

FRIENDS OF KINNEIL DEPUTATION STATEMENT TO FALKIRK COUNCIL EXECUTIVE

6 NOVEMBER 2025

Jane Hogg (Vice-Chair):

Thank you very much, Convener. My name's Jane Hogg and I'm Vice-Chair of the Friends of Kinneil. Apologies are sent from our Chair, Eileen Jackson, who had to call off at the last minute for personal reasons.

With me as you can see is Ian Shearer, who's our previous Chair and is on top of the detail relating to this, so I'm going to pass over to him to speak.

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

Thank you Jane, and thank you to all of you for receiving us today.

I'd like to explain why we think you should consider this item very carefully, and decide not to endorse the Masterplan today but ask for more work to be done to get it right, then bring it back in the New Year.

Given the pressure of your agenda, we'll try to quickly cover three things.

First, extra background and new information to what's in your papers.

Secondly, some fundamental ways in which the masterplan in front of you needs improved.

And thirdly, to suggest some next steps, and to emphasise the positive message for all of us of a good outcome today, and which can then be amplified even more in a few weeks time if the overall plan at Kinneil could be got right.

Talking of positive messages, there's been good news and co-operation on the Council's allocation of major Scottish Government funding for Kinneil's playpark renewal which we really welcome for completion in the Spring, following on from the use of UK funding for car parking and other improvements last year, but we have to put these to one side of our mind to focus on today's document which looks at overall wider strategic development for 10 years beyond these.

So first some extra context and information:

- We were last here in January when the full Council agreed to put off for 1 year its decision to close the visitor centre and facilities at Kinneil Museum.
- The first reason for putting off the decision was to allow the new masterplanning to get under way. It didn't make sense to close facilities, before reviewing what the

estate needs for the next decade. It seemed likely that the review and public consultation would clearly show, as they have, that facilities just like the visitor centre at the museum are needed and should be a central element of the plan.

- Convener, at the end of January's debate, you said that when the Strategic Property Review returns to Council next January, the opportunity could be taken at that stage to remove altogether the SPR's threat to close the museum, as Councillor Bundy had recommended, if the work on the masterplan provided the evidence to do so.
- Councillor Hannah said that she hoped to see a masterplan which would satisfy all the people of Bo'ness including the Friends of Kinneil, that she wanted to see the museum go from strength to strength, and likewise that the closure threat could be looked at again this coming January given the right progress. We hope that will be unanimous recommendation at that time.
- The second reason that the closure proposal was put off was to allow the Council to have more discussions, especially with Historic Scotland who manage Kinneil House, but also with Museums Galleries Scotland who have lifeline funding from the Scottish Government, to explore options to save the museum. That way, its visitor centre including essential toilets would remain an integral part of the overall attraction; and its facilities, together with the house, would provide a joined-up and solid foundation for the further 10-year strategic development plan.
- As of today, Convener, those discussions have made some good progress but haven't yet quite concluded, though an outcome is expected soon.
- The Council's current public position remains that it is going to close the museum next year, which is, incredibly, the 50th anniversary of its opening by councillors in 1976, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Friends. Our volunteers have tirelessly worked with the Council and Historic Scotland managers since 2006.
- Separately, an impressive third party investor known to some of you, and with encouragement from inside the Council and Historic Scotland, is working up some serious proposals for the centrepiece attraction of all of this, the currently empty main block of Kinneil House. If those proposals emerge more widely, they could soon form the core of a much more inspiring 10-year plan than the one before you.
- So... as an Executive you don't know today if the estate will keep its visitor centre and museum offer, or more basically have any toilets or where they might be. You also don't know Historic Scotland's or the third party's potentially major wider plans. Yet it's as if you're being asked to endorse a 10-year visitor roadmap whilst blindfolded as you set off, and with little idea where the route is leading.
- The Masterplan is written on the official basis that the existing museum and toilets are definitely closing, and it says so throughout the text. It speaks much of its main ideas and aims as being around improving visitor facilities and the fantastic heritage offer which attracts people from so far away to come to the Falkirk area. This is also

the message of the Council's press statement last week accompanying the plan. But you can't 'improve' a facility if it's already closed, and so there's also no detail on how. An improvement plan and a closure plan clearly just don't stack up together, and it's not credible as a strategy until these things are ironed out.

- We recognise the amount of work by lead officers in a tight timescale to try to square this circle, into running a consultation over summer holidays when schools and families for which Kinneil is so important are away, and then into analysing a flawed electronic survey and trying to shape this draft plan.
- The facilities people want and need are clear from the results, and the draft plan does capture many of the right issues and themes, but it doesn't yet hang together with solid and coherent commitments.

I'll now mention a few other fundamental problems with the plan's actual content:

- First big question – what is the plan? If you look at the work plan in Part 4, its main plan is to come up with another plan at some unspecified time in the future, and we also don't feel the vision statement in the plan is quite right. The woodland plan that has been referred to, surely that is a standalone plan, which we do support and could be adopted and approved separately.
- We looked at 5 other masterplans. Two were approved just a month ago for historic estates in South Lanarkshire. The third is the Bo'ness town centre masterplan you looked at here last month. Finally Kinneil's own 2015 Masterplan, where by the way we don't agree that it's been delivered in substantial parts of its objectives, and then also the new Callendar Park plan.
- All of these other ones had at their heart a series of deliverable projects or investment proposals.
- The two South Lanarkshire plans also have total funding attached from their Council of £1.35m in next year's budget. Bo'ness now hears that this Council is working up a budget of an astonishing £7.265m from its own funds over the next 5 years for an unpublished new Callendar House investment plan, on top of the Town Hall and Arts Centre and that there's £439,000 for the already modern Helix visitor centre next year too! What are the similar specifics for this plan and for investing in the visitor facilities?
- Talking of the masterplan for Bo'ness town centre as a fabulous heritage destination, councillors said last month that it needs joining up with the Kinneil plan and via the railway – we agree and this should be another reason and focus for more work. Bo'ness could be branded "The Fair Town".
- The plan has no proper visitor data and hasn't had time to survey the many visitors from outside the area, only residents; and there's no economic or tourism analysis. The previous feasibility study we told you about last time, in January, showing what

visitor figures a good development could deliver, isn't mentioned, and is not updated.

- How will vital learning activities for local children about history, nature, science be delivered, especially in a closed museum – it doesn't say.
- What events will attract more visitors? Why is there a very long list of Council events for families in rural Muiravonside, on the Council's dedicated marketing and social media for that park, and hardly anything like that at Kinneil?
- In the plan and outline funding opportunities, couldn't the Council be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the museum next year, and 20 years of the Friends, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Antonine Wall World Heritage site which falls in 2028?
- And with all the talk in the plan of new visitors, including at the new playpark which we do think looks very good, where will they in fact go to the toilet or get refreshments? It's the most basic public amenity of all for any plan and managed attraction, but as it stands we don't know.
- **So to wind up:**
- There's a lovely anecdote about how the family at Glamis Castle in Angus, the childhood home of the late Queen Mother, were trying to work out what to do to develop the place. Apparently the Countess of Strathmore sought some advice from an old retainer there after she had commissioned a lengthy tourism study. He said to her, "Well I don't know about all those statistics, but what I do know is that the public wants tea and toilets, and in that order". He wasn't wrong, Convener, that's what she did and frankly those few words were a sound plan.
- No amount of gloss or words can hide the actual lack of substance at the heart of this plan.
- It's surely in all our interests to have the best possible plan and not be lumbered for 10 years with this one. To coin a phrase, a masterplan is not just for Christmas, but is supposed to define a decade of development and detailed further work.
- Conversely, no-one is harmed by an extension of time. In the short term, there may be extra work for officers to improve it, but then they'll benefit too from having a more focused plan to work on rather than going around in circles to talk about the fuzzy bits in the middle of their otherwise good work on this one.
- We recommend an extension of time to get this right. Among other next steps, the Council's own Kinneil Estate Advisory Group, which hasn't even been convened to discuss the draft plan, should have a chance to do so collectively.

- In response to Mr Bennie's point about a chicken-and-egg situation, this plan and the museum plan have to be considered together, they are absolutely inseparable and each one impacts on the other; and decisions have to be taken on the overall picture all at once.
- Thank you, Convener and Councillors, for listening and we are very happy to take any questions.