Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

DOC-xxx

Date: 6 May 2026

To: Nick Kelly, Operations Manager - Whitianga

CC: Tinaka Mearns, Regional Director Hauraki, Waikato, Taranaki.
Cat Wilson, Director Heritage and Visitor

From: Rachael McMillan, Senior Visitor Advisor and Tania Short, Principal Advisor, Heritage and Visitor Directorate

Subject: Hahei Beach Short Walk Options Paper

Purpose

1. This paper sets out the context and damage to Hahei Beach Short Walk (Hahei Walk), the intended reroute alignment, the assessment methodology used, the options considered, and recommendations for next steps.

Recommendation

2. Note providing access from Hahei Beach to the entrance of the Mautohe Cathedral Cove walk, either via the existing Hahei Beach Short Walk or the realigned Short Walk no longer appears to be viable.
3. Note the evidence indicates removal of the track and not proceeding with the re-route is the preferred option.
4. Agree/not agree – DOC makes a deliberate shift to focus on the core experience by prioritising reliable access to Mautohe Cathedral Cove via the Grange Road carpark and primary track, rather than investing in a secondary connector track where the infrastructure is more vulnerable.
5. Propose consulting with key stakeholders regarding the removal of the track (and not proceed with the re-route) to inform the final decision paper.

Executive Summary

6. The Cathedral Cove Recreation Reserve is a nationally significant visitor destination with persistent infrastructure vulnerability due to unstable coastal terrain and is subject to increasingly frequent extreme weather events. The primary visitor destination is the Mautohe Cathedral Cove archway and beach, accessed by a popular walking track reopened to the public in December 2024.

7. Hahei Beach Short Walk (Hahei Walk) is a track linking from Hahei Beach to the Mautohe Cathedral Cove Track. Visitors who don't wish to walk up the road or pay for the shuttle often use this walk to reach the cove track. A stroll through the trees with beautiful views over Hahei Beach was more pleasant than walking up the steep road in full sun. It is also popular with locals for daily exercise. Prior to COVID-19 and Cyclone Gabrielle this track was very popular, with 20% of visitors arriving at the track start via this route.

8. The track has been closed since early 2023 due to landslide risks and land movement following severe weather events including Cyclone Gabrielle. Geotechnical assessments and landslide predictive modelling indicate the area is susceptible to landslides and rockfalls, especially during and

immediately after high rainfall events. The existing Hahei Walk was assessed as higher visitor risk than other sections of the Cathedral Cove Reserve due to significant fall heights and landslide vulnerability along the cliff edge[1]. Consequentially a concept was developed as part of the Cyclone Gabrielle Recovery Options Development Phase (pre-IVL assessments), to shift the second half of the track away from the vulnerable cliff edge with the exit to Grange Road and this option was deemed to halve the visitor risk for that section of track[2]. The delivery of the reroute was then scheduled for delivery in 2026.

9. Previous community consultation during development of post-Cyclone Gabrielle recovery options confirmed the Hahei to Cathedral Cove walking link is important to the community. DOC therefore prioritised restoring this connection once the main Mautohe Cathedral Cove Track reopened.

10. The proposed reroute was designed to avoid the most vulnerable section of the Hahei Walk and to remove the need to use high-risk structures, such as bridges. Although geotechnical advice noted there would still be potential land instability, the proposed reroute was the lesser risk of the two options for visitor risk and infrastructure vulnerability to landslides[3]. The Hahei Walk reroute proposed alignment branched off midway along the existing Hahei Walk to connect with Grange Road near the start of the Mautohe Cathedral Cove track. The intention was to keep ongoing maintenance to a minimum through targeted tree felling, groundwater management, and the installation of box steps.

11. Construction of the reroute was about to commence when the January 2026 storms impacted the region. Two slips damaged 1) the track from the beach to the beginning of the reroute alignment and 2) the proposed reroute alignment, prompting reconsideration of progressing the reroute and its long-term viability[4].

12. DOC used decision-making methodology designed following Cyclone Gabrielle, as well as the Mautohe Cathedral Cove Adaptation Plan criteria, to assess the recent storm damage, the previous track access route, the damaged alternative alignment, and previous rebuild options considered following Cyclone Gabrielle.

13. Adaptation planning[5] for the entire recreation reserve concluded:
    a. The unstable terrain of the entire Cathedral Cove Recreation Reserve significantly limits the type and quality of visitor infrastructure that can be provided and this must be considered in all investment.
    b. The rock archway at Mautohe Cathedral Cove is the primary visitor draw and is the main priority for access investment.
    c. Track and structure damage will continue due to known and publicised natural hazards.

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[1] Tonkin & Taylor July 2023 Cathedral Cove Basic Level Landslide Risk Assessment. DOC-7669260 Tonkin & Taylor May 2024 Cathedral Cove Track Feasibility Assessment. DOC-7645108 Tonkin & Taylor April 2025 Gemstone Bay Geotechnical Feasibility Report. DOC-10705786 Wigmore, O. March 2024 Hahei Cathedral Cove Landslide Risk Modelling DOC-7879967

[2] Tonkin & Taylor May 2024 Cathedral Cove Track Feasibility Assessment. DOC-7645108

[3] Tonkin & Taylor May 2024 Cathedral Cove Track Feasibility Assessment p13, 14, 41

[4] Email from Project Manager for Hahei Beach Short Walk reroute observations of a site visit with Frame Group and rangers, specifying new slips on the Hahei Short Walk and proposed realignment – 20 April 2026. DOC-10705786

[5] Mautohe Cathedral Cove Adaptation Plan 2025 (SharePoint)

d. Low-cost, lightweight infrastructure is preferred, as resilient structures offer little benefit when the surrounding landscape remains unstable.
e. Repairs should be prioritised only if visitor risks can be managed to an appropriate level and are cost-effective for the benefits gained.

14. Options were assessed against key criteria including the level of infrastructure vulnerability informed by geotechnical investigations, predictive landslide modelling, statutory obligations, iwi and community expectations, cost-effectiveness of continuing to replace infrastructure, environmental impact, cultural values, and visitor safety.

15. As part of this process DOC reconsidered the previous geotechnical advice on options for the Hahei Walk. The previous assessment which provided the initial development of the reroute showed the current alignment of the Hahei Walk was not viable. Therefore, the only option was the rerouted alignment. With further landslides destroying the land the new track would pass over, it is now impractical to continue with the reroute. The infrastructure vulnerability, likelihood of repeated future storm and cyclone events, existing debris, environmental impacts, and infrastructure costs are too high to warrant the benefits.

16. The recent infrastructure and land damage on the Hahei Walk and at Waimata Gemstone Bay confirm a high likelihood of repeated damage, escalating maintenance costs, and a poor return on further investment in these alignments.

17. Given this, we recommend DOC make a deliberate shift in approach. Rather than continuing to spread effort across multiple vulnerable access points, DOC should focus on the core experience and prioritise reliable access to Mautohe Cathedral Cove via the Grange Road carpark (the primary track to Cathedral Cove).

18. Reaching the Cove is the experience which matters most to visitors. DOC should invest resources into strengthening the Mautohe Cathedral Cove track stability and resilience by improving drainage and water management, targeted planting to support land integrity, ongoing monitoring and maintenance in line with our Adaptation Plan, reducing exposure to ongoing risk and cost, instead of diluting the overall budget by focusing on other tracks on the reserve.

19. DOC needs to respond to increasing frequency and intensity of weather events, known geotechnical constraints and the need to operate within fiscal limits for the longer term. Managing within these constraints will support DOC to improve long-term reliability, reduce lifecycle costs, focus staff resources on delivering the primary visitor experience.

20. It is recommended to consult with key stakeholders to inform the final decision paper process to:
    a. permanently remove the existing Hahei Beach Short Walk due to visitor safety risk and landslide vulnerability
    b. remove the bridges on the existing Short Walk due to visitor safety risk
    c. remove the steps to access the track from Hahei Beach
    d. Not proceed with building the proposed Hahei Walk reroute, which was about to get underway due to higher infrastructure vulnerability than previously considered, and a shift of priorities to focus resources on the main Mautohe Cathedral Cove experience.

Assessment

21. Table 1 shows the decision-making process flow chart[6] used to guide this assessment. The first step was to understand the risk/damage.

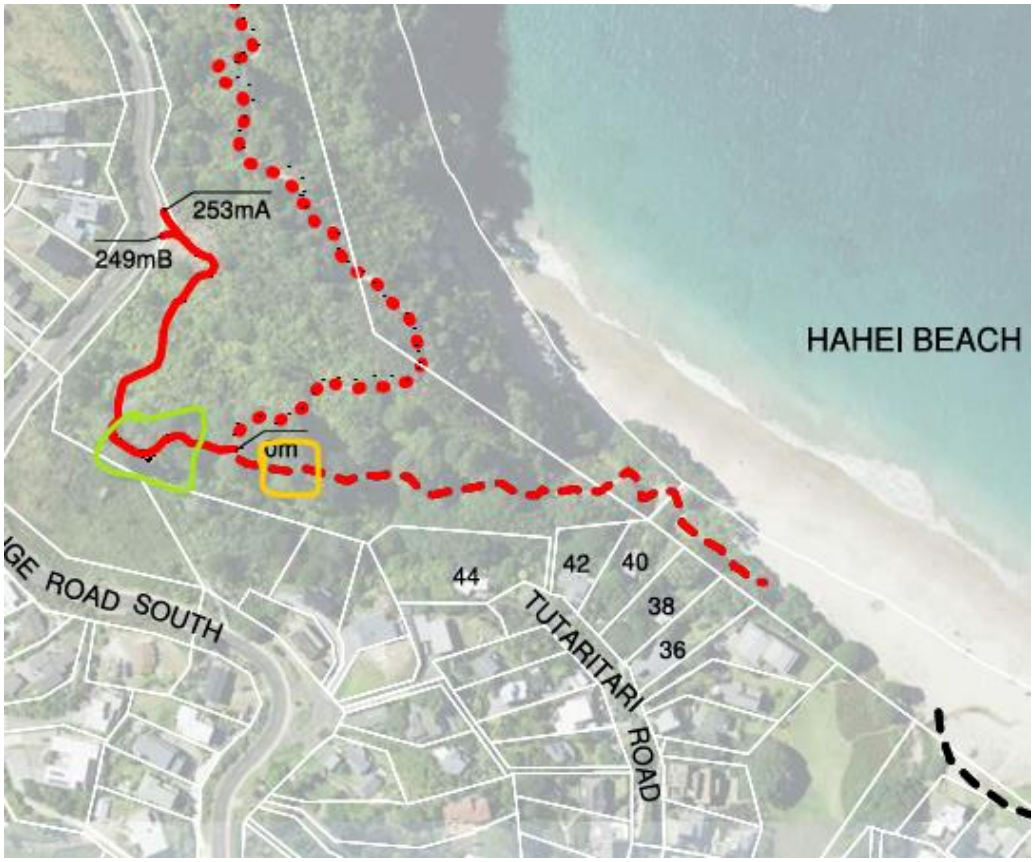
22. The Project Manager for the track reroute and construction experts undertook damage assessments in January and February 2026. The assessment undertaken was based on operational and constructability expertise and informed by existing geotechnical reporting for the area as well as direct observation of current site conditions. Damage assessments confirmed two landslides, one on a section of the existing track which needed to be retained for the reroute; and one on a section the new reroute would have crossed, where water is pooling and there is evidence of further instability.

23. Fallen tree trunks have exacerbated the land instability. Figure 1 highlights in yellow the new slip affecting the Hahei Beach Short Walk. This section was to be kept as part of the new track alignment. The slip would prevent end-to-end access, meaning the track would remain closed even if the reroute proceeded. This reinforces the ongoing vulnerability of the track to slip events.

24. The green square marks a section of the proposed reroute where three fallen trees are obstructing the alignment. Their root balls encroach onto the track, and the cut trunk sections remain upslope. Over time, these pose an ongoing risk as they may rot, shift, and potentially slip onto the track. Removal was not feasible within budget and relocating the material downslope risked damage to adjacent private property. There are another 50-plus tree trunks above the track expected to cause further instability over time. No other track alignments were considered practical.

Figure 1: Landslide and track vulnerability on Hahei Beach Short walk section 1 that was to be retained (yellow) and proposed reroute (green)

[6] Decision making process flow chart developed by the Cyclone Recovery Programme 2023-2024



Figures 2 & 3: Landslide and track damage: Photos DOC

Figure 4: Landslide and track damage: Photos DOC

25. This site damage was assessed as major, with repair requiring funding beyond the district budget[7]. It was confirmed there is no funding available to undertake the works required to repair this new slip area. This aligns with DOC prioritising limited capital investment toward resilient, high value assets and core visitor experiences, while reducing exposure to assets that are vulnerable, high maintenance, or unlikely to deliver reliable outcomes.

26. The next step of the assessment is to consider visitor site criteria, importance of the site and climate change and natural hazard risk modelling.

27. The Hahei Walk has known geological instability confirmed by geotechnical reports. Previously bridges have been placed to cross historic landslides. These were assessed as needing replacement due to foundation issues.

[7] Cyclone Recovery Programme categorisation: Minor – Repairs can be completed by District staff with minimal additional resource. Moderate – Repairs require support from outside the District and may need extra resource beyond the current budget, though not higher level project management. Major – Repairs require significant additional resource, specialist expertise, and project management for more than 12 months.

28. The 2023 geotechnical report recorded 180 recent and historic landslides on the whole recreation reserve[8]. By May 2024 monitoring noted a further 11 landslides[9]. The most recent storms in January 2026 have added to that number with significant landslides above the Cathedral Cove access, Gemstone Bay[10] and on the Hahei Beach Short Walk existing track and the Hahei Beach Short Walk proposed reroute[11], alongside many other smaller landslides not affecting the track alignments. This confirms the significant instability of this landscape. Any reroute of tracks will also be subject to ongoing landslide vulnerability due to the geology.

29. The geotechnical reports for the options development phase of Cyclone Gabrielle recovery notes the following points.

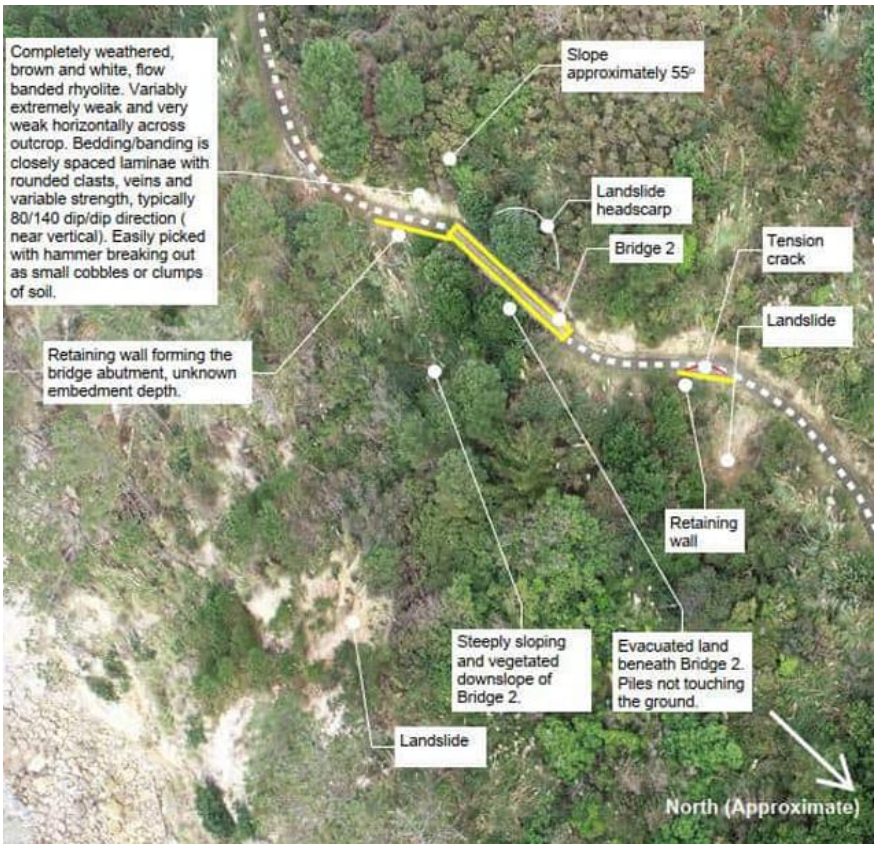
Figure 5: Map of the Hahei Beach Short Walk Options during the option development phase – Cyclone Gabrielle Recovery

Geotechnical assessment of 3a showed:

- Evidence of historic landslides upslope and downslope of the track and bridges.
- Bridge piles not touching the ground.
- Steep 50-degree slopes highly possible for landslides.
- Potential for further landslides upslope and downslope.
- Unstable and weak ground conditions above high cliffs.

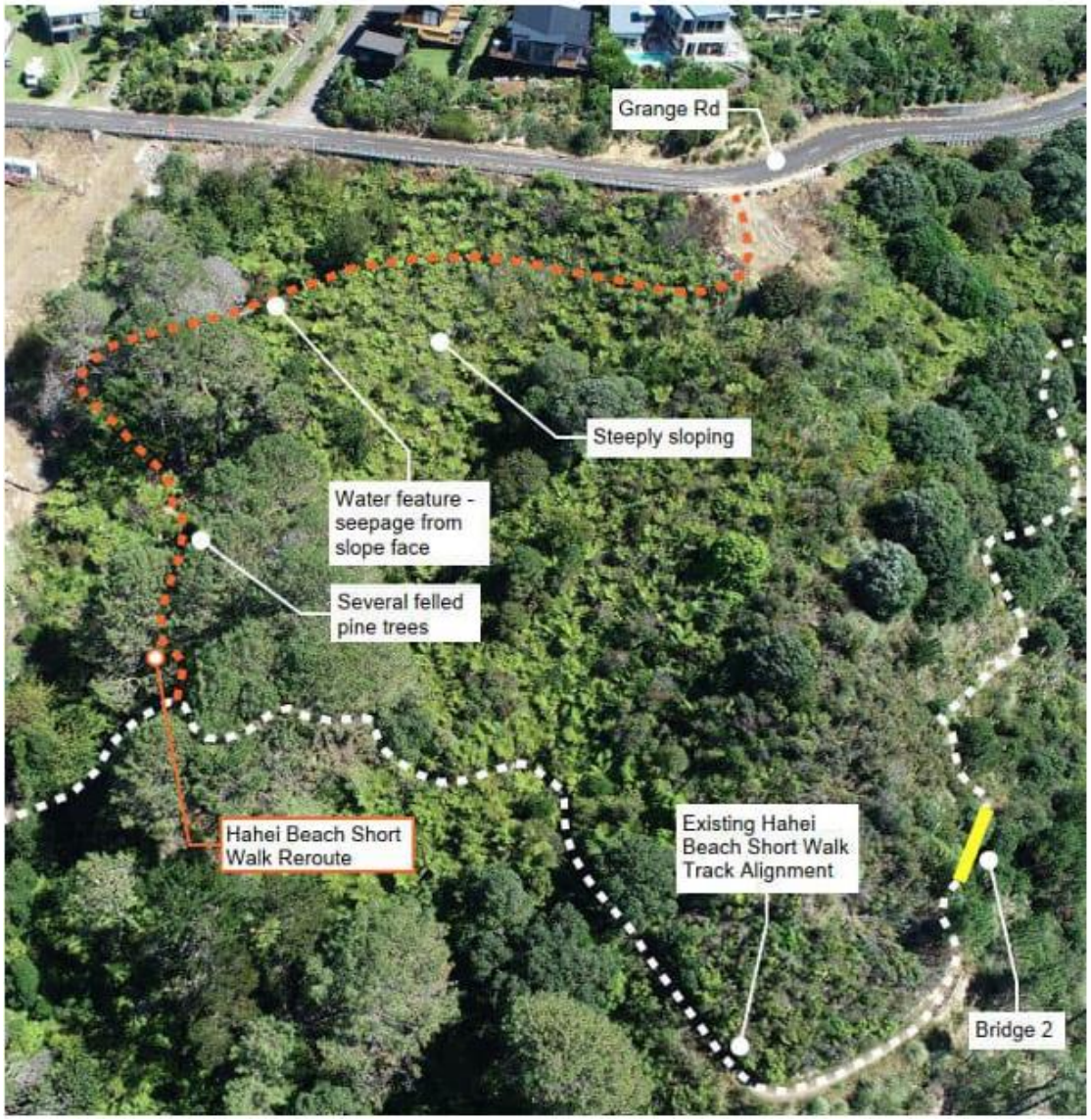
Figure 3: 3a Hahei Beach Short Walk

[8] Tonkin & Taylor July 2023 Cathedral Cove Basic Level Landslide Risk Assessment DOC-7669260
[9] Tonkin & Taylor May 2024 Cathedral Cove Track Feasibility Assessment. DOC-7645108
[10] Email from Tonkin & Taylor recording observations of the January storm damage - 17 February 2026 and Gemstone Bay Geotechnical Feasibility Report April 2025 providing the discussion material on lack of options and significant potential instability. DOC-10705786
[11] Email from Project Manager for Hahei Beach Short Walk reroute observations of a site visit with Frame Group and rangers, specifying new slips on the Hahei Short Walk and proposed realignment – 20 April 2026. (SharePoint)



Geotechnical assessment of 3b showed:

- Parts of the reroute track alignment are on steeply sloping areas with some potential for future landslides.
- Seepage area observed from the slope face crossing the track alignment.
- Ground uncertainties but proposed track lower risk structures.
- The reroute track alignment is relatively less concerning than the 3a existing alignment but still vulnerable to landslides.
- The proposed reroute does not include any critical structures such as staircases or bridges.
- The land is typical of the steep coastal hills in the area which are prone tolandslides.



30. A proposed reroute was designed to avoid the most vulnerable section of the Hahei Walk, avoid the steeper sections and to remove the need to use structures such as bridges. The Hahei Walk Reroute halved the Annual Individual Fatality Risk for the Hahei Walk section.

31. The Hahei Walk reroute would have branched off midway along the existing Hahei track and connected with Grange Road near the start of the Mautohe Cathedral Cove track. The intention was to keep ongoing maintenance to a minimum through targeted tree felling, groundwater management, and the installation of box steps. However as noted above geotechnical specialists stated there would still be potential land instability, but it was the less risky of the two options[12] and was intended to find the best option considering the range of factors.

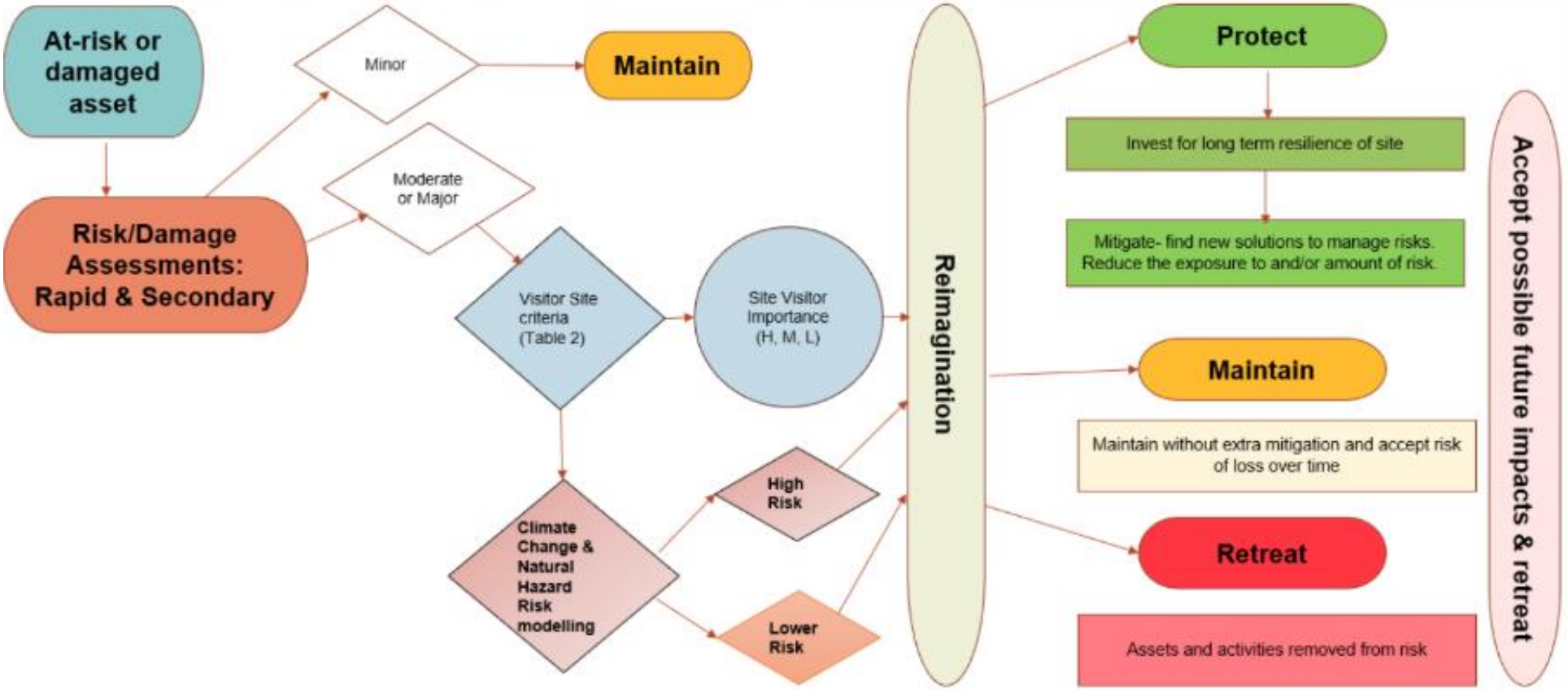
[12] Tonkin & Taylor May 2024 Cathedral Cove Track Feasibility Assessment p13, 14, 41

32. Together, these constraints further indicate the limited resilience and impracticality of maintaining this route. The key change since the previous decision to proceed is not simply that slip events have occurred, but how recent events have validated and reinforced the risks identified in earlier geotechnical assessments.

33. Although instability and slip risk were known, the recent storm damage has demonstrated these risks are more extensive and impactful than previously assumed. Slips outside the reroute footprint continue to prevent end-to-end access, meaning the intended benefits of the reroute would not be realised.

34. When considered alongside existing geotechnical information for the area, these observed conditions indicate a higher level of ongoing instability and a greater likelihood of continued disruption. This shifts the assessment from a risk that could be mitigated through targeted works to a level of vulnerability where achieving a resilient and reliable track is unlikely.

Table 1: Your step-by-step decision-making tool



Workshop Assessment

35. A workshop was run with Coromandel District staff and key advisors to consider the site and potential options. The site assessment criteria was developed by the Cyclone Recovery Programme and modified to include Future Visitor Network and other considerations.

Table 2: Site assessment criteria

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA[13]	DESCRIPTION
What do statutory documents say about the destination.	CMS description - The walking track from Hahei Beach to Cathedral Cove is the only land access to the bays and coves within the reserve and is an integral part of the visitor experience.
Is this site material to the visitor experience.	According to the CMS it is an integral part of the visitor experience.
Are environmental and heritage impacts from the visitor experience able to be managed? Is the management consistent with the reasons the site is PCLW? (Incl compliance with statutory).	From an archaeology perspective, some time ago, a worked flake was found in the area, it was recorded near the track, but nothing else has been identified. A consultant did do assessment of the proposed realignment, but we don't know if that was a deep dive or not. Nothing was identified.
Have iwi, hapū or whānau raised issues regarding management of the site.	Ngāti Hei consistent input following Cyclone Gabrielle is for a simple approach to infrastructure rebuilds and they were not supportive of any impactful modifications.
Is the site well used, what Tier is it in the FVN? Visitor data? e.g. the Strategic intentions tool tests? *OR* is it regularly used for educational purposes.	It was well used prior to COVID-19 with more than 50,000 visitors annually at peak, using the track. It was not used for educational purposes. It is essentially a link track to the significant experiences, which does not require visitors to pay to get to the start of the track.
Is the site managed more for biodiversity, heritage, infrastructure or agreements with other parties than for its visitor value?	The site is primarily managed to support visitor outcomes.
Does the site have known significant visitor safety risk? (risk that could cause serious harm)	Yes, the original alignment has the highest visitor risk due to the landslide vulnerability as well as being built on cliffs. The reroute was planned to lower the risk by avoiding the cliffs. See the geotechnical report
Is the site vulnerable to ongoing natural hazards (including climate); technical assessment show natural hazards risks are minor? How often has significant weather damage occurred (40 years?)	See the geotechnical notes above.
Does it provide an experience key to a diverse or unique offering at a regional scale? (uniqueness or representativeness)	This track does not have a unique experience, except for a beautiful view of the Hahei Beach. This view can also be experienced on the footpath on Grange Road. The track is simply a nature walk link to the Cathedral Cove track.
Is there a comparable alternative experience (DOC & non-DOC) within a similar travel distance of key population centres	Not applicable as this track is just a link track.
If the site is managed for cost recovery, does it achieve a reasonable level of cost recovery	Not managed for cost recovery.

[13] Modified from the Cyclone Recovery Programme criteria

Does the site align with the relationship the community has with its natural and cultural heritage	The community has expressed that it is very important to them to reopen the track up to Grange Road. It is used as a daily constitutional walk for locals, and it supports businesses in Hahei. However, it hasn't stopped people getting to the Cathedral Cove track, they are still able to walk along a path beside the road.
Can the visitor experience be achieved with a lower site service standard?	No, land stability issue and technical feasibility issue so changing standard would not improve the situation. Changing to tramping standard could help but the intended visitor use wouldn't align with the target user. The challenges cannot be managed via standards.
Can reimagination of the site resolve the problems identified?	Potential options are below.
Is divestment or managed retreat an option to explore? Does it warrant continued investment for the cost to reinstate and the usage and function the asset performs	Potential options are below.

Options analysis

36. Staff explored reimagining the site as per the Table 1 decision flow chart – which focuses on protecting, maintaining or retreating. Table 3 outlines the three options that were considered. These options were weighed against the following criteria from adaptation planning to ascertain if the infrastructure should and can be rebuilt in that location.

    a) The solution is geotechnically and structurally achievable within acceptable costs.
    b) The solution has iwi support.
    c) The benefit of replacing infrastructure is higher than the costs of rebuilding.
    d) Environmental impacts can be mitigated to less than minor.
    e) There are no cultural heritage impacts, or they can be mitigated to an acceptable level.
    f) Visitor safety remains within acceptable thresholds.
    g) Solution has a minimal landscape and visual impact (CMS alignment).
    h) The solution is cost effective and can be reinstated quickly post event.
    i) It is financially achievable for the department.
    j) The solution supports the overall visitor experience - access, enhancement, flow, etc.
    k) Aligns with DOC strategic outcomes.
    l) Aligns with national investment priorities.
    m) The solution is consistent with infrastructure treatment across the reserve in a vulnerable landscape.

Table 3: Options analysis

OPTIONS	ANALYSIS
1) Repair in the same place	This rerouted track alignment was chosen to reduce infrastructure damage due to landslide vulnerability. DOC could use lower risk structures (not bridges) to lower the visitor risk. Out of the two alignments (the existing and the rerouted) this was the best choice in the balance of all factors. Geotechnical specialists made it clear there was still landslide vulnerability in this location. DOC sought to support the community and the visitor flow between Hahei and the Grange

	Road entrance. Unfortunately, the landslide vulnerability has proven to be higher than expected. It is impractical to continue with the reroute and the existing track from the beach to where the reroute would have branched off as it is also damaged. The landslides across the track and reroute alignment, the infrastructure vulnerability, likelihood and frequency of another storm event, existing debris, environmental impacts, and infrastructure costs are too high to warrant the benefits of trying to repair the existing track section and start building the reroute.
2) Repair in a better spot	Options for the reroute following Cyclone Gabrielle were thoroughly explored as discussed above. There is no other alignment that is practical.
3) Retreat and remove - **preferred**	Only viable option is to retreat and remove existing track alignment and not continue with the proposed reroute. Removing infrastructure, bridges, handrails, steps etc and to scour existing track alignment and remove asphalt, replant at the top and in other locations to formally close the track.

Conclusions

37. The assessment of options found there is no viable alternative to the proposed track alignment. Building across the landslides is not viable with such unstable ground and there is no other practical alignment for the track. The infrastructure vulnerability to landslides, the likelihood of another storm event (including the frequency), the environmental conditions, and infrastructure costs are too high to warrant the benefits of reinstating the access.

38. Given fiscal settings requiring all future recovery costs be managed within operational budgets, investment in an asset with a high probability of repeated failure is not supported.

39. Given this, we recommend DOC make a deliberate shift in approach. Rather than continuing to spread effort across multiple vulnerable access points, DOC should focus on the core experience and prioritise reliable access to Mautohe Cathedral Cove via the Grange Road carpark (the primary track to Mautohe Cathedral Cove). Reaching the cove and beach is the experience which matters most to visitors.

40. DOC should invest resources into strengthening the Mautohe Cathedral Cove track stability and resilience, by improving drainage and water management, through targeted planting to support land integrity, and via ongoing monitoring and maintenance in line with the Adaptation Plan. Reducing exposure to ongoing risk and cost is more prudent than spreading the operational budget across the expanded range of tracks on the reserve.

41. It is recommended to consult with key stakeholders regarding the removal of the track (and not proceed with the re-route) to inform the final decision paper.