

The Dark Hedges, visitor impact and management issues	8th March 2016
To: Leisure and Development Committee For Information	

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Promote our tourist offer locally and internationally
Outcome	Improve prosperity
Lead Officer	Peter Thompson
Cost: (If applicable)	Unknown TBC

The purpose of this information item is to update Members on the ongoing issues and possible interventions relating to the management at the Dark Hedges.

Background

The Dark Hedges near Stranocum, Co Antrim has become an increasingly popular visitor attraction over the past few years.

Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council has received a number of concerns about degradation of the verges and traffic management issues.

On early examination, officers have also noted that there are a number of potential safety related issues with this site. In response to the highlighted concerns, officers have convened a number of meetings with key stakeholders to discuss the issues presented and explore possible management solutions.

After meeting with representatives from Transport NI, Tourism NI, the local hoteliers, the Hedges Preservation Trust and Mervyn Storey MLA, an agreed outline approach to the issues has been drafted.

To date the Council has acted as the lead in pursuing a plan for improved and safer access, through engagement with statutory partners and with the cooperation from the landowners and the wider community.

Recommended actions that are being investigated

1. Seek and agree informally a consensus for a proposal with Landowners, other statutory stakeholders and Council.
2. Informally consult with the wider community.
3. Formally issue a request to Transport NI to initiate extinction of Bregagh Road (investigate implications of a permanent road closure).

4. Provide alternative access to the Bregagh Road via a footpath leading through a field, behind the road boundary. A landowner has been approached and planning implications are being investigated.

Wider strategic issues

1. The implementation of the Planning Order for a road closure could be a lengthy process. Realistically it could take 18 months. This includes a mandatory 6 week consultation.
2. An overall integrated site management plan is required which will include parking capacity, pedestrian access, day to day site management, regular maintenance plan for road, verges and pathway, nominated key holders etc. There will also be a cost to purchase the 4 metre strip for pedestrian access and lay a suitable DDA compliant path. (currently with District Valuer for assessment).
3. Site sensitivities need to be respected. From a natural habitat and biodiversity point of view, the rural, unspoilt landscape needs to be enhanced and the experience preserved and proactively shaped to meet visitor's perceived expectations, once they have visited the site.

Conclusion

Council Officers will continue to investigate the best options for the future of the Dark Hedges site and will report back to Council with recommendations for a management approach that protects and improves on the integrity of the experience and delivers a quality experience for the thousands of inbound visitors that travel to the wider Causeway Coast and Glen's area.