

North Yorkshire Council

Executive

17 March 2026

Whitby Cliff Lift and access to Whitby West Cliff Beach

Report of the Corporate Director of Environment

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To recommend to Executive to decommission the cliff lift.
- 1.2 To recommend to Executive to discontinue the free replacement bus service.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Whitby's Cliff lift, on North Terrace, was opened in 1931 and consists of a lift within a vertical shaft running down from the cliff top through the boulder clay, leading to a 221ft long pedestrian tunnel out to the beach.
- 2.2 The lift was closed in April 2022 when corrosion was discovered in its structure. For the last three years the borough and then unitary council have run a free subsidised bus service over the summer to replace the lift. The bus service ran again in 2025.
- 2.3 No income has historically been generated from the lift. Chalet users used to get a free lift pass, but this was removed when the charge was dropped altogether. Income from non-chalet users did not cover the cost of the lift operator.
- 2.4 The tunnel is required for the winter storage of circa 170 beach chalets as there are no other viable alternative locations in Whitby and this storage is required from October to March each year.

3.0 NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

- 3.1 A steady increase in water ingress has caused corrosion of the structure. There is no easy solution to prevent this. Water ingress also causes more frequent renewal of operational parts to lift car and mechanisms. Some parts were required to be renewed annually due to this.
- 3.2 The top station building needs structural remedial works as there is cracking in the brick pillars, and the roof is bowing in places. The lifting gear is within the top station so would need to be removed or protected in situ before any repairs could take place.
- 3.3 A new ventilation system needs to be incorporated within the facility to reduce the humidity.
- 3.4 As a result, the Council commissioned a report by Align Property Services to undertake a feasibility assessment to determine long-term options that will effectively address the growing maintenance needs while ensuring the continued safety and serviceability of the lift and tunnel structures. A full copy of their report is included at Appendix A.
- 3.5 In 2020 Scarborough Borough Council (SBC) undertook a full inspection of the lift and prepared a detailed planned preventative maintenance schedule which would bring the lift back into working order. A full copy of the SBC report is included at Appendix B.

3.6 Anglo American plc were also approached directly by local Councillors to provide their advice into the problems associated with the lift. Their advice is included in Appendix C.

4.0 OPTIONS PRESENTED

4.1 The following options are available for Executive to consider. Officers' recommendation is to proceed with Option 2.

- Option 1 - repair the lift to full working order
- Option 2 - decommission the lift and retain the top building
- Option 3 - decommission the lift and remove the top building
- Option 4 - decommission the lift and infill the tunnel and shaft
- Option 5 - decommission the lift and infill the shaft but retain tunnel for storage
- Option 6 - further surveys and monitoring of water ingress.

4.2 Option 1 - repair the lift to full working order

4.2.1 The findings of the detailed survey undertaken by Scarborough Borough Council in January 2020 were that significant water ingress, defects and corrosion were present and led to the former Council closing the lift. This is further confirmed by the assessment of condition undertaken by Align Property Services in January 2024, both of which are included in the Appendices.

4.2.2 There are a significant amount of remedial works required which are set out in detail in Appendix B. It should also be noted that this survey was in 2020 and in the five years since, the condition can reasonably be assumed to have deteriorated further. Nine additional surveys were also recommended, but as the lift was closed these have not been undertaken. (Appendix B)

4.2.3 The costs of the remedial work in 2020 to simply reinstate the lift to working order was estimated to be £406k. Using RICS Building Cost Information Service indices for inflation, that cost would now be £489k (+20.3%). This does not include allowance for any further deterioration since 2020 which would be subject to further surveys.

4.2.4 Whilst this would bring the lift back to working order by repairing defects and replacing parts, it would not address the fundamental issue causing the defects which is the significant water ingress, moisture accumulation and corrosion in the structure. It also does not address the ongoing operation of the lift including the seasonal employment of a lift driver and annual testing and maintenance.

4.2.5 The total cost of reinstating the lift to working order and addressing the water ingress was estimated by Scarborough Borough Council in 2020 to be £4.58m. Using RICS Building Cost Information Service indices for inflation, that cost now would be £5.51m (+20.3%).

4.2.6 There should be some caution in reliance on this figure as it is noted that the bulk of the £4.58m estimate is a **provisional sum** for waterproofing (probably backwall grouting) and that would be subject to further detailed surveys and an in-depth feasibility study before accurate costings could be compiled. However, the advice was sought from a specialist company to inform the provision sum so this does give an anticipated order of cost that could be expected for that worst case solution.

4.2.7 There will also be additional costs associated with selecting this option:

- a) The tunnel will require ventilation either by mechanical means or vent stack in the grouted shaft to ensure a safe working environment for staff and we would estimate the cost of that work to be a £25–50k.

- b) The existing energy supply for the tunnel and two concessions (Retail shed/Surf School) on the promenade is routed down the shaft and in recent times this has been unreliable and has required regular repairs. The cabling and associated energy infrastructure is old and requires renewal to modern standards as energy will still be required following permanent closure. Depending on specification and routing of energy cables we would estimate the cost of that work to be potentially in the order of £30-60k.

4.2.8 Anglo American plc have also offered their advice on the issue and visited the site on Wednesday 20 August 2025. Following a request by the Scarborough and Whitby Area Committee a further visit was undertaken on 21 January 2026. A copy of their advice following both visits is included at Appendix C.

4.2.9 The Anglo American advice largely aligns with the SBC and Align findings, however when they visited in August they noted that the shaft is relatively dry, with no significant water ingress, and based on this suggested backwall grouting is not required at this time and instead recommended that the original grout port plugs are inspected and replaced as required. Their advice also recommends introducing ventilation to the shaft. Their visit in January also noted that the shaft was still dry.

4.2.10 Therefore the major risk surrounds the need to provide waterproofing to the shaft to prevent water ingress. Despite no change in the conditions between August and January, water ingress and moisture remain the problem. The fact that the shaft is dry now does not mean that the situation has changed. Water ingress and moisture caused the initial failure of the lift and will still be required to be addressed if the lift is brought back into use. The extent of the waterproofing solution is unknown unless further studies are undertaken.

4.2.11 If the lift is brought back into working order, then a seasonal lift operator will be required to be employed for five months between May and September. The cost of this post would be approximately £16k per annum at scale CD, although no formal job evaluation has been undertaken. Running costs at £5k pa and annual maintenance at £10k pa would also be required, taking the annual revenue increase to £31k pa.

4.2.12 Also for consideration is the option for charging for use of the lift. Scarborough Borough Council used to charge general users to use the lift and chalet tenants were provided with a free lift pass. Historically the income from the fares did not cover the cost of employing the lift operator. During the latter stages of its operation the lift was free, and the current replacement bus service is also free, although there is no revenue budget allowance for this.

4.2.13 For comparison the cost of using the Council's Spa Cliff Lift in Scarborough is £1.40 for a single journey and £2.60 for a return. Children aged 5 and under can ride for free, and registered carers also ride for free when accompanying a paying passenger. Dogs are permitted without charge. In 2024 2,851 passengers used the free replacement bus service, so a minimum income of circa £4k pa could be expected if charging were to be reintroduced.

4.4 **Option 2 - decommission the lift and retain the top building**

4.4.1 This option involves the removal of the top section of lift equipment to ensure the system is safe and prevent any future failures that could compromise the structure. Sealing up of the existing access to the lift and emergency staircase into the tunnel will be required. The tunnel section would remain in its current state for use as storage during the off-peak season.

4.4.2 This option also requires the additional ventilation and electricity supply to the concessions.

4.4.3 The cost of option two is estimated to be £199k.

4.5 Option 3 - decommission the lift and remove the top building

- 4.5.1 This option is the same as option two but instead of retaining the top building it is demolished and removed. A reinforced concrete capping slab would be required to close off the top of the main shaft. The design of a capping slab would provide a 120-year design life where the cracking can be closely controlled preventing the rate of deterioration due to the moist atmosphere below ground level, and in order to maintain ventilation through the shaft, a vent would be installed on the topside.
- 4.5.2 The installation of a capping slab to the shaft would still retain residual risk of deterioration of the shaft lining, although this would be over a period of decades. The staircase would be retained to allow access to the underside of the capping slab to undertake inspections at approximately two to six-year intervals. The tunnel would be retained as is, as part of this option and the ventilation and renewed electrical supply to the concessions will also be required.
- 4.5.3 It should be noted that the top station is not a listed building, but it is within the conservation area and therefore an application for consent to demolish the building to the local planning authority will be required. If this proved to be unsuccessful then option two could be pursued.
- 4.5.3 The cost of option 3 estimated to be £232k.

4.6 Option 4 - decommission the lift and infill the tunnel and shaft

- 4.6.1 This option would require complete removal of all M&E equipment within the main shaft and tunnel. The lift shaft and tunnel would be filled with low carbon foamed concrete and then topped with a tarmac surface to match the existing footway and blocked off at the bottom with expanded polystyrene blocks. The topside building would also be fully demolished for this option. The renewed electrical supply to the concessions will also be required.
- 4.6.2 The sustainability aspects of this option are deemed to be poor, due to the high carbon cost required to transport large quantities of foamed concrete to site. However, the option does negate the need for ongoing inspections and negate the risk of deterioration of the shaft lining.
- 4.6.3 The cost of option 4 is estimated to be £538k.

4.7 Option 5 – decommission the lift and infill the shaft but retain tunnel for storage

- 4.7.1 Option 5 is the same as option four but instead of infilling the tunnel it is retained for storage. This option requires the additional ventilation and electricity supply to the concessions.
- 4.7.2 The cost of option 5 is estimated to be £361k.

4.8 Option 6 - further monitoring

- 4.8.1 Option 6 is a new option following the consideration of the issue by the Scarborough and Whitby Area Committee at its meetings on 19 September 2025 and 3 March 2026.
- 4.8.2 Local members spoke passionately about the lift and following the debate, the Area Committee resolved to
- i. recognise the importance of the historic cliff lift to Whitby as a heritage asset, essential to the tourist economy and a means of accessing the Blue Flag beach;

- ii. request the Executive to look again at the cliff lift with a view to repairing and reopening this facility since the committee believes there is a lack of realistic up to date financial costings and information to support robust decision making on this issue; and in particular
- iii. recommend the council commissions an up-to-date survey of the cliff lift together with full costings to bring it back into use; and the council develops a business case for opening the cliff lift to include an annual maintenance plan and the ongoing cost of operating the cliff lift as a going concern used for the benefit of residents and visitors especially those who are disabled, have hidden impairments or restricted mobility.

4.8.3 This resolution is effectively a request to delay a decision on the lift so that further surveys can be undertaken, costs updated and the risks regarding the findings related to water ingress can be resolved.

4.8.4 The cost of properly investigating the water ingress and moisture, identifying the extent of the problem and undertaking a feasibility study for a waterproofing and ventilation solution, and updated costs for the repair of the lift is estimated to be in the order of £25 - 50k, dependent upon the extent of surveys required. The cost of the waterproofing and ventilation solution is unknown unless these investigations are carried out.

4.9 Summary:

| Assessment criteria | Option 1 Repair to working order | Option 2 De- commission ; retain building | Option 3 De- commission ; demolish building | Option 4 De- commission ; infill tunnel and shaft | Option 5 De- commission ; infill shaft | Option 6 Ongoing Monitoring |
|---|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| Capital costs | £599k | £199k | £232k | £538k | £361k | £50k |
| Waterproofing risk *subject to further monitoring and surveys | Up to £4.9m | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Ongoing maintenance liability/cost | Very high | High | High | Low | Low/medium | Low |
| Visual impact | Low | Low | Low/medium | Low/medium | Low/medium | Low |
| Sustainability impact | Medium | Low | Low | Very high | High | Low |
| H&S aspects of the Work | Medium risk | Medium risk | Medium risk | Medium risk | Medium risk | Low |
| Technical justification | Complex | Complex | Complex | Simple | Moderate | Simple |
| Programme | 52 weeks | 21 weeks | 26 weeks | 28 weeks | 25 weeks | 6 monthly |

5.0 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN AND RESPONSES

5.1 There has been a large volume of public and political comment regarding a lack of consultation on the options.

5.2 It should be noted that the Council is not making a decision to close the lift. The lift has been closed for over three years.

- 5.3 The Council is aware that prior to its closure the lift was a useful and a much-loved heritage asset by the people of Whitby and its visitors. This has been further demonstrated by the petition started by Cllr. Trumper on Charge.org titled “Save the Historic Whitby Cliff Lift”, which at the date of writing this report had received 5,661 signatures and was received by the Area Committee at its meeting on 19 September 2025.
- 5.4 It is therefore accepted that any public consultation would overwhelmingly support the re-opening of the lift, and any future decision by the Executive to decommission the lift should be taken within this context. The feedback from the open comments on the bus service consultation also showed 182 mentions of a desire to fix the lift in the open comments.
- 5.5 In considering the future of the cliff lift, Executive should also consider the future of the free replacement bus service. The provision of the replacement bus service has been subject to public consultation, and this is a legal requirement under the Equality Act.
- 5.6 For the last three years since the lift was closed the council has run a free subsidised bus service over the summer to replace the lift from 01 May to Sunday 29 September.
- 5.7 There is no revenue budget for the operation of the bus and the cost has been funded from reserves which are now fully utilised. The cost of operating the service in 2025 was £52,744 (£345 per day). The cost of operating the service in 2024 was £52,440 (£342 per day). The number of passenger trips in both years are:

| Month | 2024 monthly total | 2024 daily average | 2025 monthly total | 2025 daily average |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| May | 372 | 12 | 38 | 2 |
| June | 540 | 18 | 152 | 5 |
| July | 590 | 19 | 172 | 6 |
| August | 1040 | 33 | 619 | 20 |
| September | 309 | 11 | 286 | 10 |
| Totals | 2821 | | 1267 | |

- 5.8 Based on this the cost per one way trip was £18.59 in 2024 and £41.63 in 2025.
- 5.9 Given the ongoing cost of providing the bus service and the very low number of daily users the Council will need to consider if it has any legal duty to continue to provide the bus, including if the service should continue to be free.
- 5.10 Advice has been obtained from the Legal Service into the Council’s statutory obligations including its public sector equality duty. The Council is required to act reasonably and to undertake a balancing exercise, taking into account the needs of users but also having regard to its financial duty to taxpayers.
- 5.11 As the Equality Act applies, careful consideration must be given as to impact on disabled groups to ensure no one is disadvantaged by a change to the bus service. It is recommended that in making a decision the Council considers:
- The impact on disabled people if the service is cancelled.
 - Reasonable adjustments.
 - Disproportionate impact.
- 5.12 Consultation must be undertaken to understand the impact on users and demonstrate that this impact has been considered before taking any decision on the bus service. The affected individuals (disabled/non-disabled) should be consulted to explore the alternative options.

- 5.13 As such, a public consultation was held over the summer which started on 24 June 2025 and closed on 7 September 2025. In order to reach as many people as possible the consultation was:
- Hosted electronically on the Council's website
 - Paper copies were available in the Beach Management Centre
 - Posters erected in local venues with a QR code
 - Notified to Whitby Town Council, Whitby NYC Members and the local MP with a request to publicise the consultation to constituents and provision of information on how to access the consultation
 - Promoted on social media
 - Good coverage in local media
- 5.14 The high level findings of the public consultation are:
- The Council received 753 responses to the consultation
 - 49% of respondents were Whitby residents
 - 32% of respondents stated they were a disabled person or had a disability
 - 79% of respondents had previously used the cliff lift
 - Only 25% of respondents had used the replacement bus service
 - A majority (over 70%) consider the service important or very important
 - Respondents were asked to rank four funding options. The most frequent first-choice preferences were:
 - Continue funding the free bus service: (274)
 - Part subsidise and charge all passengers: (84)
 - Part subsidise and exempt disabled users: (172)
 - Remove the bus service altogether: (130)When considering all rankings, removal of the service was most frequently ranked last, indicating low support for discontinuation.
 - The open comments show 182 mentions of a desire to fix the lift.
- 5.15 The consultation reveals strong public support for maintaining or restoring access to the beach via either the cliff lift or a reliable replacement service. The disabled and elderly communities are particularly impacted, and many respondents view the lift as a heritage asset worth preserving. There is low support for removing the service, and many suggest modest charges or alternative funding to sustain it. There was also a lot of criticism of the bus service and a lack of advertisement.
- 5.16 However, this needs to be placed in the context of only 195 people (25%) having previously used the bus service.
- 5.17 A full copy of the consultation responses is included in Appendix D.
- 5.18 Options that could be considered following the consultation are:
- Remove the bus service all together.
 - Continue with the free bus service – full subsidy required.
 - Continue the bus service and charge all passengers (including disabled) – partial subsidy required.
 - Continue the bus service and charge all passengers, except disabled users who travel free – partial subsidy required.
- 5.19 Suggestion has also been made of the possibility of letting a concession contract for a land train to transport people to the promenade, although the low number of users may also make this financially unviable.
- 5.20 When balancing the very low number of users and relatively small number of people impacted, it is recommended that the bus service should be discontinued. This is also balanced against the financial challenges facing the Council and the disproportionate cost of providing the service for a small number of users.

5.21 The Council can balance this with the fact that there are a large number of both coastal and inland locations in North Yorkshire where the topography prevents access to people of limited mobility or disability. Replacement bus services are not provided to any of these locations and Whitby is the only such location where this has been done. It is therefore considered that the continuing provision of a free replacement bus service is a disproportionate adjustment.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The decision on the future of the cliff lift and bus service, need to be considered in the context of the Council's wider financial position which was set out in the report to Executive of 20 January 2026 titled Revenue Budget 2026/2027 and Medium Term Financial Strategy, which was subsequently approved as a budget at Council on 13 February 2026.

6.2 There will be financial implications for the Council as a result of whichever option is taken forward. The relative costs of each option are set out in the table at paragraph 4.9 above. The capital cost, if the recommended option 2 is taken forward, is £199k. This cost will need to be met from the Council's Strategic Capacity Reserve.

6.3 The revenue implications would relate to the ongoing operation and maintenance of the ventilation system and electrical supply, estimated at up to £5,000 per annum, although this might be able to be reduced if natural ventilation can be incorporated into the design. This revenue cost would need to be met from existing service budgets.

6.4 There are no financial savings as a result of the recommendation to discontinue the replacement bus service, as there is currently no revenue budget to fund this service. If the bus service were to be continued, a cost similar to 2025 could be expected of £53k per annum, for which there is currently no budget identified.

7.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no direct legal implications as a result of this report.

7.2 The legalities surrounding the discontinuation of the bus service are included in section 5.

8.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are equalities implications as a result of this report, and a full equalities impact assessment has been carried out at Appendix E.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are minor climate change implications principally related to construction works, which are minor in nature and which impacts will be mitigated as much as possible. Initial assessment attached at Appendix F.

10.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 Officers' recommendation is to proceed with option 2: decommission the lift and retain the top building. The reasons for this recommendation are:

- Of the options, option 2 is the cheapest and best value for money option to decommission the lift and best option to address the problems facing the lift and the top station without affecting the character of the area
- Option 2 would not prejudice the lift being re-commissioned at some point in the future if funding could be identified

- The Council operates in a challenging financial environment and the option to bring the lift back into service, whilst desirable to the community of Whitby, would add to the financial burden and reduce funding that would be available for other higher priorities
- The lift has been closed for three years without much detriment to Whitby or impact upon the chalet lets
- There is too much uncertainty surrounding the need for waterproofing of the shaft. If full waterproofing is required, the potential cost of up to £4.9m is disproportionate to the value of the service proved by the lift.

10.2 Officers' recommendation is also to discontinue the replacement bus service. The reasons for this recommendation are:

- due to the very low number of users of the service;
- the disproportionate cost of providing the service.
- The provision of the bus service is not a reasonable adjustment when compared to other steep areas within the County or on the coast where no bus service is provided.
- Access to the beach can be gained by all at Battery Parade.

11.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 It is recommended that Executive:

- i. Approve option 2 to decommission the cliff lift and agree a capital budget of £199k to be met from the Strategic Capacity Reserve and
- ii. discontinue the free replacement bus service.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Align Structures Options Report

Appendix B – SBC Planned Preventative Maintenance Schedule

Appendix C - Anglo American Advice

Appendix D – Consultation responses

Appendix E – Initial Equalities Impact Assessment

Appendix F – Initial Climate Change Assessment

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: None

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