

Agenda Item	6.
Report No	CC/17/21

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Caithness Committee

Date: 12 August 2021

Report Title: **Thurso and North West Caithness & Wick and East Caithness (Wards 2 and 3) Place Based Investment Funds – Proposed Funding Allocations**

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

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 individual Ward level have identified initial priority areas for spend against the Place Based Investment Fund for each Ward.
- 1.3 Ward 2 Members wish to develop plans to enhance and improve the facilities available at the two main sports pitches in the town of Thurso. Ward 2 Members also wish to see a plan developed to refurbish/repair/improve play parks in the Ward with an emphasis on those situated in the rural areas.
- 1.4 Ward 3 Members wish to look at an infrastructure project to replace various bus shelters around the Ward. Ward 3 Members also wish to see a plan developed to refurbish/repair/improve play parks in the Ward and to develop the Wick Town Centre project.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider and agree the proposed allocations of the Place Based Investment Funds as follows:

1. Ward 2

Up to £60,000 towards the infrastructure projects to carry out drainage works at Sir Georges Park, Thurso (aka The Dammies) along with pitch improvements at Ormlie Park. Both these areas have been identified by local stakeholders and members as key projects in the Ward.

Up to £40,000 towards play park refurbishment/repairs/improvements with an emphasis on those parks in a rural setting. It is noted that match funding would be sought from local grant providers and local groups to complement this allocation.

2. Ward 3

Up to £35,000 towards an infrastructure project to replace/relocate bus shelters around the Ward. This has been identified by a number of local communities as a priority and in discussion with Ward Members.

Up to £40,000 towards play park refurbishment/repairs/improvements. It is noted that match funding would be sought from local grant providers and local groups to complement this allocation.

3. Members are also asked to note that further work will be undertaken to develop the Wick town centre project and a report will be brought to a future meeting in relation to this.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource implications – The proposals outlined would allocate the £100,000.00 from Ward 2 and £75,000 from Ward 3. A further report will be brought to Members to allocate the remaining Ward 3 funds. Each of the Ward's Place Based Investment Fund requires to be committed by the end of this financial year.
- 3.2 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. Funding will be made to external groups and/or other Council services in line with the Scheme of Delegation, meaning that grants of up to £10,000 can be administered locally by the Ward Manager in consultation with Members, and grants larger than £10,000 will require to be reported to the Caithness Area Committee for approval.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island) impacts – The allocation of funds being proposed within the report aim to address the ongoing issues around outdoor green spaces. This will encourage greater use of outdoor space This will address the mental and other wellbeing impacts of Covid and will deliver positive impacts on communities. Working with local groups to take forward these proposals will help build community capacity and ensure that sustainable outdoor provision is established.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications– Provision of suitable year-round bus shelters will be a factor in accessing increased usage of public transport rather use of private vehicles so helping to reduce the carbon footprint.

3.5 Risk implications – There is a risk that without investment more playparks/sports fields may become unusable and prevent the local communities from accessing safe outdoor spaces to exercise. However, new play equipment will also, in time, require maintenance and repairs and at present resources are extremely limited for this. The future maintenance burden can be mitigated, if not entirely eliminated, by Amenities staff working with communities to help ensure that any new equipment is low maintenance and uses standard parts; and by encouraging community groups to purchase service packages from manufacturers/ installers when they buy new equipment. Additionally, a broader approach to play could potentially be promoted, including regarding play areas as social spaces for all age groups with less play equipment, and promoting natural play around existing features or features constructed out of standard materials (timber etc in order to minimise the ongoing maintenance costs. Grants will be made following established grant making procedures to minimise risk of project failure, funding shortfall or funding being used for other purposes.

3.6 Gaelic – no implications.

4. Background

4.1 As part of the budget setting process, a Place Based Investment Fund was created for 2021/22 allocating £100,000 to each Ward across Highland. The aim of this fund is to address the four harms of Covid (as noted at 1.1). Any proposal for funding needs to set out how it will address one or more of the four harms.

4.2 Discussions with Members, communities and partners have highlighted the following priority areas for each Caithness Ward for potential spend of this funding allocation:

Ward 2:

- Sports field/park infrastructure improvement works
- Play park refurbishment/repairs/improvements

Ward 3:

- Replacement of rural bus shelters
- Play park refurbishment/repairs/improvements
- Support for the Wick Town Centre Project

5. Playparks - Wards 2 and 3

5.1 Communities in Thurso and North West Caithness (Ward 2) and Wick and East Caithness (Ward 3) have identified playparks as key community infrastructure in need of investment. Communities across both wards have established groups to help fundraise to refurbish playparks and/or provide new equipment. This is in order to promote healthy activity and to help address issues of isolation and mental ill health that may have occurred as a result of the Pandemic.

5.2 Members have also been briefed by the Amenities Service on the condition of playparks in the wards and it is clear that significant investment is required. Given this, and the limited funds available, Members are also interested in a broader approach to playparks – perhaps considering them as community spaces for all age groups with benches, trees and open space for play rather than limited to play equipment.

5.3 A contribution from Highland Council to community fundraising efforts will strengthen the community bids to external funders and enable the Council funding to assist as many communities as possible. Community groups will be expected to work closely

with the Council's Amenities Service and funding bids will be assessed with assistance of Amenities staff.

- 5.4 It is also proposed that the Amenities service may replace equipment directly where appropriate and in consultation with Members.
- 5.5 It is proposed to allocate £40,000 to projects relating to playparks in Ward 2, with an emphasis being placed on those parks located in rural settings, and £40,000.00 to projects relating to playparks in Ward 3.
- 5.6 Projects which bring an element of match-funding will be prioritised over those seeking 100% funding. However, 100% grant award could be made available for exceptional projects. Organisations and groups will be asked to apply by 30th November 2021. All projects must be completed by December 2022. Applications will be made via the established process for Ward Discretionary Grants.
- 5.7 The funds would be managed by the Ward Manager in accordance with the Council's Scheme of Delegation, with any grants awarded of £10,000 or over being reported to a future Caithness Area Committee for approval.

6. Ward 2 – Sir Georges Park (aka the Dammies) and Ormlie Park, Thurso

- 6.1 Sir Georges Park, a key site for the majority of sporting and charitable events that are held in the town, is celebrating its 150th Anniversary this year. The site, which is managed by Highlife Highland provides a suitable venue for a range of sporting activities with the main sport being football with both male and female teams participating in various winter and summer leagues and also enables the community to come together for key community events such as local and national charity fundraisers. As such, it is key to encouraging activities and community events which can support improved physical and mental health.
- 6.2 However, for many years the drainage system at Sir Georges Park has been unable to provide the necessary capacity to remove flood and surface water from the park resulting in many cancellations of sporting events. The drainage pipes are old and are constantly being choked by tree roots which stop the flow of water into the river Thurso. This has been of concern to both Members and key local stakeholders.
- 6.3 The Council's Design Team have just recently completed a survey of the park and have prepared a project plan to improve the drainage system at the park and this is presently out for quotations. It is hoped that this work can be carried out in August this year and is estimated to take 2/3 weeks from commencement. Funds are required to support this work and it is proposed to fund this from the Place Based Investment Fund.
- 6.4 Ormlie Park sits in an area identified in the SIMD. It is managed by Highlife Highland and is very well used by the local community. It is therefore also an important area for activities and is well used by families in and around the area and in particular their children for various leisure pursuits. However, the area does require some improvements such as re-seeding of some parts and replacement and repair of fencing.
- 6.5 It is proposed to allocate £60,000 from the Ward 2 Place Based Investment Fund to cover both projects. Sir Georges Park work will be managed by the Council's Project Team. The work on Ormlie Park will be specified and commissioned by Highlife Highland.

Ward 3 – Bus shelter infrastructure project

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- 7.1 Several Community Councils have, in Ward 3, reported to local members about the current condition and placement of bus shelters throughout the Ward. Members have now identified this as a key priority and are confident that with the replacement/repairing and the site movement of these shelters, that the local community will be persuaded to make more use of public transport and with the increase in the volume of movement of people, this will help to stimulate the local economy.
- 7.2 Members have held discussions with officers from the Infrastructure and Environment service and have identified the sites that require action.
- 7.3 It is proposed to allocate £35,000 from the Ward 3 Place Based Investment Fund towards this project. The intention is for the required work to be undertaken by the Infrastructure and Environment service and a project plan will be developed to progress this in consultation with local Members. The Infrastructure and Environment service have agreed at a local level that they can accommodate the proposed project.

Ward 3 – Remaining Allocation

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- 8.1 Members are asked to note that work is still required to consider the allocation of the remaining £25,000 for Ward 3. Members are keen to support the local economy by encouraging increased footfall into the town centre. Work with Sustrans and local partners to develop the Wick Town Centre Project which had been in progress prior to the Covid pandemic, is now under consideration once again. Ward 3 Members and key stakeholders have recently had an initial review of the town centre to identify areas that may require work to improve the surroundings and make the town centre a vibrant area. A further report on this will be brought to the next meeting of the Caithness Area Committee.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

Date: 12 August 2021

Author: Alex Macmanus, Ward Manager

Background Papers: Place Based Investment Fund – Operational Guidance April 2021