

Agenda Item	9
Report No	CIA/43/17

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: City of Inverness Area Committee

Date: 30 November 2017

Report Title: City Centre Development Update

Report By: Director of Development and Infrastructure

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report updates Members on Council investment, fund-raising and activity to contribute towards the improvement and regeneration of Inverness City Centre including tourism and cultural facilities, improvements to access and connections and the regeneration of Academy Street. It also highlights opportunities for the redevelopment of properties and sites to increase the number of people living and working in the city centre. Many of the projects are shown on the accompanying diagram at **Appendix 1**, these are being led through the Inverness City task Force chaired by the Director of Development and Infrastructure.
- 1.2 Members will also note that a separate report to this Committee proposes the adoption of a new Inverness City Centre Development Brief that shapes other potential opportunities for regeneration and investment across the City Centre.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are invited to note progress and agree next steps in delivering city centre improvements detailed in Sections 3 – 6 under the following themes:
3. Visitor and Cultural Attractions
 4. Access and Connections
 5. Academy Street and surroundings
 6. New office and residential accommodation

3. Visitor and Cultural Attractions

3.1 Inverness Castle

3.1.1 The Inverness Castle project (map item 2), led by a project delivery group, jointly chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, and the Provost of Inverness, is progressing well. The following working vision has been adopted:

To create a sustainable and viable must see visitor attraction that celebrates the spirit of the Highlands past, present and future: its creativity, well-being, culture, heritage and natural environment. It will attract new and returning visitors to the area, will be embraced by the people of the Highlands and will inspire all to visit other parts of the Highlands.

3.1.2 Discussions are underway with a number of potential partners with a view to a significant visitor offer. Much work has been done to ascertain the historical value and the condition of the buildings on the site to determine what must be done in terms of conservation and preservation and therefore the options for adaption and development as a visitor attraction. Work remains on track for The Highland Council to acquire the South Tower when the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service leave on completion of the new Justice Centre in Inverness (map item 14). Funding of £15m has been allocated through the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal.

3.1.3 Once the work on the options for the visitor attraction and on the potential of the buildings is further developed applications for additional capital funding, for example to the Heritage Lottery Fund, can be submitted. A public consultation is planned, particularly around how the Castle can act to encourage visits to other parts of the Highlands, notably those less well known communities. The aspiration is for the Castle to be a very high quality attraction of international repute.

3.2 Inverness Castle: North Tower alterations and public realm improvements

At the end of a very successful first summer season, the Castle Viewpoint (map item 3) has had just over 22,360 visitors. This exceeded the numbers required for the break-even business case, which in turn enables the attraction to open through the winter season. The popularity of the attraction; its role promoting the Inverness Castle project; and the Viewpoint's contribution to the overall tourist offer in the Inverness suggests that this is worth doing. The opening hours will be Friday to Monday, 11.30am – 4.00pm, based on experience of visiting patterns to date.

3.3 Inverness Town House

Work is ongoing on a five year project to repair and conserve the external fabric of Inverness Town House (map item 7), due for completion in 2020 at a cost of £5.8m. The next phase will commence in Spring 2018 and will take a further two years to complete. With the recent changes in the Council, office staff from elsewhere in the city have been relocated back into the Town House to ensure that vacant spaces are utilised and the city centre is supported. Amongst them has been the Planning and Building Standards teams which relocated from Beechwood Business Park

3.4 Inverness Museum and Art Gallery

Measures to enhance the public realm surrounding the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (IMAG) (map item 10) are under consideration, including the potential to expand the current programme of streetscape improvements and give greater prominence to IMAG signage. Work is underway to ensure that any project can be integrated with the Inverness Castle Project (map item 2).

3.5 **River Ness Flood Alleviation Scheme - Public Art Project (map item 11)**

3.5.1 Over £0.75m has been raised to deliver six art projects in association with the city's flood alleviation scheme. One project, River Connections, has been completed as has the Worker's Memorial which was supported by this programme. The other projects are progressing well and are due to be completed by spring/summer 2018 including the New Gathering Place which has been re-commissioned. The new design concept for this is in development and is being informed by a process of engagement with local community, stakeholders and project funders. Two artists' events have taken place to date, one in Eden Court and the other in Inverness railway station and a website has been set up www.myriverness.com to capture people's stories and views on the river.

3.5.2 The Public Art Project is funded by The Highland Council (£106k), Inverness Common Good Fund (£281k), Creative Scotland (£306k) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (£66k) and is under the governance of the Inverness City Arts Working Group (ICAWG).

3.6 **Uniqueness Tourism BID**

Visit Inverness Loch Ness (previously Uniqueness Tourism BID) has a business plan for activities to 2019. While their direct membership excludes those who are already Inverness BID members, the majority of activities within the business plan will support city centre businesses, notably marketing the city and area, and attracting conferences, meetings, and supporting events to the city. A new £3m marketing campaign has been run in conjunction with VisitBritain.

3.7 **Inverness city centre Wi-Fi**

3.7.1 The Inverness City WiFi Project, led by the Highland Council and funded by the Inverness and Highland City-Region Deal, aims to create a free open public Wi-Fi system across the area for visitors and residents. The first phase of the Inverness City WiFi project, branded Ness WiFi, has provided fast internet coverage in a pilot area including the Victorian Market, Falcon Square and surrounding streets. The system is providing reliable fast internet usage to users, whilst being family friendly (Internet Watch Foundation Standard and updated twice daily) and content filtered with average daily user number of between 300 – 600 users. Users also have language choices when logging into the system (with Gaelic coming on-line). Phase 2 is currently being installed to cover Inverness City Centre and across the river along to Eden Court, the Northern Meeting Park and Ardross Coach Drop off with a go live date of November 30th 2017.

3.7.2 The creation of backbone wireless network(s) allows for future proofing and the opportunity to have one singular network as opposed to multiple to run Internet of Things, Traffic Management, Sensors, CCTV etc. This potentially could provide significant savings for the Highland Council for the future and provide many options for projects. The project is also working on providing valuable footfall data throughout the project zones which doesn't currently exist and could be shared with relevant groups.

3.7.3 The development work on creating a suitable model of WiFi design for the project has enabled the project budget to allow for deployment to be rolled out across Highland towns. Available resources are allowing for WiFi to be provided in 14 town centres. Based on a desire to introduce WiFi to a number of town centres across Highland, allied to a need to service a number of tourism hotspots, the following 14 towns have been identified for Phase 3 rollout:

Alness, Aviemore, Dingwall, Dornoch, Drumnadrochit, Fort Augustus, Fort William, Invergordon, Nairn, Portree, Tain, Thurso, Ullapool and Wick.

- 3.7.4 The rollout for the 14 towns aims to be live by Spring 2018. The Project has also won a consultancy award through Scottish Town Partnership, which is being used to involve local communities, groups in business to get involved and support the project areas will also look at monetisation and sustainability of the project long term. Scottish Government are also consulting with Highland Council to seek guidance of WiFi issues and plans.

4 Access and Connections

4.1 Inverness Railway Station

- 4.1.1 Abellio Scotrail (AS) is progressing with the design phase of the Inverness Station improvement project (map item 5). The total investment will be in the region of £6m and is being led by AS as part of their franchise agreement with Transport Scotland.
- 4.1.2 Mott MacDonald is the appointed team working on the detail design phase, which is expected to conclude early in 2018 with the proposed package of works going to tender. The Council has been working in close collaboration with AS and Mott MacDonald as a key partner, with the specific aim of making substantial improvements to all three entrances to the Station and Station Square. A number of key stakeholder groups have been actively engaged throughout the design process including neighbouring landowners, access groups and local businesses. Public consultation will be commencing shortly.
- 4.1.3 HITRANS and the Highland Council have been successful in securing additional funding from the Sustrans Community Links Programme (map item 20) to promote active travel links around the Station Improvement project. The recently commissioned work sees Civic Engineers now embarking on feasibility, design and community engagement/public consultation for the project, which will complement and add value to the plans by Abellio ScotRail to upgrade Inverness Railway Station and its surrounds. The goal is to ensure the streetscapes and environments approaching the railway station are safer and more attractive for pedestrians and cyclists and those with reduced mobility.

4.2 Community Links PLUS 2017 (map item 15)

The preparation of a funding bid for the Community Links Plus fund was reported to this Committee on 19 June 2017. The headline interventions of the overall Programme include:

- provision of a new link (West Link route) across the River Ness that enables walking and cycling journeys to and from the major sports facility area at Bught Park from the south side of Inverness which will also link up to the existing Southern Distributor Road which incorporates active travel infrastructure;
- connect the West Link route to the City Centre (identified as ATN4 in the Active Travel Audit);
- enhancement of the key 'East to West' active travel corridor linking with the City Centre;
- complementary proposed measures towards enhanced public transport infrastructure (rail and bus) by providing improved cycle routes and cycle parking to the transport hubs in the City Centre.

- 4.3 Funding of £6.5m has been awarded towards the Inverness City Active Travel Network interventions. Early dialogue with Sustrans about the management and

governance of the three year funding award has already begun. A separate update report to CIAC is anticipated in Spring 2018.

4.4 **Streetscape improvements: Castle Wynd and Bridge Street (map item 4)**

Proposals to enhance the surrounding public realm in the Castle Wynd, noted at paragraph 3.4, have been submitted for planning approval. These include improvements to lighting and as part of the proposals the existing taxi rank is to be removed and the access from Bridge Street is to become a Pedestrian priority area to encourage footfall to the castle.

5 **Academy Street and surroundings**

5.1 **Inverness Townscape Heritage Project**

5.1.1 The five year Inverness Townscape Heritage (TH) Project (map item 8) has now completed its second year of delivery. In total the TH Project will invest just over £3m in regenerating the built environment of Academy Street through a grant scheme for repair and restoration of historic fabric. The project is funded by £1.49m from the Heritage Lottery Fund, £725k from the Council, and £946k from Historic Scotland via the Inverness City Heritage Trust. The high priority projects are AI Welders, Station Square and the Phoenix; there are 10 medium priority projects, and a shopfront and small works grant fund focused on Academy Street.

5.1.2 Current project activity includes:

- progression of grant applications with all the priority projects and working up new building repair projects where appropriate;
- finishing the series of heritage workshops themed around Academy Street's built heritage. These public events took place over the last 18 months and the outcomes will form the content for the digital heritage trail, which be launched by Easter 2018;
- best practice workshops on traditional shopfront design, heritage building maintenance and CPD events to help address the local gap in conservation skills; and
- continued one to one employability support for the city centre with weekly appointments available with the TH Employability Adviser at the Prison, within various HMOs and the Ness Bank Lunch Club run by Inverness Foodstuff.

5.2 **Victorian Market**

The Victorian Market (map item 1) is an asset of the Inverness Common Good Fund that is managed by the Council. A Victorian Market Stakeholder Group was set up in August 2016 to explore future management options with a focus on delivering a vibrant and sustainable future for the Market. Group membership includes Councillors and local business representatives. A Market Manager has been appointed to deliver the Market Action Plan which has been approved by the Market Management Stakeholder Group and the City of Inverness Area Committee. Market retailers are supportive and the development of a brand will be one of the first tasks when the Manager takes up post shortly.

5.3 **Eastgate Hostel (map item 13)**

This prominent High Street property has been derelict since a fire destroyed the interior in April 2013. The Council acted quickly to ensure the building was made safe. The building is owned by 3 individuals. As no action was being taken to restore the building, the Council convened a meeting in summer 2016 with the owners, agents and officials. The position has improved with all statutory permissions in place, negotiations taking place with a preferred bidder to restore the building to a shell and

allow the two shops to trade.

5.4 Hotel developments

There are a number of emerging hotel developments on and around Academy Street including:

- the refurbishment of Ballantyne House at 84 Academy Street to form a 59 room Travelodge which is currently under construction (map item 19);
- a planning application currently under consideration for the change of use of offices at 47-49 Academy Street (above the Nickel & Dime store) to form hostel accommodation with four dormitory style rooms (map item 20); and
- a planning application currently under consideration for change of use of offices at 111 Academy Street (above the recently opened McGregors Bar) to form four hotel-apartments (map item 21).

6 Other City Centre developments

6.1 Midmills Campus (map item 9)

Planning permission was granted in August 2016 to re-develop the former Inverness College UHI complex to form a creative hub, new sheltered and affordable housing (comprising 83 residential units) and associated infrastructure. The proposed development is a joint venture between the Council, retirement home specialists McCarthy & Stone and Wasps Artists' Studios. The Council has recently let the contract for the delivery of 30 affordable homes for the elderly as part of this project

6.2 Proposed new residential development: Raining's Stairs (map item 6)

A planning application for the gap site abutting the southern edge of Raining's Stairs to form one commercial unit and 18 residential flats was approved in April 2017. The contractor is now onsite with completion anticipated in 2018.

6.5 Proposed new hotel development: Glebe Street (map item 17)

This riverside site, formerly occupied by a municipal swimming pool, has lain vacant since the pool was demolished in the 1980s. Although planning permission was granted in January 2016 for 60 new privately owned residential units the site has now been sold to a hotel developer.

6.6 Former McEwens store, Church Street (map item 18)

Planning permission and listed building consent for change of use of the former McEwens of Perth store to a bar were granted in January 2017 and the works are currently underway with an advertisement consent for outside signage currently under consideration.

7 Implications

7.1 Resource – none.

7.2 Legal – none.

7.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – none.

7.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever - none

7.5 Risk – none.

7.6 Gaelic – none

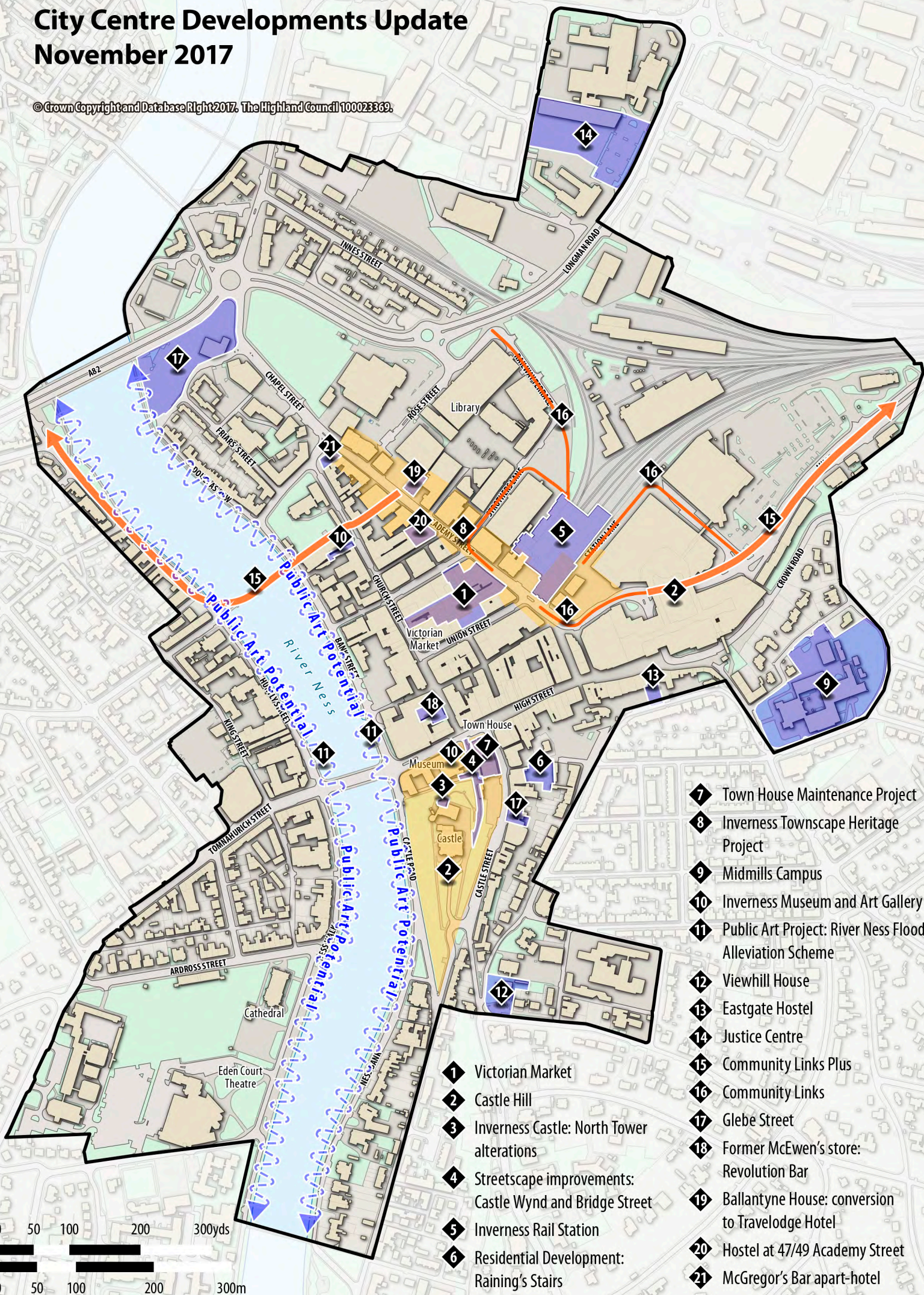
Designation: Director of Development and Infrastructure

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