The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**5**
Report No	**CIA/46/26**

Committee: **City of Inverness Area**

Date: **16 November 2026**

Report Title: **Visit Inverness Loch Ness (VILN) Business Improvement District (BID) Renewal**

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

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report introduces a report from Visit Inverness Loch Ness (VILN) Business Improvement District (BID) Ltd on their work over the course of the last year. This is set out at **Appendix 1**.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:-

i. **Consider and note** the work of Visit Inverness Loch Ness set out within Appendix 1; and
ii. **Note** the ongoing development of partnership working in key areas identified.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – The principal costs associated with the collection of the BID Levy by the Council have been recovered from BID levy income.

3.2 **Legal** – No implications.

3.3 **Risk** – No implications

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – VILN are responsible for ensuring that all health and safety requirements in relation to the delivery of projects are adhered to.

3.5 **Gaelic** – No implications

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 on the work of an independent, external organisation and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Background

5.1 A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business led initiative where businesses work together and invest collectively in local services and improvements in their business environment. A BID is funded by businesses through a levy calculated on their respective non-domestic rates valuation. The resulting improvements and services are additional to those provided by public sector organisations such as the local authority. A BID can only be introduced when it has been put to a democratic vote involving all eligible businesses, when at least 50% of all businesses involved are in support of it, and they in turn represent more than 50% of the rateable value of the BID area.

5.2 Members will be aware that Visit Inverness Loch Ness (VILN) Business Improvement District (BID) has operated based in the City and Area since March 2014. This BID differs from others within Highland as its membership is based on association with the development of tourism and hospitality meaning that any business that has one of these elements as an essential component of its operating model can be a member no matter where it is geographically located within Highland.

5.3 The Council has a statutory role to play in this process in addition to its involvement as an affected tenant and property owner, although, in this instance, the Council is not a potential Levy Payer at this time. At the time of the next renewal ballot set for March 2029, the Council will be invited to scrutinise a new BID proposal should VILN decide to seek a fourth term of office.

5.4. This Committee has considered applications to the Inverness Common Good Fund for grant of £20,000, which has been awarded annually, through the current term of the VILN TBID up until 2025, in support of joint marketing proposals for the City and Area. **Appendix 1** includes a summary of support from the Inverness Common Good Fund.

5.5 Members are invited to scrutinise the work of VILN in delivery of their business plan for the period March 2024 to March 2029. **Appendix 1** provides a summary of the work undertaken to date.

Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Date:	21 October 2026
Author:	David Haas, Senior Community Development Manager (City of Inverness & South)
Background Papers:	None
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Report from VILN Chief Executive Officer

Appendix 1

Visit Inverness Loch Ness Annual Report

This report updates Members on delivery of the Visit Inverness Loch Ness (VILN) Business Plan 2024–2029 and the benefits secured for Inverness and Loch Ness. Membership has exceeded 500 businesses, a Convention Bureau Lead has been appointed, and participation in the Global Destination Sustainability (GDS) programme is strengthening destination planning.

Business Plan General Updates

The Business Plan approved at ballot in March 2024 remains the delivery framework. The previous Council report recorded 35% completion in January 2026. As of 12 October, VILN record 42% progress. Progress includes finite projects and continuing services. The October figure is therefore a reported milestone.

Full-time Membership Manager role now in situ. Membership has passed 500 for the first time, compared with 484 reported in January 2026 and 473 at ballot. This broadens the business network contributing to destination development and supports collective delivery across the city and rural area. Membership growth is a positive indicator of value and sector cohesion, it is not, by itself, a measure of business profitability.

Capacity has increased through the appointment of a Digital Engagement and Content Manager in summer 2026 and our Convention Bureau Lead in September. These appointments strengthen destination promotion and business tourism. Improved implementations of trackers and databases are improving our ability to track performance and ability to streamline bookings and programme development.

Weekly updates, sector briefings, networking and development activity support businesses, including smaller enterprises. Destination statistics give members evidence for planning and market development. Priorities include improved visitor maps and business case studies, to show how destination support reaches individual enterprises.

VILN has committed to bringing more buyers directly to the destination and at the end of October will deliver its activity-focused familiarisation visit. This visit will bring 9 buyers from across the UK, Europe and North America together to showcase new and emerging businesses in the destination. Full results from the visit will be shared in the November meeting. Plans are ahead to host a Business and Conference specific buyers' trip in February 2027.

MICE & Greater Business Tourism Development

The Convention Bureau is moving from development into dedicated delivery following the appointment of its Lead. It builds on Inverness Common Good Fund support for the establishment of the Convention Bureau by funding the movement of VILN offices to the Inverness Town House, and the Council and HIE work identifying VILN as an appropriate body to develop this function.

The immediate focus is to build a venue and supplier database, respond to organiser enquiries and develop bids. Bringing hotels, meeting venues, transport and experiences into one destination offer will help conference expenditure reach more local businesses. Pipeline records will support systematic buyer follow-up and measurement of results.

Business tourism offers a route to demand outside peak leisure periods and longer stays through additional experiences. VILN is developing closer relationships with partners, including UHI, to support opportunities such as academic conferences. Enquiries and bids remain prospective business until confirmed.

Marketing

Despite changes over the past 12 months in how people use the internet, including increased use of AI to plan travel, VILN's website user numbers continue to track upwards. So far into 2026 (as of September 2026) reports are up 2.6% year on year. The website launched in October 2025 supports this changing market through discoverable destination information and direct routes to member businesses.

In 2026, VILN has enhanced its partnership working with international brands to improve the visibility of the destination. The full update to the committee will include case studies from selected partnerships with LNER, Caledonian Sleeper and Aer Lingus. Additional share of renewed work with influencers from the USA will demonstrate how VILN has leveraged the popularity of Scotland with the World Cup to heighten awareness of the destination to millions of viewers.

Membership Manager represented members at UKInbound Inspire in September 2026, supporting relationships with prospective buyers. Trade activity and familiarisation visits help businesses reach markets that would be costly to access individually. Buyer follow-up and business participation are central to securing value from this activity. Both Destination Development Manager and Membership Manager attended Visit Scotland Connect in March, as well as Membership Manager attending IBT trade show. Examples of follow ups include an influencer visit, increasing our American audience in partnership with Rabbies, visit Scotland, Visit Wales and the Caledonian Sleeper.

VILN supported the British Airways Inverness route tenth anniversary in September and welcomed the Frankfurt route announcement. Airport partnerships and international market development connect promotion with opportunities for local businesses. Passenger movements from Inverness Airport average at approximately 12% higher than in 2026. A key project which VILN has supported in 2026 has been the support given to H&I Airports to secure the additional routing to Frankfurt with Discover Airlines (subsidiary of Lufthansa).

Sustainability and Destination Resilience

Inverness and Loch Ness were selected as one of four Scottish pilots in the VisitScotland-funded GDS programme. The introductory meeting took place in August, followed by stakeholder work in September. The project brings environmental, social and destination management evidence into a shared improvement process.

The focus includes climate action, active travel, waste, community sentiment and visitor movement. Work with Council services, VisitScotland and local partners will help identify gaps, agree responsibilities and target actions where they can have the greatest practical benefit. Participation is a development programme; this report does not claim a completed certification or verified improvement in performance.

Learning from the Digital Tourism Think Tank Campus in Finland, attended with HIE support, is informing this approach. Priorities include better use of data, practical benchmarking and measures that consider business viability, community benefit and environmental pressures alongside visitor volume.

The next stage is to refresh the Climate Action Plan following expiry of the 2023–2025 plan and use the GDS review to establish a proportionate set of measures. Proposed Board oversight, action ownership and quarterly monitoring will support accountability. This will help VILN and partners prioritise achievable actions, support businesses and direct limited resources towards improvements that protect the destination's long-term appeal.

Community Benefit and the Visitor Economy

The Inverness Town House visitor project will open more opportunities to experience the city's civic heritage. Cath Findlay has been appointed to deliver pilot tours, with the first scheduled for 13 October and further dates through December. At the reporting date, these tours are planned activity rather than completed outcomes.

Tours are priced at £15 for adults, £10 for a limited allocation of Highland Council residents and free for children under 16. The guide fee is £150 per tour. Income above the guide fee and online booking administration costs will return to the Inverness Common Good Fund. Commissionable member bookings provide a further route for businesses to participate.

Food and drink activity includes the previously reported successful delivery of and development of Taste of the Highlands for 7 March 2027. These programmes showcase local producers and give small businesses a shared platform to reach visitors and residents. Sponsorship and partnership development aim to extend the return from public support. Popular Local Producers Dinner, teaming up with Kingsmills Hotel, will also take place in its third year in February 2027. Plans are underway of producing local producer maps once again, to support local businesses in the area. An initiative led by Destination Development Manager and Highland Good Food Partnership to promote sustainable eating across our destination.

Hospitality and education partnerships support young people's awareness of sector careers. In the time since the last report VILN has led in delivering the Highland Menu Competition which saw over 600 entries from across the Highland Council Area by primary school students and raised donations for local schools. Additionally, VILN has developed and helped to deliver hospitality training programmes with DYW and Hospitality Connect. Further to this, VILN has redesigned their networking, introductions and collaborative promotion to connect businesses with one another and with events. The CEO's participation in the City of Culture Interim Advisory Board links destination development with cultural and community ambitions.

VILN's presence at the Inverness Highland Games, Belladrum and the Loch Ness Marathon supported visitors to explore the destination to over 45,000 people with over 3,500 direct engagements. Conversations suggested interest in extending stays; this is an observation to investigate through future data, rather than a quantified change in visitor behaviour.

Visitor Levy engagement continues through the autumn with VILN leading the joint in-person consultation events across the Highlands to allow Councillors to engage with businesses. Alongside this VILN has conducted their own survey with members. Member feedback emphasises the need to understand governance and spending arrangements before considering support. Bringing business evidence into the Council's discussions remains a priority. VILN has engaged constructively with the Highland Council in the Visitor Levy Forum meetings to feedback industry voices and find workable solutions for the betterment of our region.

VILN continues to work on improving the dispersal of visitors into the rural economy. In 2026, VILN has held over 10 meetings with community groups to better understand their priorities for local placemaking, the role of VILN in doing this and has aided in assisting to find appropriate funding opportunities. This has extended to the support in the development of major new events, including the Gravel Sportive in Drumnadrochit, Gravel North and the development of the first Women's Pro Am scheduled for May 2027.

Value of Money and Next Priorities

VILN combines business levy income, voluntary membership and project support to provide services across Inverness and Loch Ness. Shared promotion, buyer engagement and destination coordination offer businesses access to activity that is harder to deliver individually. The strongest quantified return currently available is the earlier evaluated business tourism programme; wider activity is reported through outputs and developing outcomes.

The next phase is to convert increased capacity into measurable benefit: confirmed conference business, effective member referrals, stronger market readiness and practical sustainability improvements. VILN's currently prioritises outcome reporting, review of actions and risks, and improved partnerships to help aid destination discovery. Reporting will distinguish completed Business Plan milestones from continuing services and record funded project costs and outcomes.

Priorities through the remainder of 2026 and into 2027 are to establish the Convention Bureau's venue network and bid pipeline; complete the next GDS review actions; deliver and evaluate the Town House pilot; and progress Taste of the Highlands and trade engagement. These priorities support year-round business activity and a stronger connection between tourism and local benefit.

Conclusion
VILN has strengthened its membership and delivery capacity while progressing the Business Plan. Previous business tourism investment has demonstrated a positive estimated return. The Convention Bureau, GDS programme and community-facing projects provide a clear next stage: secure more year-round business, protect the destination's assets and demonstrate how investment benefits Inverness and Loch Ness.

Designation: Chief Executive, Visit Inverness Loch Ness

Date: 9 October 2026

Author: Ellen Walker

Background Papers: VILN Annual Report; October 2026 Board Papers and preparation discussions; notebook themes and project updates

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Previously reported financial support from the ICGF