

## **FRIENDS OF KINNEIL DEPUTATION STATEMENT TO FALKIRK COUNCIL**

**30 JANUARY 2025**

### **Eileen Jackson (Chair):**

Thank you very much, Convener, and thank you to everyone for giving us this opportunity to speak with you today. My name's Eileen Jackson and I'm the Chair of the Friends of Kinneil. I've been the Chair since 2023. With me is Ian Shearer who has been with the Friends for a very long time, and was my predecessor for 5 years and it's Ian who's actually going to speak with you today, so I'm really delighted to ask Ian to give you all the information that I hope you will find very useful and interesting – thank you so much.

### **Ian Shearer (Committee member, past Chair, 2018-23):**

Thanks Eileen and thank you Convener, and thanks from me too to all of you for supporting and listening to us today and maybe having read the press statement and email we sent to all of you.

For our part we've now seen and much appreciate the proposed amendments lodged across all parties in Kinneil's favour which is encouraging, and let's hope good sense now prevails.

Given the pressure of your agenda, we'd just like to cover three broad headings.

First, for the record, some points to clarify what's in your agenda paper and to help inform your own debate and vote later.

Secondly, to really speak up for the overall value of what a place like Kinneil is, for everyone, and I hope for you too as elected members and for the communities you represent.

Thirdly, to therefore plead with you to send the strongest possible message to the outside world, to Historic Environment Scotland, and to officers that, instead of the bad public impression sent out by this proposal, you as the full Council actually have the highest commitment to the tourism potential of this area's fabulous heritage, and will be unanimous in not compromising in taking a stand on it.

The heritage round here is one of the area's unique selling points, and tourism is one of its few growth sectors and with untapped potential.

You could do this by all voting to take Kinneil off the threat list once and for all, and that would safeguard and support it well into the future.

It's not really a community building but a very different type of property, and each property should be considered on its own unique features and merits.

**1      So first of all please, just to pick up on some points on your agenda paper...**

- The section on Kinneil Museum is at para. 6.1.8 at p15 of the [agenda paper](#) (p171 of the full bundle if you have that in front of you), and it just comes out and says quite casually right at the beginning that the museum “...is due to close as part of Phase 3... in the event of no Community Asset Transfer”, and it’s as if we all already knew that and as if we’re all being made to feel as if we’ve somehow had our heads in the sand or haven’t been keeping up all this time.
- In fact, everyone, including Historic Scotland, and ourselves, had understood from the Council’s previous SPR decisions, which we followed very closely, that the proper next step would be the review of the overall Kinneil Estate strategic Masterplan, and that the future of the museum would very sensibly be considered within that. We’d all been told that this review would begin last September, since when we were all waiting for the Council to kick it off.
- It just doesn’t make sense, after all, to decide to close the main visitor facility, and toilets, within your inter-related set of historic attractions at Kinneil Estate, before even discussing the review of the plan! And what message does that public shockwave send to Historic Scotland or other partners, or to the community and visitors, about the Council’s commitment to the overall whole?
- Backlog maintenance costs of £163,900 have been referred to in the property ‘scorecard’ (p34, or p190 of full bundle), but these aren’t broken down. It doesn’t mention that the building is B-listed and part of an A-listed group, on a World Heritage Site – so aren’t there statutory responsibilities on the owner to have been covering much of these upkeep costs?
- Ongoing investment needs are also said to be a barrier, but it doesn’t say what effort has been made under the existing Masterplan, which has been in place since 2015, or what opportunities exist, to look at external funding sources.
- “A community-led management approach” is the necessary only solution, it concludes. Well why? To go back to our first point, the relevant public bodies haven’t yet had ‘extensive discussions’, as was stated in the newspapers, at all but are only just beginning the planning discussion, at the right strategic level, which could also end up accessing suitable funding, including new sources like the Scottish Government’s proposed new Heritage Fund.
- There’s a brief reference in the paper to visitor numbers, but no analysis of those visitors has been provided. Where do these visitors come from, when do they come? Why do they come? What can boost the numbers? We know, for example, that numbers are multiplied significantly by Kinneil House also being open on certain days, attracting more visitors from far and wide, or by providing events and activities such as is done at other Council parks and venues, and by school visits in the week.

- On a related point, what economic impact assessment has been done of the current and potential visitors, and how the funding and investment might actually be generating a return to the wider local economy? There's also no reference to the independent feasibility study done in 2014, publicly funded by Falkirk Community Trust, which showed that the right configuration of the assets at Kinneil could deliver between 12,000 and 18,000 visitors per year – and that was before subsequent continuing growth in regional tourism and in Kinneil's profile. There might be substantial further potential by imaginatively tapping the tens of thousands of visitors a year who pass on the Kinneil Railway, which runs right through the estate. There's a lot on the airwaves at the moment about economic growth. Tourism is one of the area's few economic growth stories – why choke it off instead of investing in it?
- Officers tend to say that the museum doesn't have the numbers to justify keeping it open, whilst other places do. But ask us if you like in questions why we think some other places like Muiravonside are said to be getting an improvement in financial performance and visitor levels.
- The paper doesn't mention at all the bigger heritage context and inter-relationships at Kinneil – the fact that it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site...the World Heritage designation, what duties that entails; it doesn't mention the Antonine Wall; it doesn't mention Kinneil House even and its exceptional wall paintings, Mary Queen of Scots, James Watt, the John Muir Way, the Round the Forth Cycling Route, large cycling and horse-riding events, the good work of Sustainable Thinking Scotland in the walled garden... No mention of the benefits of having a welcome and orientation point, and meeting space, for visitors to your 200-acre estate. It's also an official help, wellbeing and first aid point for visitors in difficulty, and provides toilets and water, including for those coming to Kinneil House for tours with Historic Scotland, and similar facilities for all other people visiting and using the park.
- There's nothing in the paper about the educational value of school visits to the museum during the week. Generations of school classes have walked over to discover the many learning opportunities and some of the items in the Council's collections. They can learn about local mining traditions, the former industries and major port at Bo'ness, and the story of the Bo'ness Fair. Since COVID, the Friends volunteers have been trying to help to re-encourage and facilitate school visits – and we hope you've watched Historic Scotland's inspiring recent film about this initiative.... We risk just throwing away these benefits for ever. Yes there's a revenue cost – as for any public service. But are we just going to discard without more public debate decades of excellent public local museum services and park visitor facilities, which not only depend on funded revenue support, but also, unlike many other budget lines, represent a commercial, tourism, and growth opportunity?

**2      Moving on from the detail of the paper to our second heading, just to emphasise again the overall priceless value of the facility which is under threat and its place within its wider setting:**

- From what I've already said, I hope it's clear that Kinneil isn't just a place of local Bo'ness interest – but of regional, national and world significance too.
- Our history – our collective history for all of us in this room – our Council museum collections (not just the one at Kinneil), the displays in those museums, as well as the historic parks that are all around us, and stretches of the World Heritage Site, belong to everyone, through the stewardship of public bodies and local authorities. And as such, they need revenue support, and professional management. Why should voluntary groups who are a very small and oppressed minority of amateurs be asked to take on unfunded management and go round bidding for random sources of over-subscribed non-local external funds?
- No-one expects volunteers to manage visitor operations at Muiravonside, the Helix and Callendar House, or at Blackness Castle, Linlithgow Palace or a host of other publicly-owned sites of similar scale. Why is it Kinneil and Bo'ness where this is claimed to be the only solution?
- Public support also supports local jobs, and tourism visits to our doorstep from interested people from all over Britain and the world with tourism one of the area's few growth stories.

**3      So to wind up, Convener, I just want to paint a rough picture of the vast potential of this place, and what the right constructive solutions are.**

- 'Kinneil is the nearest thing you're likely to find to a history theme park anywhere in Scotland'. Not my words, but those of the very good Undiscovered Scotland web site. In some parts of Britain, or in other countries, ownership bodies would be desperate and proud to have an asset with that description, and would understand it of course needs care and investment to maximise its potential.
- Where is the vision for that potential?
- Only just over a year ago, the Council led a celebration of its Centenary as a public heritage asset, and invited no less a person than the King to mark the Centenary and see, very quickly, all these dimensions. It was one of His Majesty's first ever local visits in Scotland as monarch. How can the Council honestly now be publicly putting out a closure proposal? Why not instead consider celebrating the upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the museum, and support Councillor Bundy's very sensible amendment, which completely rejects the soul-destroying proposal on the table?
- Thank you, Convener and Councillors, for listening and we are very happy to take any questions.