Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**RDB/14/26**

The Highland Council

Committee: **Redesign Board**

Date: **19 November 2026**

Report Title: **Unique Visitor Experiences - Smoo Cave**

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

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 Following approval of the full business case at Redesign Board on 27 August 2026, this report provides an update on progress to date in the development of a unique visitor experience (UVE) at Smoo Cave.

1.2 Further progress has been made on a range of factors including - the site, outline considerations for the design of the facilities required, community engagement, environmental impact and funding.

1.3 A Member/Officer working group has been established to guide the project development. This group meets for the first time on 3rd November 2026 and will meet at regular intervals throughout the design and development phases of the project.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. **Note** the progress to date on the development of the UVE at Smoo Cave

ii. **Note** the formation of the Redesign Board Working Group

3. Implications

3.1 **Resource:** The FBC for the development of a unique visitor experience project at Smoo Cave includes detail of the resource implications for the project. A funding strategy has been developed as part of the overall project plan and will ensure that appropriate resource is available at each critical stage of the project development.

3.2 **Legal:** The FBC outlines the legal implications required to progress the project. Management of the legal process will be undertaken throughout the lifespan of the project.

3.3 **Risk:** Project risks are described in the FBC and will be managed through the project risk register

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

3.5 **Gaelic**: There are no implications arising as a direct result of 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. When further action plans are developed these will be assessed for impacts accordingly.

5. Smoo Cave Unique Visitor Experience – Progress Report

5.1 Project Overview

Following approval of the FBC in August, work is progressing on the project. The Smoo Cave Unique Visitor Experience Project aims to enhance the visitor experience at Smoo Cave through the development of new car parking, an improved footpath network and the creation of a new visitor centre.

The development will move visitors away from the main A838 road and on to a new car parking site to the north of Smoo Cave with a new all-abilities footpath taking visitors back towards the cave from a new direction incorporating a unique aspect view of the cave and surrounding sea inlet.

The visitor centre will house an interpretation space focusing on the history and geology of the Cave and surrounding area, the marine and coastal environment and the military heritage of the former RAF Sango site on which the Centre will be constructed. The Centre will also include a retail space featuring products sourced locally and a café. Income generated through the development will support ongoing maintenance and development of the site.

5.2 Funding

All potential funding sources continue to be explored as part of the funding strategy for the project. Two early expressions of interest have been submitted to identified funding streams for the project, one to Regeneration Capital Grant Fund and a second to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Excellent feedback has been received that will allow the project team to tailor future funding applications in due course addressing the specific requirements of both funding bodies.

5.3 **Community Engagement**

The business development lead has met with representatives of Durness Community Council and Durness Community Group (formerly Durness Development Group) together with the local member and the local cave tour operator to outline the options being considered for development around Smoo Cave. There is broad community support for development at Smoo Cave. An engagement strategy has been drafted with the support of local members and will form the basis of our continuing community engagement.

5.4 **Environmental Assessment**

An ecological impact survey was undertaken to determine the suitability of the preferred site. The outcomes of this survey suggest there are no significant ecological impediments to developing the site as planned.

5.5 **Working Group**

As is standard practice with projects progressing through the redesign process, a working group comprising elected members from the Redesign Board together with relevant officers has been established and meets for the first time on the 03 November 2026. The two Redesign Board member representatives are Cllrs Robertson and Hendry.

The working group terms of reference include details on the scope of responsibility of the working group, the governance arrangement and the levels of technical expertise to be drawn on as required throughout the lifespan of the project. The draft Terms of Reference for this group are attached at **Appendix 1**.

6. **Next Steps**

6.1 The next steps and key milestones for the project are as follows:

Milestone	**Target Date**
Full Business Case approved by RDB	27 August 2026
Met with community representatives	05 October 2026
First meeting of Working Group	03 November 2026
Initial design process commences	09 November 2026

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate

Date: 04 November 2026

Authors: Sheila Armstrong, Chief Officer – Revenues & Commercialisation
Matt Bailey, Strategic Lead - Commercialisation
Steven Bone, Business Development Lead

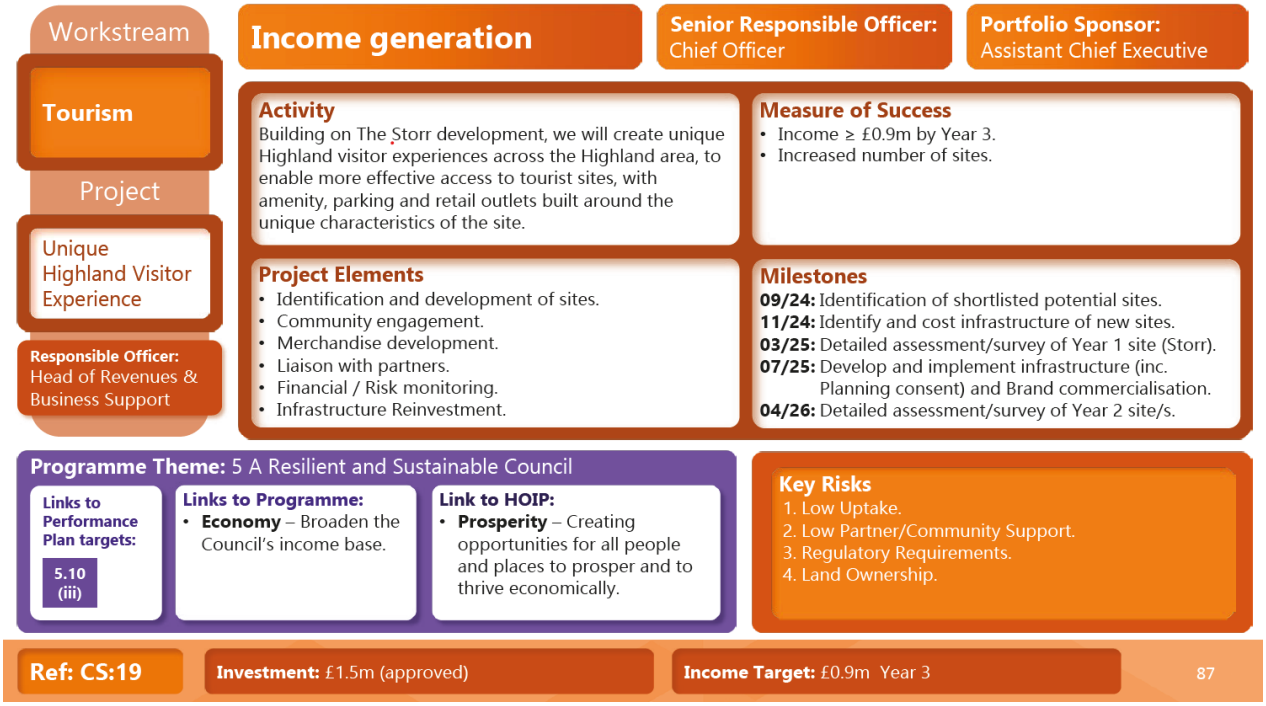
Appendix 1: Smoo Cave Visitor Centre Working Group - Terms of Reference

Chair	Sheila Armstrong		
Date of last update	29 October 2026	**Version**	DRAFT

1. Strategic Context & Working Group Purpose

Background - Strategic Context

As per the budget of 14th March 2024, Unique Highland Visitor Experience was approved as a workstream in the Delivery Plan Income Generation portfolio, with an approved investment of £1.5m and an Income Target of £0.9m in year 3 of the programme.



Building on the success of the development of car parking and a visitor centre at the Old Man of Storr in Skye, a number of sites were considered for further development within the context of unique visitor experiences. Of these sites Smoo Cave, has been approved for development by the Redesign Board.

Working Group Purpose

Operating in line with its Scope of Responsibility, the Smoo Cave Working Group will provide proactive and responsive governance throughout the project lifecycle, from initial development and planning through design, approvals for the successful delivery of the expected outcomes and benefits, with a key responsibility for decision-making, risk management, and oversight of all approved work.

2. Scope of Responsibility

Within the context of the approved UVE project for the development of a visitor centre and car park at Smoo Cave, the scope of the Working Group will be:

- to consider all aspects of Highland Council's process and financing for delivering a unique visitor experience at Smoo Cave
- to explore and identify development options at Smoo Cave
- to consider Council and stakeholder impacts
- to commission work to deliver efficiencies.

In doing so, the Working Group's responsibilities will encompass:

- Providing unified direction to the project.
- Ensuring there is effective communication within the project team and with all stakeholders.
- Ensuring the delivery of agreed business benefits.
- Being accountable for the success or otherwise of the project.

3. Governance & Group Management

Governance

With the complexity of the Smoo Cave Visitor Centre workstream, the Redesign Board provide the member representation on the Working Group, with the Group reporting into the Redesign Board.

The Smoo Cave Visitor Centre Working Group will provide input to the project Action Plan and report progress to the Highland Council Redesign Board, and the Corporate Income Generation Board.

Group Management

- The Group will be chaired by the Project Sponsor for the Smoo Cave UVE Project or Vice Chair (in the Chair's absence).
- The Group will meet monthly with additional meetings scheduled as necessary.
- The Group will have at least 4 members to be quorate, not including the Sponsor.
- Attendance is expected, with substitutes provided where agreed in advance with the Sponsor.
- The Group will receive the agenda and papers 5 working days in advance of the meetings
- The Group will be presented with the latest version of the Project Plan timeline, with key milestone dates defined across the in-scope areas
- Group action notes will be produced and shared with the working group.

4. Membership

The core members of the Group and their roles are set out in the table below. In addition to core members, specific subject matter experts and advisors will be invited to attend the Group as and when required.

Role/area of expertise	Designation	Name
Project Sponsor (Chair)	CO Revenues & Commercialisation	Sheila Armstrong

Commercialisation (Vice Chair)	Strategic Lead (Commercialisation)	Matt Bailey
Redesign Board – Member	Councillor	Trish Robertson
Redesign Board – Member	Councillor	Jacqui Hendry
Project Manager	Business Development Lead (Commercialisation)	Steve Bone
Finance Support	Senior Accountant	Daniel Jamali
Design Support	TBC	TBC
Community Support	Community Development Manager	Fiona Richardson

5. Responsibilities

In line with the referred to Scope of Responsibility, the Group will have the following responsibilities:

- Be forward looking and lead with purpose, taking decisions to maintain pace and momentum to ensure the successful delivery of expected Project outcomes and benefits.
- Production of an Action Plan, and to consider and provide approval to proceed where appropriate.
- Receive and consider ongoing reporting of progress against expected delivery, ensuring activities remain viable and the best option.
- Ensure the required resources are available to deliver the Project outcomes and benefits.
- Manage and respond to risks and issues that could lead to the non-achievement of outcomes and benefits, making decisions on the required remedial action.
- Resolve any exceptional matters escalated to the Working Group.
- Apply change controls and authorise (where applicable) any major deviations from the approved plan - communicate information about the Projects across stakeholder groups.
- Provide overall strategic direction for the Smoo Cave Visitor Centre Project.
- Provide reports to Redesign Board for political scrutiny. Deliver income generation targets for this project that will contribute to the UVE Programme targets as set out within the Council's Delivery Plan 2022-2027.
- Ensure the wider implications and effects of all proposed projects, remedies and policy recommendations are investigated, defined, understood and communicated to facilitate fully informed decision-making.

6. Financial Management

The Working Group does not have responsibility for the overall financial management of a specific project budget.