

REPORT TO CABINET

11 June, 2013

Cabinet Member: Councillor W Gareth Roberts

Subject: Barmouth Bridge

Contact Officer: Gwyn Morris Jones, Head of Highways and Municipal

The Decision Sought/Purpose of the Report

To approve work required to establish the best way in future of maintaining the rights to use the path on the Bridge for cyclists and pedestrians and to accept that it will not be possible to collect tolls from users of the path until a solution is in place.

Local Member's Views

I welcome the recommendation; the Report is comprehensive in terms of detail and information.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Alongside Barmouth Railway Viaduct is a footbridge, with connecting paths at each end, which provides a link for pedestrians, cyclists and motor cyclists between Morfa Mawddach (Arthog) and Barmouth across the Mawddach estuary. This footbridge is a private path for which, until recently, a toll is charged in order to meet the annual cost set by Network Rail for the right to use the path.
- 1.2 The path is located in a very scenic part of Gwynedd's coast; it crosses Morfa Mawddach on a Bridge of historical relevance. The path is of national importance as part of the Wales Coastal Path and part of the National Cycle Route linking North to South Wales since 1996. The path is a tourist attraction and of local importance to residents of Barmouth and Arthog.
- 1.3 Gwynedd Council is the owner of the tollhouse near the Bridge and, until recently, it was home to a married couple employed by the Council for the purpose of collecting tolls from users of path from Easter to the end of September every year.

1.4 The two members of staff are, since April this year, no longer employed by Gwynedd Council. It will therefore not be possible to collect tolls in the same manner in the future and the Council has to find an alternative way of meeting Network Rail's costs for maintaining use of the path.

2. Reasons for Recommending the Decision

2.1 Since 1970 there exists an agreement between the Local Authority (now Gwynedd Council) and the Railway Company (now Network Rail) whereby the Council have been granted a licence to use the footbridge. In accordance with the agreement, Network Rail charge 10% of the annual cost of maintaining the Bridge for this licence. The annual sum was reviewed in 1997 (a 66% increase), 2002 (a 30% increase) and then in 2007 (annual increases by indexation using the General Index of Retail Prices).

2.2 The Railway Viaduct is a Grade II* Listed Structure, and possibly the longest timber railway viaduct still in regular use in Europe. As a consequence, there is a significant cost to Network Rail in its maintenance.

2.3 In 2012/13, the annual sum charged by Network Rail for the licence was £39,405.

2.4 The Head of Service has recently written to the Director of Network Rail seeking a review (and reduction) to the amount this Council has to pay for the right to use the footbridge. Network Rail has confirmed that they will not reduce the amount being charged under the agreement.

2.5 Until recently, the Council employed two members of staff to collect tolls from users of the footbridge. These tolls are set and made public by the Council annually.

2.6 Despite reviewing (and increasing) the tolls recently, the income from the tolls after taking into account staff costs, service costs etc was insufficient to meet the annual sum charged by Network Rail for the right to use the path.

2.7 Since the departure of the two members of staff in the tollhouse, the Department has given detailed consideration to the possibility of employing staff to collect the tolls and to an automative system of collecting the tolls. Unfortunately, it is not cost effective to do so.

2.8 Without collecting tolls or other means of raising finance to meet Network Rail's annual charge, the Council is facing a deficit of £23,000 this year (and £9000 annually for the following years) i.e. the shortfall between what is allocated in the Council's budget and what Network Rail require as payment under the agreement.

2.9 The Cabinet is therefore asked to approve efforts to establish alternative means of meeting Network Rail's annual charge for the use of this path. Until an alternative means is established, it will not be possible to raise tolls on users of the path.

3. Relevant Considerations

3.1 The Cabinet Member and Head of Department have consulted with the Local Member regarding this matter. Discussions to date have led to the following suggestions/possibilities:

(i) In abolishing toll collection:

- Seek contributions from others in order to maintain the right to use the path i.e.:
 - Sustrans – National Cycle Route
 - Natural Resources Wales – Wales Coastal Path
 - Town and Community Councils – Important Local Facility/Attraction
 - Snowdonia National Park – With ownership of a nearby car park with a link to the path and bridge.

(ii) In continuing to collect tolls:

- Collection of tolls through the assistance of the local business or voluntary sector:
 - have already received two enquiries from the local business sector proposing an alternative use for the tollhouse which includes the collection of tolls from users of the path
 - it would possibly be a means by which local voluntary and charitable organisations raise many and also contribute towards the annual cost of maintaining the use of the path.

3.2 The Local Member emphasises the importance of maintaining the right to use this path (see the Local Member's View in this Report). This is evident from the Local Member's promotion and support of Barmouth Viaduct Access Group's application for grant assistance to develop the pathway linking the Bridge with Barmouth Promenade.

3.3 Under the agreement with Network Rail, Gwynedd Council is responsible for any work necessary to maintain the footbridge deck and parapet. During the last 5 years, Gwynedd Council spent approximately £10k undertaking this maintenance work. This work is financed from the Council's Public Rights of Way budget.

3.4 The tollhouse, owned by the Council, is not in good condition. Despite £9k being spent on damp-proofing in 2011, a further approximately £10k is required on internal work to bring the building up to an acceptable standard for its usage as a dwelling or in collecting tolls.

3.5 It should be noted that the tollhouse's current sewage system is not acceptable, and requires up to £20k of expenditure in order to have a system that is acceptable and to standard. Furthermore, it is envisaged that a further £8k of expenditure is necessary in strengthening and securing an adjoining retaining wall.

3.6 Despite the Bridge itself being a Listed Structure, we have received confirmation from the Regulatory Department that the tollhouse is not listed. If any of the options being considered changed the use of the tollhouse, then there would be a need to obtain relevant advice on the matter from the Planning Service.

3.7 If the collection of tolls resumed, consideration has to be given to the many and expensive measures necessary to ensure the safety of the person/s collecting the money; and to the way the money collected is dealt with and managed.

4. Next Steps and Programme

4.1 It is recommended that sufficient time is allowed to establish the options available in order to maintain the right to use this path. Every effort will be made to report to the Cabinet for a decision which would enable new arrangements at the Bridge to be in-place by 1 April, 2014.

Officer's Views

The Chief Executive:

In these circumstances this is the only reasonable step that the Council can take. In the year ahead there is an obvious need to look at creative means of maintaining this important right to use the path whilst seeking to reduce the deficit facing the Council.

Monitoring Officer:

The proposal is a sensible step in response to the situation facing the Council, pending a report back to Cabinet in due course on the long-term intention. I am therefore satisfied as regards propriety.

Head of Finance:

For this year, I agree with the business case not to raise tolls on users of Barmouth Bridge because of the cost associated with its collection. Of course, the right to use the path is a local 'asset' that should be safeguarded and I note that this remains the focus for the Cabinet Member for the Environment and the Highways and Municipal Department.

Attachments