

DEPUTATION STATEMENT TO FALKIRK COUNCIL, 26 MARCH 2026

Eileen Jackson (Chair):

Good Morning Provost... and everyone.

Thank you very much for allowing us to be with you today.

We are here today, because we are very concerned and disappointed at the present shambolic situation concerning the museum down at Kinneil.

None of this is of our making, but we are here to plead with you, to please take the sensible and pragmatic approach – which is to keep the museum visitor centre and its vital facilities open – whilst the apparently positive discussions are taking place with Historic Scotland and allow them to continue.

With me is Ian Shearer, our past Chair, and he's going to speak now, thank you again.

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

Thank you. We're, to say the least, deeply frustrated to have be here again, taking up everyone's time on this and having to fight to retain the good facilities and a warm reception to visitors from all over the world to one of your most outstanding historic attractions and parks.

This year is the 20th anniversary of the Friends volunteers who've dedicated untold amounts of time over two decades to help the Council and Historic Scotland to develop and promote the heritage experience for locals and visitors alike. Yet it feels like this is how we're being rewarded for our efforts – the Council administration seems determined to shut its doors at Kinneil after this weekend, just as visitors begin arriving in earnest.

On Saturday, we helped with a free opening at the house and museum to support the Council's Silent Film Festival. Even on this first opening of the year, around a hundred people came and were as ever both astonished by what's been described as the nearest you'll find in Scotland to a history theme park, and appalled by the museum closure plan.

Assuming it does close, then if you're a visitor on a Saturday open day over Easter or the coming weeks, which can be a 2-3-hour visit including a walk, then based on current information, Historic Scotland are having to advise visitors to trek a mile and a half away to the nearest public toilet facilities at Bo'ness Library. We suspect officers may have an update on the toilet situation, but without that, it looks far from ideal if you've sensibly travelled by public transport, or are elderly or are with young children hoping to enjoy the Council's great new Roman-themed playpark or do Historic Scotland's Easter Egg Hunt. And forget it if you want to find out more about the Romans or other periods inside the museum, or if you'd like your children's school class to go there to learn some proper history during the week.

Volunteers, plus the venue team staff too of course, are having to be put through this stress and the enormous uncertainty of the situation. We and the wider community have not recently been formally included in the details or know exactly what any sticking-points are in the Council's discussions with Historic Scotland, and as far as we know, it's unsatisfactory that Historic

Scotland's managers aren't presenting today to explain their vital role for your scrutiny, or to answer your questions directly.

We'd not expected or wanted to have to be here. At the January Council meeting on the Strategic Property Review, or SPR, there was a very positive written update about the museum, and painting a picture of good progress with Historic Scotland, in your agenda paper. On that basis we felt re-assured and decided not to attend that one, and councillors too may have concluded from reading it that there was no need to lodge any amendments to the SPR then, but merely to ask a few questions, as was done. Officers gave even more positive-sounding answers to those questions, and brimmed with confidence that there could be a "seamless" transfer to Historic Scotland by the end of this week. We only now find out that this confidence may have been misplaced and lulled everyone into false security – how do we know that people and especially Councillors might not have taken a different approach in January if they had known where we would be today?

These are among the many special circumstances adding to the case for Councillor's Ritchie's motion. Until we saw it on today's agenda, no information or communication had been shared with us about the negotiations with Historic Scotland since that update given to the January Council.

As well as our own 20th anniversary, Provost, it's the 50th anniversary of the Council's opening of the museum to the public at the end of August 1976 as the original proudly-run museum for the whole Falkirk area. What other large organisation mindful of its reputation, having pride in place, claiming to value its heritage, and all the associated social and economic benefits, would close such a gem in its 50th anniversary year, instead of celebrating it and leading it onwards to another level? At the time, the Council's museum conversion won a Saltire Society restoration award, and a European Architectural Heritage award presented by the late Queen Mother. Three years ago, the Council welcomed her grandson, His Majesty the King, on one of his first ever local visits as King, to appreciate the estate and its Centenary as a public park and heritage asset, with no mention of this looming cut.

The Council is the keeper of local history, and steward of the area's fabulous historic parks and historical collections built up and donated over generations. The people and the area are being totally let down if the public guardians of this heritage have lost their way and can't keep a reception hub like the museum open to showcase this historic identity, to teach the children who come after us about this inheritance including the miners, the port, the Fair and the area's industry, and offer its nice facilities and a welcoming face for those who've travelled to discover what the Council's area offers.

The museum is not a community building but something different. It's a vital part of a national visitor attraction for education, tourism and enjoyment. It should not just be closed without a clear ongoing plan, and isn't a good fit in the Community Asset Transfer process up to now. Incidentally, it seemed to be suggested in January that the museum was still in Phase 3 of the SPR, yet it had actually been decided a year earlier to move it to Phase 4 which is for buildings with special features, with links to investment programmes and partnership opportunities, and needing careful consideration.

If Historic Scotland are the best alternative option, which we do strongly support to create an integrated attraction with Kinneil House, clearly they aren't a community body but another massive public agency and couldn't there be better alternative forms of public partnership structures and funding than the rigid CAT framework?

In November the Council narrowly voted to adopt its new 10-year Masterplan for Kinneil after hearing our views and concerns on that as well. A reminder that its first stated aim talks of attracting more visitors through among other things "improved facilities". The second talks of

safeguarding and maintaining the estate's historic buildings. How can it make any coherent sense at all that the first action under this new plan is to close the 17th-Century visitor centre building in its 50th year of operation as a museum? It's not perfect but it should be improved and invested in, not closed. Let's all still hope that remains the plan after this temporary fiasco.

There are substantial Scottish Government funds via Museums Galleries Scotland and other funding pots available precisely for enhancing assets such as the museum, and the wider masterplan. It's not a big or complex building and its needs aren't insurmountable in the wider scheme of things. Since the Council closure reprieve decided in January 2025, there have been fourteen months of discussions, with Museums Galleries Scotland invited to sit patiently through many of them. We hope Councillors will probe what funding has or could have been explored to keep the visitor centre open for many years more.

Some other questions which Councillors might wish to put:

- What's the basis for the cost provided by officers to Councillor Ritchie of up to £42,000 to keep the museum open for 6 months? A year ago, a figure of £34,000 was given for a 12-month reprieve.
- Couldn't there be a compromise of, say, opening the museum only for weekends, school holidays when the new playpark is likely to be popular, and special events? Has this been explored?
- Of course museums need a budget, but where's the estimate which you ought to be given of the offsetting local economic and social benefit? These are among the area's truly unique selling-points, supporting tourism, and people are coming here from all over the world to visit because of them.
- The Council have repeatedly claimed it can't afford the costs of keeping the museum open. Yet since the issue arose, the Council has managed to find £0.5m for very vague investment in another masterplan for Bo'ness as, ironically, a heritage visitor destination, but not the funds to keep its local museum open.
- The administration's amended motion before you today also talks about fairness and consistency. What's fair and consistent in the first place about the substantial public support for Callendar House and Park, the Kelpies, Muiravonside, Blackness Castle and a host of other attractions, whilst apparently uniquely at Kinneil, which has more real history than almost all of them, the visitor centre is run down, then put into an inappropriate community asset transfer process, with the initial thinking that volunteers ought to run it, and now it's to be closed.
- And finally, what's the plan then not just for the building, but also for the Council's good displays and items inside telling the story. What happens to the museum accreditation beyond this weekend? Nobody knows or seems able to tell us, and many are asking, with only days to go.
- Thank you for listening. We hope this is helpful and we please ask you to support Councillor Ritchie's motion, so that sense can prevail.