

Agenda Item	6
Report No	ERA/14/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee:	Easter Ross Area Committee
Date:	25 May 2021
Report Title:	Cromarty Firth and Tain & Easter Ross Place Based Funds – Proposed Funding Allocations
Report By:	Executive Chief Officer, Community and Places

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Following on from the budget agreed by Highland Council in March 2021, a £100,000 Place Based Investment Fund was allocated to each ward for the 2021/22 financial year. This fund is intended to enable a flexible local response to address the 4 harms of Covid which are identified as direct health harms; health impacts not directly related to Covid; societal impacts and economic impacts.
- 1.2 Early discussions with local Members at ward level have identified initial priority areas for spend against the Place Based Investment Fund for the two wards. For Cromarty Firth, and building on the re-prioritisation of covid funds agreed at the February committee, Members want to further develop a new approach to play and play areas in the Cromarty Firth Ward. For Tain and Easter Ross, Members have identified the need to bring swings back into use in key locations across the ward. There is also support from both wards for financial support for the Nigg - Cromarty ferry contractor in order to mitigate against fare increases and so benefit the local economy. This report asks the Committee to agree the budgets outlined in the report.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider and agree the proposed allocations of Place Based Funds as follows:
 1. Up to £12,000 from the Cromarty Firth Place Based Investment Funds to fund the costs of a part time temporary post via Highlife Highland for a play officer to support the development new approach to play areas;
 2. £2,500 from the Cromarty Firth Place Based Investment Funds and £2,500 Tain & Easter Ross Place Based Investment Funds towards the Council's contract for the

Nigg- Cromarty Ferry route in order to avoid a fare increase and so support the local economy; and

3. Up to £ 20,000 Tain & Easter Ross Place Based Investment Funds in order to bring swings or one other piece of equipment back into use in the Tain Links, Tain Jubilee Drive, Knockshortie, Abbotshaven, Balintore, Seaboard, Hilton and Milton playparks.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Legal implications: whilst the Council has no legal duty to provide playparks, the Council does have a legal duty in relation to the health and safety of playparks under its ownership. The Tain & Easter Ross budget requested will allow swings currently closed to open safely and in compliance with legal standards.
- 3.2 Resource implications: the resource implications are set out in the report. The change of direction being explored in the Cromarty Firth ward for play areas will also explore options to promote good play in a cost-effective way using low maintenance items which are also resistant to vandalism. This is intended to support a more sustainable approach to play areas for this area in the future.
- 3.3 Members will note that there is a contract in place for the Nigg/Cromarty ferry service until the end of the 2022 summer season, with an option to extend for up to 3 years. The proposed contribution will avoid the risk of the ferry service proving uneconomical in the 2021 season.
- 3.4 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications –The allocation of funds to support a new approach to play and play areas will require significant community engagement and will help local families to enjoy good quality play. This will include engagement with children’s advocacy and play groups in the area. The funding to supporting is supporting bringing swings back into use is largely focused on areas of deprivation and will therefore support these communities.
- 3.5 Risk implications: There is a risk that due to limited resources more and more playparks in the Easter Ross area are closed as there are insufficient resources to maintain them in a safe condition. The allocation of funds for play and playparks will mitigate against that risk by exploring options for a sustainable approach in Cromarty Firth for good play using low maintenance items and in Tain & Easter Ross by providing sufficient resources to open up swings currently out of use. The allocation of funds to support the Nigg-Cromarty Ferry will reduce the risk that increased fares impact negatively on tourist traffic to the area via the ferry. However, this funding is for one year only and a decision has been taken by the Council to reduce funding support on an ongoing basis. Should this funding support be agreed, it must be noted to the ferry operator that this is for one year only.
- 3.6 Climate Change/Gaelic implications– there are no climate change or Gaelic implications

4. Play as a Priority

- 4.1 In Ross-shire there are 79 equipped play areas, which have a total of 436 items of play equipment. The current total annual revenue budget covering all aspects of repairs and maintenance for all play parks in Ross-shire is £37,300, and of this there is £2,200 available for materials. This leaves on average, £27.85 per play park per year on materials. The revenue budget covers the workforce, vehicles, and materials.
- 4.2 The Council meeting in January 2021 agreed that the budget and decision making on play areas should be devolved to Area Committees to support a place-based approach to developing a sustainable approach to the play estate. Work is ongoing across Highland to review play park provision, firstly through ward meetings and wider engagement with communities on play park provision is planned for the months ahead in order to better understand community priorities and different ways in which to deliver play provision.
- 4.3 Members are very aware both of the importance of play and play areas to local communities. This must be considered in conjunction with the very limited budget available to keep the play equipment provided in a safe and useable condition. Presentations by the Amenities Services to Members at Ward Business meetings have highlighted the level and cost of repairs required. Members will be aware that as the regular safety inspections required take place, safety issues are highlighted and with very limited budget available to make the repairs, provide bark/chip etc an increasing number of play equipment items have had to be closed off.
- 4.4 The importance of play to children particularly after the restrictions due to Covid is widely recognised. The proposed funding allocations relating to play are aimed at addressing children's health and wellbeing via play.
- 4.5 **Cromarty Firth Funding Proposals for Play**
In Ward 6, Cromarty Firth, there are 17 play parks, which have a total of 76 items of play equipment items. The current estimated situation in Ward 6 Cromarty Firth is:
- there is a backlog of maintenance estimated to amount to £17,150;
 - to refurbish the play equipment back to BS EN 1176 is estimated to cost £180,341;
 - loose fill (play bark or chip) requirements to BS EN 1176 is estimated to cost £47,919;
- 4.6 The 'do nothing' approach to playpark maintenance is also costly and in general not possible as this still results in cost implications:
- it can create a health and safety liability with the asset requiring to be replaced, removed or temporarily restricted;

- the value of the asset degrades, and equipment is lost over approximately 15 years;
- there is a cost to removing unsafe play equipment;
- there is a cost to obtaining, erecting and inspecting fencing to secure a site from use; and
- fencing is also an attractive climbing frame for children and creates additional risks.

4.7

The Cromarty Firth ward has already set aside £15,000 of unused Covid Ward Funds for the purchase of play equipment. This was approved by the Easter Ross Area Committee at its meeting on February 17 2021. However, Members are also keen to look in detail across the Ward at developing a sustainable approach to play; considering how best to promote good play at a reasonable cost while reducing the impact of vandalism and wear and tear of equipment.

4.8 To support this the intention is to work with Highlife Highland with additional funding for enhanced hours for a local officer to consult with local communities. This play officer would examine each of the existing play areas in turn and consider, along with the community, how best children and families can be supported to play. This will include consideration of what equipment would be most appropriate and how play and learning can best be supported. In some area a 'destination play area' with traditional play equipment will be appropriate and, if additional local funds are available, affordable. However, in other locations, particularly where vandalism is an ongoing issue, simpler play equipment, such as jump logs, may be more appropriate, affordable and sustainable. The intention is to carry out this work in close consultation with families so that children and their families are encouraged to play well and better health and well-being for children is supported. This will help them to recover from lockdown, engage with friends and build resilience.

4.9 It will be important to have the right officer with the right skills supporting such play discussions. Highlife Highland have staff with the required skills and expertise in relation to leisure and play. They have also agreed, subject to funding, to identify current part time staff who have the required skillset and who are happy to take on some additional hours (an average of 1 day per week is anticipated) over a period of approximately 6 months to support this work. This report recommends that a budget of up to £12,000 be set to cover the cost of this including associated costs such as essential travel.

Tain and Easter Ross Funding Proposals for Play

4.10 The Tain & Easter Ross Ward Members wish to take a slightly different approach. In the immediate term Members are keen to bring swings or one other item of equipment that have been temporarily closed off due to safety issues back into use as quickly as possible in key locations to support this form of play. The aim is to do this for the play parks at Tain Links, Tain Jubilee Drive, Knockshortie, Abbotshaven, Balintore, Seaboard, Hilton and Milton. Members will note that this includes swings in the most deprived areas of the ward

as well as some of the more rural areas. A budget from placed based investment fund of up to £20,000 is requested to enable this work to be undertaken.

- 4.11 Alongside this, work will also be undertaken along with Amenities staff to set up local community discussions or play workshops across the Ward. These discussions may include discussion around funding opportunities as well as the types of play equipment preferred. Key community partners will be included in such discussions which will allow longer term plans to be developed.

5. Nigg – Cromarty Ferry Support

- 5.1 Members will recall the contract price for the Nigg-Cromarty ferry was reduced by £10,000 as a part of the budget process on the basis that the resulting gap would be made up by an increase in fares. This proposed funding allocation to the Nigg-Cromarty ferry contract is intended to fill that gap so that fares are not increased at a rate above the current CPI index. This is in order to support the tourism brought in by the ferry service and to encourage tourism within the Easter Ross area. The Black Isle Ward Members have supported an allocation of £5,000 from their Ward Discretionary Budget towards this and so the £2,500 allocation from each of the Easter Ross Wards would meet the remaining gap. This top up funding award would be made on the condition that fares were not increased in 2021/22 by any more than the current CPI index. This funding support is on a one year basis.

Designation: Carron McDiarmid, ECO, Community & Places

Date: 14 May 2021

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