



**BALESHARE CAUSEWAY**

Report by Chief Officer, Assets and Infrastructure

**PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to advise the Comhairle on issues relating to the safety of the Baleshare Causeway as requested at the April 2024 meeting of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 Baleshare consists of a community of approximately 30 properties located on the west coast of North Uist. The land surrounding Baleshare is tidal and access is by road over a rock armour causeway, as detailed in the Appendix to the Report.
- 2.2 The roads network throughout the Western Isles relies heavily on bridges, causeways and culverts to connect communities maintaining accessibility to lifeline services. The scale of these structures varies considerably throughout the islands, however are vital links to ensuring the resilience of communities.
- 2.3 Weather and tides have the potential to disrupt travel to and from communities served by the road network, predominantly where bridges, causeways and culverts are located. Local residents of Baleshare have raised concerns relating to the safety of passage across the Baleshare causeway under certain conditions and are seeking reassurances and improvements to this infrastructure.
- 2.4 The position reflected in the body of the Report recognises the concerns in relation to Baleshare, however also reflects the requirement to consider the other needs across the estate before committing to prioritise investment. This will require a detailed assessment of similar community resilience concerns and a quantification of interruption and risk. A high-level assessment of community resilience is proposed in connection with a potential Levelling Up project.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:

(a) note the Report; and

(b) agree to consider community resilience/accessibility as a potential project for Uist and Barra through the UK Government Levelling Up Fund.

Contact Officer:	Calum Mackenzie, Chief Officer, Assets and Infrastructure
Appendix:	Baleshare Causeway
Background Papers:	None

## IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	The Comhairle has a limited capital allocation, however has many competing demands for investment. A replacement causeway to Baleshare is estimated at £5-9m. This is in excess of the Comhairle's current annual capital allocation of £5-6m.
Legal	None
Staffing	Resource will be required to assess resilience of the current transport network.
Assets and Property	The current Baleshare causeway has been assessed as stable, with no immediate concerns in relation to structural integrity.
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	Risk assessment will be required of all similar structures which will include the frequency of interruption and procedures for public warning/notice in the case of weather/tidal related events.
Equalities	None
Corporate Strategy	Fits with the theme of "Strengthening the Local Economy" by "prioritising investment in Comhairle buildings and infrastructure maximising effectiveness of available internal and external funding sources"
Environmental Impact	The possible impact of climate change on the frequency of interruption will be considered across all similar assets.
Consultation	None

## BACKGROUND

- 5.1 Local residents of Baleshare in North Uist have expressed concern at the safety of the causeway serving the community under circumstances where the weather and tidal conditions render the road unpassable.
- 5.2 There are many such locations across the Western Isles where roads to communities are temporarily closed due to weather and tidal conditions impacting communities to various degrees.

## WEATHER AND TIDAL DISRUPTION

- 6.1 Causeways and bridges form vital links to communities, however their general proximity to the sea and inland water courses can leave them liable to disruption. Tidal conditions, generally combined with a strong wind and surge can result in some causeways being overtopped by wave action or submerged. These conditions are generally predictable, and warnings can be issued to affected communities. The bridges and causeways affected can also vary depending on the prevailing wind direction.
- 6.2 SEPA operate a coastal flood warning system to which all can subscribe to. The Comhairle and first responder agencies utilise this service along with warnings from the MET Office to plan for events which may require a pro-active response to managing the road network or reacting to emergency situations.
- 6.3 Police Scotland will normally monitor conditions at key locations and make decisions on closing roads on a temporary basis as required in the interests of public safety.

- 6.4 Remote weather monitoring is available to measure wind speed at Scalpay Bridge and a live stream camera is available at the Braighe Causeway in Lewis to aid public information and decision making on safe travel.

### **BALESHARE CAUSEWAY**

- 7.1 Concerns have been raised by the community on certain aspects of the Baleshare Causeway.
- Structural Stability – the causeway is constructed from large armour stone and has been assessed by the Comhairle’s Structural Engineer as being stable. The structure will continue to be monitored and inspected periodically.
  - Width – the causeway is single track with two passing places. There are also small pedestrian step of places. However, these are not large enough to accommodate prams.
  - Height relative to sea level – there are times under particularly high spring tides that the road can become submerged with very little weather influence.
  - Approaches – visibility and turning facilities to aid drivers could be improved.
  - Closure procedures – communication and physical closure to prevent unsafe crossing could be improved.

In general there is a view within the local community that the causeway is not suitable for the current times and would like to see it improved or replaced to address these concerns.

- 7.2 A high level design and costing was undertaken for a replacement causeway and submitted as part of the Comhairle’s round 2 Levelling Up Fund bid. At the time this was estimated at £9m for a replacement off-line construction. Costs could be reduced by building on the existing line to approximately £5-6m, however there would be significant disruption to the community during construction.

### **INVESTMENT PRIORITIES**

- 8.1 The Comhairle’s entire capital annual allocation currently stands at £5-6m, from which there are many competing priorities. Although Levelling Up Funding of £20m has been announced, direction on the scope of projects to be included is awaited following meetings with UK Government. Even if funding towards the road network is allowable under the scope of Levelling Up Funding a full assessment of investment priorities would be required, which would include an assessment of similar structures across the network and the prevalence of weather/tide disruption. It is therefore recommended that a wider scoping study is undertaken of the road network considering the issues affecting community resilience prior to a commitment being made to any specific structure such as Baleshare Causeway.
- 8.2 Comhairle Engineers are currently working through a related investment programme of priority bridge repairs, achievable from additional funding of £6.66m provided by Scottish Government. The Comhairle had also made provision for capital maintenance works on Scalpay Bridge, which is the largest spanning bridge in the Western Isles.

### **COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY/RESILIENCE**

- 9.1 The Comhairle has, over many years, managed to improve connectivity and transport resilience throughout the Island chain. Islands such as Bernera and Scalpay have been connected to Lewis and Harris mainland by bridge. Eriskay and Berneray have been connected to Uist mainland by causeway. There are also in excess of 230 registered bridges and culverts across the road network in addition to some major coastal walls protecting roads infrastructure, such as the Braighe and Newton sea walls in Lewis.

- 9.2 In order to plan for future investment there will be the requirement to better understand the structural condition of each of these assets together with the community impact and risk of failure/interruption.
- 9.3 The subject of further fixed links has been raised over recent years. The Sound of Harris and the Sound of Barra crossings would complete the connectivity across all major island groups through the Western Isles Spinal Route. A further Minch crossing could connect the Western Isles to Mainland Scotland. A seminar is being organised to ascertain the public opinion and implications of such developments.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 Whilst the community concerns around the adequacy of the Baleshare Causeway are recognised the immediate focus will be on notifications and warnings in relation to weather interruptions. Officers will also consider option in relation to the approaches and passing places on the existing structure. The existing structure is currently in a stable condition however, will continue to be inspected annually or following any major storm event.
- 7.2 Further detailed assessment of bridges, causeways, culverts and costal defences should be undertaken prior to commitment of major investment in one specific area. Such assessments will consider elements of condition, safety, frequency of interruption and the resilience/size of the population affected.