access track on a blind bend. These conditions present significant and ongoing safety risks, with several serious road traffic incidents, including fatalities, recorded at this location.

The absence of appropriate infrastructure is also contributing to localised environmental impacts, including verge damage and erosion associated with informal parking. A strong and active community working group is in place and has been consistently advocating for improved visitor infrastructure at this location, demonstrating both local support and readiness to engage.

## 7 Next Steps

7.1 As part of the Scottish Government's 2026/27 budget, approved in January 2026, it was confirmed that an additional £4m would be made available for the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF). While the application round had originally been expected to run between May and July, VisitScotland announced on 25 March 2026 that Round 8 was open to applications, with a closing date of 24 April 2026.

7.2 Given the tight timescales and the highly competitive nature of the fund, the Council progressed a range of proposals and assessed which were best placed for submission. Priority was given to advancing those projects that were most viable, sufficiently developed, and capable of delivering meaningful improvements in the short to medium term.

Accordingly, applications were submitted for Whaligoe Steps, Chanonry Point / Rosemarkie, and a National Trust for Scotland-led parking and toilet scheme at Blairmore in Sutherland as part of Round 8.

7.3 Sustainable Tourism Strategy - Delivery Programme - When Members approved the Sustainable Tourism Strategy (2024–2030) in November 2024, there was a shared understanding that a Delivery Programme would be needed to turn the strategy into something practical and deliverable.

That Delivery Programme has still to be prepared and will incorporate an updated Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan in due course. The current plan has been an important piece of work. It has provided a strong evidence base and helped shape a clear pipeline of projects across Highland. However, it was designed with a fairly fixed, capital-focused approach, and this has limited its ability to respond to evolving visitor pressures and emerging opportunities.

The forthcoming Delivery Programme will build on that foundation rather than replace it entirely. The existing project pipeline will continue to play a key role, particularly in supporting RTIF activity. What will change is how this is brought together. The programme will take a broader, more joined-up view—setting out a clear direction for how tourism is managed and supported over the longer term.

This shift will be important. It will give the Council and its partners more flexibility to respond to change, whether that is shifting visitor patterns, new pressures in specific locations, or opportunities to invest differently. At the same time, it will maintain a clear focus on supporting communities and protecting the environment that underpins the visitor economy.

The timing of this work will be closely linked to work on the Visitor Levy. As agreed by Council in December, the levy will be subject to further consultation, and that process will help shape how tourism is managed going forward.

Preparing the Delivery Programme alongside this work will ensure that it:-

- reflects the views and priorities that emerge through consultation;
- aligns with how tourism activity and resources are expected to be managed; and
- sets out a clear and practical approach to delivering infrastructure and managing visitor pressures and supporting sustainable growth over the short, medium and longer term.

Taken together, this approach will ensure that the Delivery Programme is timely, well informed, and ready to support the next phase of work, including the possible introduction of the Visitor Levy.

7.4 Alignment with wider Council priorities – The Delivery Programme will not sit in isolation. It will be developed in alignment with wider Council priorities and the work already underway with partners. In particular, it will link to the Operational Delivery Plan 2024–2027 (especially the *Income Generation – Unique Visitor Experiences* programme) as well as the Pathfinder initiative focused on improving the electric vehicle charging network.

Bringing these strands together will support a more joined-up approach. It will help make better use of resources, reduce duplication, and create stronger opportunities for partnership working and co-investment.

More importantly, it will ensure that tourism contributes directly to the Council’s wider ambitions- supporting economic growth, strengthening communities, and advancing sustainability and climate objectives.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

Date: 1 May 2026

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Background Papers: [Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development Plan \(2022\)](#)  
[Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2024-2030](#)

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Revised STIDP Hotspot Map

## Appendix 1 – Updated STIDP ‘Hotspots’ Map

The updated STIDP map below includes a slight eastern expansion of hotspot #1 ‘Glen Etive & Glencoe’ and the addition of hotspot #9 ‘Whaligoe’.

