



REPORT TO: MORAY COUNCIL ON 31 OCTOBER 2018

SUBJECT: RURAL TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE FUND – PLUSCARDEN ABBEY

BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR (ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE)

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Council of the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund and to ask the Council to homologate the decision by the Convener and the Leader of the Council to submit an Expression of Interest to the fund and if successful to seek permission to act as a lead applicant for a full application for Pluscarden Abbey.
- 1.2 The report is submitted to the Council in terms of Section III A (2) of the Scheme of Administration relating to long-term financial plans.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 The Council is asked to:

- (i) **to consider the request by Pluscarden Abbey to act as a lead applicant to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund with no financial implications for the Council;**
- (ii) **to homologate the decision by the Convener and the Leader of the Council to submit an Expression of Interest to the fund and if successful; and**
- (iii) **to authorise a stage II application.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Scottish Governments Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund can provide for Local Authorities or National Park Authority in Scotland grants from £50,000 to a maximum of £300,000 at an intervention rate of up to 70% for capital expenditure only.
- 3.2 The purpose of the fund is to improve public infrastructure at visitor pressure points. It will not be for funding new attractions, but rather mitigate existing

pressures. It is only for 'accessible and remote rural areas', excluding settlements above 3000 people. Grants are available for:

- Parking, scenic laybys, camping facilities and disposal points (especially for camper vans), and toilet provision
- Essential improvement works to paths to cope with visitor pressure or improve sustainable visitor management in the immediate area including directional road signage, waymarks and improved interpretation can also be included
- The fund will also be able to support other interventions that encourage sustainable tourism, for example, recycling points and potentially enhanced access to natural attractions
- Routine maintenance or repair of cycling and walking infrastructure is ineligible; however the exception to this is where the creation of a new or enhanced path is linked to a wider environmental improvement.

- 3.3 Pluscarden Abbey was originally founded in 1230 by King Alexander II of Scotland for monks of the order of Val des Choux in Burgundy. Pluscarden is now the only Benedictine Abbey in Scotland and is the only monastery in Britain to be housed in the original medieval building. It is of international significance and is listed under category A by Historic Environment Scotland. Not only is it extremely important in religious, cultural and architectural terms but, remarkably its monastic way of life continues to this day.
- 3.4 Increasingly, the Abbey is also a place where the local community – as well as guests, visitors and retreatants from further afield - come to enjoy the historic and beautiful environment, to learn about a unique way of life and participate in various activities. An estimated 15,000 people now visit the Abbey each year, of whom around 400 stay as guests. The growth of interest in the Abbey has brought pressure not only on the existing buildings, but in particular on the environment and the Abbey's request is for the Moray Council to be the lead applicant for the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund to alleviate the problems set out below.
- 3.5 Due to the remote rural location of the Abbey and the absence of public transport nearby, nearly all visitors arrive by car. The heart of the problem is the limited parking space at the entrance gates to the Abbey. This currently accommodates a maximum of 8 vehicles and no coaches. The situation of the present car park gives rise to a congested area at the gates, where vehicles can arrive from 4 directions as featured in **Appendix I - Current Car Parking Arrangement**. When this parking area is full, vehicles pass on up the entrance drive, a single track lane which is also the main pedestrian access. Vehicles returning down the drive after a visit meet the incoming vehicles and the result is a hazardous mingling of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, with vehicles attempting to drive on the grass areas.
- 3.6 The vast majority of visitors are coming during the summer months and there have been several recent occasions when unforeseen arrivals of large numbers of tourists have created a disturbance, in particular three 60-seater coaches from abroad visited the Abbey on six occasions without notice.

- 3.7 With the trend of increasing tourism to Moray and to make provision for greater numbers visiting the Abbey, the proposed project will demonstrate the following funds priorities:
- 3.8 **An enhanced visitor experience – through the provision of improved visitor facilities and infrastructure.** Immediately adjacent to the current parking area is a field belonging to the Abbey, which is no longer required for cultivation. It is currently under grass and is screened on every side with trees and shrubbery. It would be invisible from the approaching major road and it would have enough room for the provision of 30 further parking spaces for cars and 2 for coaches, together with toilets, picnic tables and seating areas. It would simply exclude vehicle traffic from the entrance drive as featured in **Appendix II –Proposed new parking area** & it would eliminate all sense of bustle and real dangers.
- 3.9 **A sustainable approach** – The proposed layout of the new parking area takes account of the rural location and is environmentally friendly. There will be rolled quarry hard-core surfaces rather than tarmac or concrete. Parking bays will be designated by log sections rather than kerb stones. The facing of the toilet facilities will be wooden. Existing areas of shrubbery and trees will be used to enhance privacy and quiet. The drainage plan for the car park, excludes the possibility of pollution to the adjacent burn and SEPA has been consulted. A clear pedestrian lane system, leading from the new car park to the Abbey entrance, can be installed quite simply and should ensure pedestrian safety. Details are contained in **Appendix III – Proposed layout of new parking area**
- 3.10 **Creating more resilient communities more able to cope with peak tourism demands** – The Abbey has been increasingly struggling with increasing visitor numbers and trying to cope with the traffic congestion. The proposed solutions for car parking with toilet facilities, waste and recycling receptacles, picnic area and signage will allow directing the visitor flow, whilst at the same time ensuring that they are able to come and go with a sense of the peace of the place and enjoying the scenic surroundings.
- 3.11 **Effective partnerships and collaboration** – The Abbey has been engaging with the local community and meeting with representatives of activity groups to see how the proposal complements with walking and cycling routes in the valley. It is envisaged to provide signage for routes connecting to the Abbey grounds. Also the Abbey links into existing place partnerships such as the Castle to Cathedral to Cashmere and Discover Moray's Great Places.
- 3.12 **Project viability and deliverability** – Pluscarden Abbey has a good track record of successfully managing over 12 building projects over the past 60 years. All of these have employed professional architects and quantity surveyors to maintain control of the project at every stage. Each has been accomplished in a sustainable manner with a lasting benefit to the community. If the request to Council is granted, the Expression of Interest deadline was 26 October 2018 and if successful the deadline for final application is 25 January 2019. It is anticipated that the outcome of the application is known by April 2019. The project will commence as soon as possible and will be completed within 4 to 6 months.

- 3.13 The project will be managed by Pluscarden Abbey with a suitably qualified project manager already in place. The total cost of the project is £115,000 with a grant request to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund for £80,500 with match funding contribution from the Abbey of £34,500.

4. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))

The project will contribute to achieve the corporate plan priority to promote economic development and growth, also the LOIP priority of a growing and sustainable economy.

(b) Policy and Legal

The Council considers support for economic development issues on their merits, against the objective to facilitate sustainable economic growth and the desired outcomes of the Ten Year Plan and Corporate Plan. For any partnership agreement Legal will be consulted.

(c) Financial implications

As only the Local Authority can apply to the funds, the request from the Abbey has been made for the Council to front the application. The total project cost is £115,000 with a request to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund for £80,500 and confirmed match funding contribution from the Pluscarden Abbey of £34,500. There are no financial implications for Council.

(d) Risk Implications

To mitigate any risks, a partnership agreement will be drawn up at full application stage outlining that the Abbey will adhere to all funders grant conditions and that they are solely responsible for any liabilities associated with the funding.

(e) Staffing Implications

This short-term project will be managed by Pluscarden Abbey with a suitably qualified Project Manager already in place. They will prepare applications and claims; set up project systems for carrying out the works including for procurement, monitoring and evaluation. Staff from the Economic Development section will provide support for submitting the applications, interim and final claims to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund and make arrangements for claimed funds to be transferred to the Abbey. The project duration is only for 4 to 6 months and the required work can be accommodated within existing staffing resources.

(f) Property

None arising from this report

(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact

An equality impact assessment is not required as the reason for the report is for the Committee to consider being the lead applicant for the Abbey to access funds, which they could not undertake themselves.

(h) Consultations

Consultation has taken place with the Corporate Director (Economic Development Planning & Infrastructure), the Head of Development Services, the Director of Corporate Services, the Equal Opportunities Officer, the Democratic Services Manager, the Head of Financial Services and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and their comments incorporated within the report.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 Pluscarden Abbey is one of Moray's unique heritage assets of international significance and is the only monastery in Britain to be housed in the original medieval building. The tranquil setting provides visitors with a compelling cultural and heritage experience.**
- 5.2 With increasing number of tourists to Moray and popularity of the Abbey, it has brought pressure not only on the existing buildings, but in particular on the environment. The proposal will allow alleviating the problems of managing the visitor flow through investment in the infrastructure such as car parking, toilet facilities and signage etc.**
- 5.3 The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund could be the most suitable funding source for this investment, however as only Local Authorities are eligible to apply, it is recommended to support the Abbey's request for Council to work in partnership and front the applications.**

Author of Report: Reni Milburn, Principal Officer Economic Development

Background Papers: Documents on file in Economic Development Section

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