

Agenda Item	<b>11.</b>
Report No	<b>CC/06/21</b>

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Caithness Committee

**Date:** 21 January 2021

**Report Title:** Caithness Horizons Update

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on work undertaken on a partnership basis by The Highland Council (THC), High Life Highland and Dounreay Site Restoration Limited (DSRL), to support the re-opening of Caithness Horizons, Thurso, and the current position in light of the latest Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

### 2. Implications

2.1 **Resource (Budget and Staffing)** – the capital and revenue funding associated with the re-opening of Caithness Horizons was approved by Committee in May 2019. The majority of the capital works are now complete and expenditure committed and accounted for. In relation to revenue, the annual contribution from THC of £75,000 per annum for 3 years (matched by the same contribution from DSRL) will be drawn down to support High Life Highland as operator, on a timeline linked to a post-lockdown opening date.

2.2 **Legal** – THC has previously agreed to the novation of the existing 3-way agreement between the National Lottery, and THC/Caithness Horizons, being novated to THC. This relates to the terms and conditions of the lottery funding awarded to renovate the building 10-plus years ago. An operational agreement between THC, DSRL and High Life Highland has been prepared and is being finalised to reflect the 3 way partnership and funding arrangements for the facility.

2.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** – the re-opening of Caithness Horizons will bring back into use a vital community asset and support wider community and economic benefit for Thurso and the wider Caithness Area.

2.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – no implications to highlight.

2.5 **Risk** – due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and current lockdown, it is not possible to give a definitive date for the re-opening of Caithness Horizons. As outlined in the

report, the partners are focused on ensuring all building and other preparatory works are complete or progressed as far as can reasonably be done at this time, to support a swift re-opening when safe and permissible to do so.

2.6 **Gaelic** – no implications to highlight.

### **3. Recommendations**

3.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Note the positive progress made regarding building and other preparatory works to support the re-opening of Caithness Horizons, Thurso.
- ii. Note the ongoing support from THC, High Life Highland and Dounreay Site Restoration Limited, on a partnership basis, with the intent to re-open the facility as soon as circumstances under the current Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown allow.

### **4. Background**

- 4.1 Caithness Horizons in Thurso closed its doors in February 2019, when the then operator “Caithness Horizons” ceased operations due to financial and sustainability issues.
- 4.2 The building is owned by the THC, and THC retains responsibility for the collections housed therein.
- 4.3 Recognising the valuable role the building plays within the town of Thurso, and the wider Caithness area, and the opportunities offered in relation to museum and community use, and in turn tourism and the wider economic benefit, THC’s Care, Learning and Housing Committee in May 2019 agreed to commit to the re-opening of the facility, with a capital investment from THC of circa £200k to address key building works, and a joint partnership approach between THC and Dounreay Site Restoration Limited (DSRL) to each provide revenue funding of £75k p.a. for an initial 3 year period to support a new operator, High Life Highland.
- 4.4 A number of local meetings took place with Ward members and other local stakeholder interests to develop and support a new vision for the facility and the re-opening of the facility on a partnership basis between THC, High Life Highland and DSRL.
- 4.5 Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the majority of building works had been undertaken, albeit those works had taken longer than initially anticipated, and plans were being developed for an expected opening in spring/summer 2020. Due to the pandemic and lockdown, subsequent building works and planning towards re-opening had to be put on hold. The lockdown and extended period of the building being unused also led to some additional works requiring to be addressed in the latter part of 2020.

### **5. Current Position and Next Steps**

- 5.1 To date the following works are now confirmed as complete in relation to the fabric of the building and other building related activity which were required to support safe re-opening of the facility. The replacement of the heating system including new boilers, repairs to the ventilation system and the mobility lift. There has also been extensive repairs on the roof, making good the damage caused by the lead theft. Work identified

by our own Fire Risk Assessment has been actioned. All relevant plant such as fire alarms, emergency lighting, CCTV, gas safety checks etc has transferred on to the respective THC maintenance contract.

- 5.2 These address the more significant building fabric issues which required to be addressed. In the latter part of 2020, the HLH team have had a number of visits to the facility to assess what further improvements and actions may be required to support re-opening, and these include updating and reviewing risk assessments and commissioning a number of improvements to the café area, including purchasing new catering equipment, (currently on order). The new ICT requirements for the building, including free public Wi-Fi, have been established and installation is currently being arranged. Work is in hand with regards to the refresh of the kitchen and café area and should be completed in the very near future. There have been indications that Caithness Horizons could potentially be used as a Covid-19 vaccination centre. If this was to happen, works would be delayed.
- 5.3 Some final re-commissioning of services within the building are required before re-opening, and these include a flushing and testing of the water system among other key safety and compliance checks. The water system was flushed and disinfected before Christmas. Samples have been taken to ensure good water quality. We are awaiting the results. However, if the building is unused for a prolonged period of time due to the current lockdown, these water safety measures may have to be repeated.
- 5.4 HLH had plans in place to commence recruitment activity at the start of January 2021, with the intent of a re-opening spring 2021. Clearly due to the current lockdown these plans have been put on hold, but with the intent these can be progressed quickly when it is safe and permissible to do so.
- 5.5 Engagement between THC, HLH and DSRL has continued throughout the period since Caithness Horizons has been closed, with a number of recent discussions pre and post-Christmas 2020 with a view to supporting a re-opening of the facility, with the aim prior to the most recent lockdown for a re-opening by Easter 2021, but with that now impacted by the pandemic.

## 6. Conclusions and Next Steps

- 6.1 Significant investment in terms of cost, works and time has been spent such that the building itself has now had addressed the more significant building fabric issues. The focus now has been on the final improvements and commissioning steps that will allow HLH as the new operator to maximise the opportunity offered by the facility.
- 6.2 Despite the impact of the latest lockdown, these final steps are progressing as much as is possible in the current circumstances. All partners remain committed to re-opening the facility as soon as it is safe and permissible to do so. The main final stages will be recruitment to posts by HLH, and final commissioning of the building.
- 6.3 HLH has initiated pre-opening engagement with key local stakeholders and community groups with an extremely favourable response. This process will continue in advance of the facility opening; the support and involvement of the wider Caithness community will be a critical factor in determining the success and sustainability of the facility. The HLH marketing team will ensure that the community are kept apprised of developments through social media and other channels as the facility prepares for relaunching as **the North Coast Visitor Centre**.

- 6.4 Through partnership working and the ongoing support of local members and the community, Caithness Horizons is well placed now to re-open as soon as safe and permissible to do so, and provide a facility from which the local and area community, and in turn the tourism market, can benefit from the interpretation, the programme and the facilities on offer.
- 6.5 Further local updates to members and stakeholders will be provided as and when there is clarity on the opportunity to re-open once we are out of lockdown.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning

Date: 11 January 2021

Authors: Brian Porter, Head of Resources, The Highland Council  
Tom Murdison, Property Manager, The Highland Council  
John West, Director of Culture and Learning, High Life Highland