

INVERNESS CASTLE EXPERIENCE PROGRESS REPORT - Report by Chief Executive

Recommendation

The purpose of this report is to provide a progress report on the Inverness Castle Experience.

It is recommended Directors note the update.

1. Strategy Contribution

1.1 High Life Highland's (HLH) purpose is Making Life Better. The HLH Strategy for 2025-2030 contains five strategic objectives which support the delivery of this purpose, and this report supports the following highlighted objectives:

1. **Delivery of affordable, accessible and inclusive services across the region.**
2. Maximise and grow income to reinvest across services.
3. Ensure a consistent high value of delivery across HLH services.
4. Commit to the net zero and sustainability agenda.
5. Efficient and effective service delivery through our people and processes.

2. Contract

2.1 The Highland Council is responsible for the Inverness Castle Experience (ICE) building project with governance through the Council and a delivery group which it established for the stakeholders, particularly those partners which have funded the project.

2.2 The building is scheduled for transfer to HLH to operate on behalf of The Highland Council (THC), week commencing 28 November 2025.

2.3 ICE is scheduled to open its doors for a soft launch in December 2025 followed by an official opening early in 2026.

3. Design and fit out

3.1 All design and fit out works are on track and are either finished or in the final stages of completion.

3.2 The final revisions of the audio-visual interpretation, including the digital shows and narration in the South Tower have now been completed and the last of the interpretation objects are being installed across both the North and South Towers.

3.3 The link building comprising of the Bistro and West Tower is now fully fitted out and the HLH Food & Beverage (F&B) team are conducting operational planning and testing.

3.4 Feedback from the visitor test and preview groups has, to date, been overwhelmingly positive.

4. Marketing and Communications Update

4.1 An update on the following areas of work is provided below:

- Marketing activity
- Media activity
- Stakeholder engagement
- Stakeholder previews
- Communications plan

4.2 Marketing Activity

4.2.1 The following activities have been undertaken in recent weeks:

- i) Attendance at the VILN Loch & Land Festival (25 October) to promote ICE and the Highlander Pass;
- ii) Continued review of content for the website to ensure ready for launch;
- iii) Promotional photography with models shoot for website;
- iv) Promotional Saltire Bistro food photography;
- v) Creation of marketing assets to be used in promoting the castle when it's ready for visitors;
- vi) Continued development of booking confirmation emails to ensure guests receive all necessary information prior to their visit;
- vii) Continued work with travel trade contacts;
- viii) Work with media partners and stakeholders to co-ordinate the soft launch campaign;
- ix) Ongoing liaison with VisitScotland regarding promotion and collaboration opportunities;
- x) Media (FAM) trips to the castle with VisitScotland, including various international media visits (e.g., Vanity Fair Italy, Grazia China); and
- xi) Trade (FAM) trips to the castle with luxury trade partners, including 2BUK and VILN.

4.2.2 The following events and milestones will be the focus of marketing and communications activity in the upcoming period:

- i) Ongoing liaison with travel trade representatives to maximise group bookings;
- ii) Issuing e-news to all ICE subscribers to announce tickets on sale date and opening date;
- iii) Preparation and delivery of an online marketing campaign to drive ticket sales;
- iv) Delivery of a new comms plan to cover from soft launch up to official opening period – written and awaiting approval from UK and Scottish Governments;

- v) Ongoing regular engagement with IHCRD funders, including discussions with UK and Scottish Government on soft launch and official launch communications protocols; and
- vi) Ongoing engagement with local Highland based media on soft launch up to official opening coverage and key messaging.

4.3 Media Activity

4.3.1 In the last quarter, the following media activity has been undertaken:

- i) Saltire Bistro 'Living Roof' video;
- ii) Landscaping complete plus garden detail video;
- iii) Inverness Castle seeks Visitor Experience Assistants;
- iv) Weaving stories into style: announcing collaborations with Prickly Thistle and Sandra Murray;
- v) Time capsules lowered into historic well; and
- vi) Inverness Castle Experience welcomes full team.

4.3.2 The following media activity is pending:

- i) Hoardings start to move revealing gardens;
- ii) Website launches and date gardens to re-open to the public;
- iii) Prickly Thistle Bespoke Tartan announced;
- iv) Tickets on sale;
- v) Gardens re-open to the public – on this day;
- vi) Peregrine Falcon Platform;
- vii) Castle Energy Centre net-zero towards castle green credentials;
- viii) Individual sponsorship announcements;
- ix) Camanachd cup view in situ in the Experience;
- x) Milestones of creative fit out team;
- xi) Milestones of operational team;
- xii) Runrig and development of the Highland Archive Resource Centre Archive; and
- xiii) Official opening date and details.

4.4 Stakeholder Engagement

4.4.1 A Stakeholder Invite Plan has been developed collating all the people that have been integral to the project and ensure they are included in the invite plans.

4.4.2 The plan outlines a stakeholder preview programme designed to acknowledge key contributors, strengthen relationships, and generate advocacy ahead of the soft launch and the official opening in 2026.

4.4.3 A number of testing groups have been invited to the Inverness Castle Experience to monitor:

- i) physical customer journey/customer flow;
- ii) customer experience;
- iii) accessibility;
- iv) fire evacuation routes;
- v) dwell times;

- vi) guide ID monitoring;
- vii) timings of shows; and
- viii) overall feedback of the Experience.

- 4.4.4 The next phase will include the key Stakeholders, Funders and Contributors.
- 4.4.5 Members of the team have visited Culloden Battlefield, Glasgow Science Centre, various High Life Highland sites and the Newton Rooms to begin the research phase of developing the Education programme for the Inverness Castle Experience.
- 4.4.6 A 'Cuillin' workbook is being developed for younger children to have a companion around the Castle. The workbook includes lots of activities to keep the younger children engaged throughout the experience, they can then pick up a 'Cuillin' souvenir in the retail space.
- 4.4.7 The team are delighted to report that two of the work experience students have secured employment as part of the Inverness Castle Experience team. Planning has commenced to deliver another Work Experience week early next year ahead of the next batch of recruitment scheduled for March 2026.
- 4.4.8 The Time Capsule has now been buried in the well for the next 50 years. Students from the winning school, North Kessock Primary, were invited for a photo call and to see where the capsule will be housed in the Bistro.
- 4.4.9 The new Inverness Castle Experience catering team have included the student's winning recipe in the new menu. We look forward to inviting the winning student on site soon to see his dish prepared for the public and included in the official menu.
- 4.4.10 A presentation was delivered to the Westhill Senior Citizen group. The group were extremely enthusiastic and are very eager to visit as a group activity.
- 4.4.11 The Inverness Castle Experience team attended the annual Chamber of Commerce Spotlight Event at the Drumossie Hotel. The business-to-business event had over 60 exhibitors, and the Castle team had a productive day networking. All the businesses were extremely positive and supportive. Event provided the team with new networking opportunities in the city centre.

5. Operations

- 5.1 This provides an update on the following areas of operational activity.

- i) Recruitment;
- ii) Training;
- iii) Pricing;
- iv) Ticketing;
- v) EPOS Systems;
- vi) Audio Guides;
- vii) Communications
- viii) Staff Scheduling;

- ix) Security;
- x) Retail; and
- xi) Food and Beverage.

5.2 Recruitment

- 5.2.1 All positions have now been filled across the Inverness Castle Experience, At full capacity the team will rise to 132 people, but this will be variable depending on the hours people are available.

5.3 Training

- 5.3.1 Training began on 3 November with a complete schedule for 87 people covering topics from compliance, health and safety, standards, customer care, practical skills from pouring beer to making coffee, menu delivery and awareness of High Life Highland values.

5.4 Pricing

- 5.4.1 Prices were released to the public in March 2025, and details of this announcement can be found here - Highland Residents to Benefit from Pricing Proposals for the Inverness Castle Experience | Inverness Castle Experience. Prices will be advertised on the new consumer facing website.

5.5 Ticketing

- 5.5.1 The ticketing system is now live, and minor amendments are being made to improve the ease of use for customers and Visitor Services staff.
- 5.5.2 Additional iPads have been purchased and configured to allow for ticket scanning at the Tapestry and Runrig exhibits.
- 5.5.3 E-mail content continues to be finalised: improving imagery and messaging.

5.6 EPOS Systems

- 5.6.1 All EPOS equipment has been received and configured and staff training has been completed.

5.7 Audio Guides

- 5.7.1 All Guide-ID equipment has been installed and is fully operational.

5.8 Communications

- 5.8.1 Internet connectivity throughout the castle including Wi-Fi and staff/visitor telephony is now complete.

5.9 Staff Scheduling

- 5.9.1 The “Deputy” Rota and scheduling software system is now fully operational allowing line managers to schedule staff quickly and easily and create the

necessary timesheet and finance information. All staff have access to Deputy. Managers have setup rotas for our initial opening period and privileged staff now have access to a system that extracts timesheet and schedule information from Deputy, to aid preparation of payroll submissions.

5.10 Security

- 5.10.1 Scotguard have now been awarded the contract for site security and will cover both night call out and monitoring, along with daytime cover with two officers from 10am to 10pm for an initial period of 3 months. The team have been managing access onto site during the training period which has allowed ICE staff to get to know our security team.

5.11 Retail

- 5.11.1 The shop is merchandised; physical pricing is well underway along with point of sale. The Christmas range is in place for opening. Currently the team are ensuring the EPOS systems and back office are correct and operating as expected.

5.12 Food and Beverage

- 5.12.1 The menu has been drafted; suppliers are in place and orders done. The beer system is in place along with coffee machines and training with staff undertaken. The kitchen brigade under the direction of the Head Chef have been practising the delivery of the menu offsite at the Bught Pavilion. The afternoon tea patisserie has been sourced, prices agreed and samples tested and approved. Photography of the menu items has taken place for the website and future marketing.

6. Delivery Group Meetings

- 6.1 The final meeting of the Inverness Castle Delivery Group was held in the North Tower of the castle on Friday 21 November 2025. This was followed by a tour of the facility and an opportunity to sample some of the catering from the menu.

- 6.2 The ongoing governance of the Inverness Castle Experience is considered elsewhere on the agenda.

7. Implications

- 7.1 Resource Implications – the budget was previously agreed by the HLH Board and will be reviewed on an ongoing basis in accordance with finance and performance monitoring procedures as the facility commences operation in December. Governance matters are considered elsewhere on this agenda.
- 7.2 Legal Implications – there is a separate report on governance arrangements, which includes a legal check on arrangements, elsewhere on this agenda.
- 7.3 Impact Assessment - All policies, strategies, or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural

Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken – an Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA) has been devised for the project and is set out in the CRD Full Business Case. In addition, an Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been conducted in advance of the operational phase of the project. There are no adverse impacts that necessitate a full Integrated Impact Assessment.

- 7.4 Risk Implications – the Inverness Castle Experience has been included in the HLH risk register.

Recommendations

It is recommended Directors note the update.

Designation: Chief Executive

Date: 25 November 2025

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