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# CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

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## FOR DECISION

**Title: BLAIR ATHOLL VISITOR INFORMATION HUB**

**Prepared by: Pete Crane, Senior Visitor Services Officer**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to provide the background to the partnership work in developing proposals for an improved visitor information hub at Blair Atholl and to present the case for offering grant toward the development of the facility.

### **Recommendations**

That the Board approves in principle grant support of up to £100,000 towards the development of on an improved information hub at Blair Atholl subject to financial support from partners and detailed approval of spending plans by the Finance Committee.

### **Executive Summary**

Following community consultation and a feasibility study undertaken by Blair Atholl Area Tourist Association plans have been prepared to develop a visitor information hub in Blair Atholl based around the existing ranger facility. These proposals have support from a range of partners including; Blair Charitable Trust, Perth and Kinross Council and Scottish Enterprise. This paper provides a detailed assessment of the proposal, as an Expenditure Justification, and discusses the case for supporting the development.

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## BLAIR ATHOLL VISITOR INFORMATION HUB - FOR DECISION

### Background and Policy Context

1. We, Cairngorms National Park Authority, do not own or manage any visitor information centres or ranger bases. To date we have worked with a range of partners to upgrade key places where visitors obtain information and install orientation and interpretation about the National Park. These upgrades have included; refurbishment, joint branding, installation of interpretation and orientation panels, audio visual presentations and leaflet racking. **Annex 1** shows a summary of our work with partners.
2. The proposals to develop an information hub at Blair Atholl are a continuation of this work. **Annex 2**, an Expenditure Justification, sets out the background, policy context and details of this proposal.

### Discussion

3. The case for providing high quality information and interpretation across the National Park is now well established and reinforced by the latest Sustainable Tourism Strategy.
4. Our support for upgrading information centres has been on a 'case by case' basis and varied depending on need. Our most common intervention has been financial support for upgrading facilities and improving information and interpretation. Such support is typically in the range £8,000 to £15,000 per site. We have not contributed to the ongoing revenue costs of any facility.
5. However, in the Angus Glens there was no ranger base or information centre at a busy site receiving 65 – 70,000 visits per annum. Here, we provided £100,000 towards the capital cost of a new facility.
6. We consider that Blair Atholl is an important point of contact for many people visiting the CNP. Here we do not require a completely new visitor facility but in order to create an information hub befitting both Atholl and the National Park we consider that a substantial investment is required.
7. The project has the support of the following partners; Blair Atholl Area Tourist Association, Blair Charitable Trust, Perth and Kinross Council and Scottish Enterprise. Collectively, we have developed proposals to restore the old school refectory and surrounding area to create a new 'fit for purpose' information, interpretation and education facility, at an estimated cost of £250,000.

8. Planning permission has also been obtained for up to three commercial units on the site. These do not part of this project but the proposals are likely to make future private sector development of the retail units more attractive.
9. The decision being requested is for 'in principle' support for two reasons:
  - a) We do not have detailed costs for the works. These are currently being prepared.
  - b) We do not have confirmed support from partners.
10. If agreed by the Board, the final decision on the level of our support will be made by the Finance Committee. This will only be once we have detailed proposals, costs and confirmation of partner support.

### **Consultation**

11. Details of the thorough work undertaken since 2004 are in **Annex 2**.

### **Recommendation**

12. **That the Board approves in principle grant support of up to £100,000 towards the development of on an information hub at Blair Atholl subject to financial support from partners and detailed approval of spending plans by the Finance Committee.**

### **Delivering Sustainability**

13. The works proposed are to refurbish an existing vernacular building and install wood fuel heating. The facility will be maintained by Blair Charitable Trust as part of their contribution to the partnership.

### **Delivering A Park for All**

14. The proposals will improve visitor information, interpretation and education for all visitors. Atholl has a range of activities available for visitors many free or at low cost that will be promoted through the hub.

### **Delivering Economy, Effectiveness and Efficiency**

15. The partnership approach used in developing this proposal is a collaborative and effective way of working.

## Implications

### *Financial Implications*

16. Some 70% of the funds requested are available within this year's operational plan. The remainder will be a commitment on next year's budget.

### *Presentational Implications*

17. The support recommended is a substantial contribution from CNPA to a single project and may raise concerns about fairness/appropriateness from other areas of the National Park. We consider that over the last seven years project partners have demonstrated the need for improved visitor information facilities in Blair Atholl. In this case we consider that the investment is justified.

### *Implications for Stakeholders*

18. Our support is likely to show:
- a) A continuing commitment to partnership working
  - b) A strong commitment to Atholl as part of the newest area of the National Park
  - c) A continuing commitment to raising the quality of visitor experiences across the National Park.

## Next Steps

19. If the recommendation is agreed the next step is to present detailed costs and confirmation of partner support to the Finance Committee at end of October.

**Pete Crane**

**22 August 2011**

petercrane@cairngorms.co.uk

## **Annex I: Work to date in Developing Visitor Information Centres and Ranger Bases**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Work undertaken</b>	<b>Partners</b>
Aviemore VIC	Refurbishment, installation of information and interpretation.	Visit Scotland and CNPA
Cairngorm Mountain ranger base	Installation of information and interpretation.	CairnGorm Mountain, Association for Mountain Woodland and CNPA
Glenmore Visitor Centre	Upgrade of information and interpretation.	Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Forestry Alliance, Association for Mountain Woodland and CNPA.
Rothiemurchus ranger base and visitor centre	Installation of information and interpretation.	Rothiemurchus Estate & CNPA
Grantown VIC	Installation of information and interpretation. Refurbishment due 2012.	Visit Scotland and CNPA
Tomintoul VIC	Refurbishment, installation of information and interpretation.	Moray Council, Visit Scotland and CNPA
Crown Estate Ranger Base	Upgrade of information and interpretation.	Crown Estate & CNPA
Ballater VIC	Refurbishment, installation of information and interpretation.	Visit Scotland & CNPA
Crathie VIC	Refurbishment, installation of information and interpretation.	Balmoral Estate, Visit Scotland & CNPA.
Glen Muick ranger base	Installation of information and interpretation.	Balmoral Estate & CNPA
Glen Tanar ranger base	Development of information and interpretation. Refurbishment due 2011/12	Glen Tanar Charitable Trust & CNPA
Braemar VIC	Refurbishment, installation of information and interpretation.	Visit Scotland & CNPA
Glenshee Information Centre	Development of new centre at Lair with information and interpretation.	Glenshee Tourist Association & CNPA

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<b>Location</b>	<b>Work undertaken</b>	<b>Partners</b>
Kirriemuir Information Centre	Development of a new provision co-located with Gateway to the Glens Museum.	Angus Council & CNPA
Glen Doll Ranger Base	Construction of new ranger base with information and interpretation.	Angus Council, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage & CNPA
Loch Insh National Nature Reserve	Construction of new wildlife hide with interpretation.	RSPB, SNH and CNPA

## Annex 2: CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

### EXPENDITURE JUSTIFICATION

#### 1. Title

Blair Atholl Visitor Information Hub
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#### 2. Expenditure Category

Operational Plan goal		Code	PO7 721	Project	
				Grant to <b>Blair Charitable Trust</b>	Y
Core or Project spend		Code		Consultancy	

Is this spend to be funded from an existing budget line, existing line with additional funds or is it a totally new spend?		Existing budget	Y
		Additional budget	
		New budget	

#### 3. Description

- Brief overview of project/activity
- Specific elements for which support is sought (if not whole project/activity)

Since 2004 Blair Atholl Area Tourist Association (BAATA), Blair Atholl Community Council (BACC), Blair Charitable Trust (BCT) and Perth and Kinross Council have been developing plans to build a new visitor information hub in Blair Atholl.

As part of the initial consultation a community survey was undertaken. Some 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (73%) with the development of such a facility. An independent feasibility study was also commissioned by BAATA in 2006 using the Tourism Resources Company (TRC). This led directly to the development of the current proposals.

TRC stated that the facility would, ' **become a focus for visitors in the heart of the village ....the role of the centre is to link the village with its wider environment and provide information and orientation to the visitor**'. It is not intended to displace visitors from existing local facilities – quite the opposite; it is intended to promote existing visitor facilities and attractions.

The main function of the facility would be to provide a high quality welcome to visitors and:  
Information about the local area and Cairngorms National Park  
Interpretation about local area and Cairngorms National Park  
Education linked to the special qualities of Cairngorms National Park

TRC indicated that the facility has a potential audience of up to 145,000 visitors per annum with the majority also being visitors to the village and castle. A realistic target is probably about half of this total.

Perth and Kinross Council and BCT have taken the proposal forward through detailed designs; planning consent (2008) and building warrant (2009).

The proposals are to improve and upgrade facilities at an existing site in the village centre that already forms a 'hub' and includes:

- Atholl Museum of Country Life
- Café
- Ranger Facility (located in old school refectory)
- Car Park and information boards

The site is 5 minutes' drive from A9 (heading north), close to Blair Castle, Killiecrankie and House of Bruar attractions. It is opposite the Blair Atholl Caravan Park. It is located on National Cycle Route 7 and there is an excellent network of promoted paths accessible from the village. The village is also a popular destination with mountaineers and off road cyclists.

The existing ranger base and associated car park require work to bring them up to a high quality standard. CNPA and BCT installed new information and interpretation in the ranger facility earlier this year and this will be retained in any future development.

### **Proposed Development**

- a) Refurbish externally and internally the existing ranger base which is a 19<sup>th</sup> century wood lap and corrugated iron building. All external features to be maintained.
- b) Create a single central space in the building for enhanced visitor information, interpretation and education.
- c) Install insulation and a wood fuel stove
- d) Install public toilets
- e) Landscape grounds, car park and entrance
- f) Install external visitor information and interpretation



The facility would be developed, owned and managed by **Blair Charitable Trust** with the visitor information facility and interpretation and education being provided by BAATA and Atholl Estates Ranger Service (part of BCT). The main functions of the facility are in line with the aims of Blair Charitable Trust (see below)

In addition to the above works, there is detailed planning permission on the site for up to three shop units. These are not part of this funding proposal. However, the works outlined above, combined with the existing use, are likely to make the site more attractive to potential developers.

**Blair Charitable Trust** (Registered Charity SC001433) was established in 1986.

General Purpose of BCT – the maintenance, repair and preservation for the public benefit of buildings of historic or architectural interest, land of scenic historic or scientific interest, or objects of national, scientific historic or artistic interest.

Policy of BCT – Maintenance, preservation and presentation to the public of historic and architecturally interesting buildings within its ownership, notably Blair Castle and its contents. To promote the land based interests of the estate whilst providing a planned and structured approach to recreation management and environmentally sensitive development.

To protect and manage the land within its ownership, to encourage public enjoyment of the land, to look after the rural land uses of farming, forestry and field sports and promote a harmonious balance between these uses, recreational pursuits and conservation ideals through continual discussion and assessment with local groups and users, national bodies and by providing information via the ranger service. **To provide and manage visitor facilities to a high standard throughout the estate to increase visitor understanding and enhance their enjoyment.**

The trust trades under its subsidiary company, **Blair Castle Estate Ltd**, which runs the castle exhibition, the caravan park, holiday lodges, the ranger service, let housing, field sports, forestry, farming, leisure activities (trekking, safaris, fishing) and events such as the horse trials and Atholl Gathering.

Public sector grants would be made to Blair Charitable Trust. The terms of any grants would need to include provision in the event of the trust ceasing to operate (see Section 6).

Because all approvals are already in place it is anticipated that building can take place February – May 2011/12.

#### 4. Rationale and Strategic Fit

- Objectives/intended beneficiaries
- Evidence of need and demand
- Fit with National Park Plan/Corporate Plan/other relevant strategies
- Linkages to other activities/projects

Blair Castle receives 135,000 visits per annum making it the third most popular paid attraction in the National Park after CairnGorm Mountain (144,000) and Landmark (141,000). In addition a further 20,000 people visit the castle gardens. The proposed information hub is opposite a major caravan and camping park, and already includes a museum and café.

While we have no accurate figures, the village is likely to attract more visitors. It is a key place in the National Park in which to provide information, interpretation and education for visitors and this is enhanced by the location just off A9 at the southern boundary. This is a strategically important site in a part of the National Park that was only designated in October 2010.

Tourism Resources Company indicated that the proposed facility had a potential audience of 145,000 people per annum.

The proposal helps to deliver key actions in both the current National Park Plan and Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

#### **National Park Plan 2007-12**

- 2 Key places for information transfer and interpretation
- 2a Support the existing Tourist Information Centres, visitor centres and ranger bases as some of the key places to get information about the Park and visibly link these places to the Park in a significant way.
- 2d Install visitor information and Park-wide interpretation at key entry points to Park
- 2h Communities tell and present their stories about their place in the Park.  
ACCC, Community Councils and Associations, CNPA, DMOs, SNH

#### **Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2011-16**

- 3a Follow a strategic approach to information and interpretation delivery
- 3c Maintain a wider set of information points at key sites and in communities
- 3d Strengthen provision of Cairngorms information interpretation by tourism enterprises / other stakeholders
- 3e Further develop the role of rangers in information and interpretation

The 2009/10 CNP visitor survey indicates that visitor centres continue to be an important way of providing information. Twenty eight per cent of visitors said that they had been to a ranger base and 17% a visitor information centre.

## 5. Option Analysis

- Are there other ways in which the above objectives could be achieved?
- If so, why is this the preferred option?

Blair Atholl is a strategically important location for visitors in CNP. It is a key point of contact for visitors and a major destination.

Currently, dedicated visitor information in Atholl is provided in the Visit Scotland VIC in Pitlochry (outwith CNP) and by BAATA at a temporary, part time location in Blair Atholl. The latter is likely to close when the existing 'grace and favour' location is sold.

Interpretation has been improved in the current ranger building but this improvement is a relatively small upgrade and does not meet the full potential of the site.

There is scope to work with partners at NTS Killiecrankie, Atholl Estates Campsite, and Atholl Country Life Museum. However, none of these will provide a dedicated information and interpretation hub about Atholl and the National Park. None will so clearly deliver our vision of '*a renowned international destination with fantastic opportunities for all to enjoy its special places*' in the same way as a dedicated information, interpretation and education facility.

The proposals outlined will produce a sustainable, high quality visitor information hub capable of enthusing visitors about Atholl and CNP. The upgrade of a vernacular building adds to the attraction of the site as do the existing facilities (museum and café) and the potential for further commercial development.

These proposals do not preclude us from supporting additional work at the key places listed above. However, a well-run information and interpretation hub will complement the other local attractions and signpost visitors to other facilities in CNP.

## 6. Risk Assessment

- Are there risks to the CNPA in funding this project/activity?
- Are there risks in the project/activity not being delivered to required timescale/quality?
- Comment on the likelihood of such risks occurring, their potential impact, and (where appropriate) any action that would be taken to mitigate the risks.

Without CNPA support this project is very unlikely to proceed.

There is a risk that Blair Charitable Trust will not be able to manage and maintain the facility. However, the Trust is a substantial organisation with an excellent track record of managing a complex estate and a popular 5 star visitor attraction. Blair Castle is the most popular paid attraction in Perth and Kinross and the most visited Historic House/Palace in Scotland. The proposed facility will form part of Blair Charitable Trusts portfolio. The Trust will be directly associated with the building, and the location in the heart of the village will ensure that they, and BAATA, will wish to see it succeed.

The facility is designed to be low cost low maintenance to make the ongoing running costs as efficient as possible.

Nevertheless, any offer of grant will need to make provision for the trust ceasing to operate.

The proposal also requires the support of other partners (see section 7).

Therefore, the key decision is whether this is such an important project that we should commit significant funds

There is also a risk that BAATA will be unable to maintain the visitor information within the facility but the facility is designed so that this can be provided unstaffed (as in Angus Glens Ranger Base).

## 7. Costs and Funding

- Detail the financial costs of the project/activity
- Detail the sources of funding
- Detail any non-monetary costs to the CNPA (such as Member or staff input)

Detailed costs are being developed based on the indications of support below:

Perth and Kinross Council	£50,000
Historic Environment Regeneration Fund (CARS)	£50,000
CNPA	£100,000
Scottish Enterprise (legacy fund from SET)	£50,000
	£250,000

Blair Charitable Trust will contribute land and on-going running costs

### **Note:**

Perth and Kinross Council has funded development to this stage.

We are funding the preparation of detailed costs for this proposal.

## 8. Deliverables/ Impact Assessment

- What end products/outputs will be delivered?
- How will success be measured?
- How will the project be monitored and what will be the feedback to the CNPA?

The project will deliver:

### **A sustainable Visitor Information, Interpretation and Education Hub**

Comprising:

- a) Restored vernacular building
- b) Upgraded and refurbished information, interpretation and education centre
- c) Landscaped car park and grounds with external information
- d) An attractive hub in the centre of Blair Atoll with the potential to attract private investment

Success in delivering information and interpretation should be reflected in increased visitors to the site, greater visitor satisfaction, longer stay and greater spend.

Providing information, interpretation and education about the special qualities of CNP should lead to increased awareness of CNP.

These outcomes will be assessed by National Park Visitor Survey, Economic Survey, Local Surveys (including Cairngorms Business Partnership work on Dove and Business Barometer)

## 9. Value for Money

- In view of the costs, do the deliverables appear to offer value for money? (consider cost of comparable projects, where available).

All elements of this project have been tendered competitively as will the final build.

Our financial contribution to this project is the same as that made to Angus Glens Ranger Base in 2007 which receives some 65 – 70,000 visits per annum. The facility at Blair Atholl has the potential to positively impact on a similar number of visitors to CNP.

## 10. Exit or Continuation Arrangements (where applicable)

- If this is not a discrete, time-limited, project or piece of work, what are the exit/continuation arrangements for when CNPA support ceases?

This is not a discrete project. We will have an ongoing commitment, with other partners, to supporting the provision of high quality information, interpretation and education. We also have a commitment to work with Atholl Estates Ranger Services.

## 11. Additionality

- Does this work/project substitute for or duplicate work being carried out or proposed by others?
- What would be the effects of the CNPA not supporting the project? Would it proceed without CNPA support?

Our funding does not substitute for the work of others and without it the project will not proceed.

## 12. Stakeholder Support

- Have the organisations and/or communities that would have an interest in this work/project been involved, and are they supportive?

This project has been seven years in development it has strong support from the following:

Blair Charitable Trust  
Blair Atholl Area Tourist Association  
Blair Atholl Community Council  
Perth and Kinross Council  
Scottish Enterprise

Background work, including community surveys, demonstrates strong local commitment to the project.

### 13. Recommendation

It is recommended that the project is approved for: **the offer of up to £100,000 of grant to Blair Charitable Trust to develop the Blair Atholl Information and Interpretation Hub.**

Note: this expenditure can be spread over two financial years. Current budgets allow for some £70,000 to be spent this year with potential to increase that if required.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### 14. Decision to Approve or Reject Programme Manager

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Head of Group

I recommend approval.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Chief Executive

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

