

Highland Council

COVID-19 AND ACTIVE TRAVEL : Submission from Nairn West and Suburban Community Council

The Highland Council launched an online consultation on 15 May seeking comments on proposals for early action to promote safer active travel in and around local communities in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objectives are to *“deliver safe active travel connections ... to maximise opportunities for social distancing”* and to *“provide a necessary springboard for town and city centre recovery and regeneration as ... places need to be adapted to be safe for work, business and leisure.”*

NW&SCC welcomes this initiative and strongly supports the Highland Council’s bid for additional funding for this purpose. We are encouraging members of the local community to submit comments via the online survey portal. But we also wish to make an agreed submission setting out our views on the broader policy. We think it important that any action should take account of the local context and history: much consideration has already been given to options for improving access, for town centre pedestrianisation, and for similar measures.

We urge that action taken now should contribute to a longer-term strategy to improve safer active travel in Nairn. We believe that any short-term measures implemented now should not be applied on an ad-hoc temporary basis – since this would not represent value for money. This funding must be used to make changes which will be sustainable and produce long term gains not spent on measures which will have no short or long term benefit to the town as it moves into recovery phase. We wish a lasting legacy for health and activity to come out of this time. The measures should be integrated with the Council’s core paths strategy, ‘green’ energy efficiency agenda, and the A96 bypass plans for walking and cycleways.

The consultation document sets out two proposals for Nairn – both apparently intended to address the “social distancing during essential travel” requirement. We do not believe that these are appropriate or adequate, for the reasons outlined:

1. Widening pavements.

This would not be a good use of this money.

Nairn’s High Street and Leopold Street pavements were widened to over 2 metres as part of a very extensive streetscape project a few years ago. There is no major problem maintaining social distancing either while queueing or passing other people, except in a few locations such as the Brae, and a short section at the start of Cawdor Street where the road width precludes pavement-widening or demarcation of cycle lanes. There is little scope for further modification of pavements without major reconfiguration of the road network. Adding further restrictions on cars and lorries using the High Street and its connecting roads before the opening of the bypass would only add to the congestion on other residential streets and the A96 and its junctions through the town.

2. Suspending on street parking.

Nearly 50% of Nairn on street parking is for loading or disabled, so these spaces are required and will continue to be used. The other spaces are at present at a premium for our large elderly population who may not have blue badges but need to shop by car with least risk of contact. It would make absolutely no sense to have those who are at least risk of Covid (the younger /fitter /more active) to have street space preference to those at higher risk. On-street parking in the one-way High Street is already in 'recessed' or inset bays in the wider pavements, so suspending these spaces would not assist the safer movement of either cyclists and pedestrians.

Also our businesses need to make High Street shopping as easy as possible to survive this desperate trading period, and the BID is firmly against any restriction on normal parking.

We believe it is essential to have a more coherent and effective strategy which will deliver on the objectives already identified:

- Rapid roll out of designated spinal routes across settlements.
- Safe connections to major healthcare facilities and other destinations.
- Safe recovery and regeneration of village, town and city centres

This funding must be used to make changes which will be value for money, sustainable and produce long term gains in active travel.

The Local Context

Nairn and its environs are ideal for walking, wheeling and cycling. A microclimate which results in reasonably dry weather and avoids extremes in winter should encourage active travel for work, school, leisure and light shopping. In particular, as far as cycling is concerned, the countryside is relatively flat, the town is compact with a good range of high street shops and there is a nice mixture of on and off road capacity, with the historic sites of Cawdor, Fort George, Brodie and Auldearn all within easy distance for the average cyclist. Walking provides opportunities for beautiful beach, forest and riverside walks, and some of these are also suitable for wheeling.

The challenge of the A96

However the perennial problem is the A96 trunk road generating constant traffic and pollution through the centre of town. Previous studies have shown that around 15,000 cars daily transit Nairn with 80% not stopping in the town. These volumes preclude safe cycling even with a cycle lane according to Sustrans. Advisory cycle lanes are dangerous where traffic is heavy and there are multiple side roads, with the majority of cycle accidents being at junctions.

Moreover A96 congestion produces rat running through many of the Nairnshire back roads which used to be very safe and quiet for walking and cycling, but now are as dangerous as the main road. The agreed solution, already endorsed by Highland Council, Transport Scotland, local MSPs and Ministers, is the delivery of the bypass. Once in place, the former route through the town can be reconfigured to offer safe access and a route for all users.

A Network of Safe Spinal Routes: marked, enhanced and signposted

During the pandemic there has been an exponential rise in the number of walkers and cyclists exploring Nairnshire, and discovering places they never knew existed in their back yards.

Key to getting both locals and visitors cycling, wheeling and walking longer term is to have a joined up and clearly signed network of routes into, through and around the town: isolated sections of marked pathway are both unattractive and ineffective. Routes should avoid the A96 apart from crossing at designated places

We require a major investment in signage and associated maps and information provision both in the town and further afield. This would reinforce and complement an initiative already launched by the Nairn Connects BID, and so should be planned in collaboration with that group and other local advisers. Suitable routes and infrastructure to facilitate active travel and ease of access will be critical to the revival and regeneration of the town as a destination and hub with repurposed and resurrected buildings.

At present there is an almost total lack of signage to encourage active travel.

We would like to see a plan which includes:

1. Signage and readily available information in the town centre as outlined in the town centre action plan, linking King Street and the High Street
2. Signage through Viewfield to the Leisure Park, beach and promenade .
3. Signage from Tradespark and Cranloch to cycle/walking paths and roads into town. (Avoiding A96)
4. Signage to extend the Auldearn cycle path via Boath Park / Grantown Road into town/ primary schools/ healthcare and also up and down the riverside. (Avoiding A96)
5. Signage around harbour, promenade and East Beach.
6. Proper signage to RSPB Culbin and forest walks or off road cycling.

There is also a need to widen and/or mark existing cycleways and footpaths where appropriate around the town, in particular establishing safe designated walking and cycling routes to schools.

7. Maps, Apps and leaflets
Both locals and tourists need to have route information and maps to plan for safe cycling, walking and wheeling.
In the past Highland Council has produced leaflets for walking routes and private individuals have published maps for cycling. These now need funding for updating and made available on line, as apps and as leaflets for locals and tourists alike.
8. Street and Park Enhancements
If people are going to be out walking, wheeling and on bikes in larger numbers whether for shopping, work or leisure there have to be more facilities for them apart from safe well signed and maintained paths and roads.
 - a)Secure bike stands in convenient places. (Some covered)
(There are no bike stands in the central car parks and only 1 rack of 3 spaces on the High St)
 - b)Well maintained numerous benches and picnic tables.
 - c)Good access to high quality toilets especially for those with mobility issues.
 - d) Provision of showers for visitors – possibly linked with the marina.
 - e)Timely maintenance and strimming of core paths especially higher up the river.

9. Completing missing links.

There are some notable missing links in the paths network in and around Nairn such as:

- a) Active travel provision for the Lochloy estate. The pathways within the area do not connect or link onward into the town centre and other facilities and services. In particular, the bridge over the railway to Balmakeith – already identified as a developer-funded contribution should be a priority. Consideration should be given to making this a vehicle link as well, as the current access to the 1000 houses at Lochloy is absolutely unacceptable.
- b) the continuation of the foot/cycle path from Delnies Schoolhouse to the Delnieswood Caravan site/end of Moss-side Road giving safe access to Nairn by walking, wheeling or bike, and in the other direction, accessing quiet roads to Ardersier, Carse Wood and Fort George.
- c) Extending the Auldearn cycle/walking path into central Nairn by signposting existing routes away from the A96 via Boath Park and Jubilee Bridge.
- d) the Moray Firth Coastal Path section from Nairn via Ardersier to Inverness, already identified as a priority in the agreed local development plans.

Access to the Nairn Hospital and Health Centre

The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the need for safe exercise and social distancing but also better access to relevant healthcare facilities. The routes to Nairn Healthcare are constrained by the bridge/underpass on Cawdor Road. Demarcating a cycle route along Cawdor Road is constrained by the narrowness of the road and its pavement.

However on the east side of town, the existing pathways from Auldearn, BoathPark and Broadhill via the Jubilee Bridge provide an existing access to Mill Road and Nairn Healthcare which should be promoted and signed. Joining the latter part of this route from Acre Street would avoid Cawdor Rd. From the west, the route from Tradespark/Cranloch across Lochdhu level crossing to Cawdor Road is a level and easy route to healthcare facilities.

Conclusion:

Covid incidence is extremely low in Highland, and the emphasis must be on spending any money available to support and build on the present local enthusiasm for active travel. The aim should be not to provide short term contingency measures, but make longterm changes to infrastructure and access. This will also help what will be a long and painful recovery for both local and tourist businesses.

We have had a wake up call on how individual actions can have an effect on climate change and that each of us can play an important part in a healthier future for both ourselves, our families and the planet.