

**ANGUS COUNCIL**

**DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE COMMITTEE – 30 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**PICTAVIA UPDATE**

**REPORT BY CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**ABSTRACT**

This report seeks approval of the future approach to be taken with regards to the Pictavia visitor attraction, Brechin the building which currently houses Pictavia at Haughmuir, Brechin.

**1. RECOMMENDATION(S)**

It is recommended that the Committee:

- (i) note the outcome of the recent independent review into Pictavia;
- (ii) agree the closure of Pictavia and remit the Service Manager – Economic Development in conjunction with the Heads of Technical & Property Services, Legal & Democratic Services & Corporate Improvement & Finance to explore the lease or sale of the building to Brechin Castle Centre Ltd;
- (iii) note that a suitable facility/facilities will be found to house the 7 Pictish stones and take on the education of Pictish heritage role;
- (iv) note that visitor information provision in Brechin will be serviced from Brechin Library as of 1 November 2014 and the effectiveness of this will be reviewed as part of the overall annual review of the Minute of Agreement with VisitScotland; and
- (v) note that a further report setting out details of any sale or lease will be brought forward to the appropriate committee in due course.

**2. ALIGNMENT TO THE ANGUS COMMUNITY PLAN/SINGLE OUTCOME AGREEMENT/COPORATE PLAN**

This report contributes to the following local outcome(s) contained within the Angus Community Plan and Single Outcome Agreement 2013-2016:

- Angus is a good place to live in, work and visit

**3. BACKGROUND**

Reference is made to Paragraph 7 of the minute of meeting of the Infrastructure Services Committee of 19 November 2013. Pictavia is a visitor centre, based in Brechin, focusing on the story of Pictish heritage which opened in 1999. It also houses one of the two VisitScotland visitor information centres (VICs) in Angus, the other being located at the Harbour Visitor Centre in Arbroath.

Due to its decreasing visitor numbers and the changing consumer needs for fixed tourist information centres, an independent review of the operation of Pictavia was commissioned, with input from all major stakeholders including VisitScotland. An executive summary of this report is contained within the Appendix.

The study reported that Pictavia has not achieved the visitor numbers or financial performance over the past few years anticipated during its development and which formed the basis of the original investment. Visitor numbers have been declining year on year falling to an average of only 3,500 per annum over the past 2 years, compared to an average of 11,517 over the first two full years of opening. However, school visits have remained buoyant with 16 in 2013 plus other groups such as Brownies, a Rotary Club, Student interest groups and Carers groups visiting the centre.

Pictavia has been open for 15 years with limited capital investment over that period and now requires updating and improvement if it is to continue attracting visitors.

Extensive consultation was carried out with internal and external stakeholders - VisitScotland, Brechin Castle Centre Limited, the Pictish Arts Society, Education Services and Cultural Services - to ensure all partner views were sought. The review report offered four broad options for the future of Pictavia. These were:

- **Option 1** – Do nothing. Continue to operate as currently with no new capital investment.
- **Option 2** – Investment. Modest to substantial investment but with particular focus on a major upgrade.
- **Option 3** – Diversify. Close Pictavia and use the building for other functions.
- **Option 4** – Disposal. Close Pictavia and sell the building for alternative uses.

#### 4. CURRENT POSITION

##### **Pictavia as a Visitor Centre**

In the first instance **Option 2** was selected as the preferred route for the way forward. However it was noted that this would need a major investment of in excess of £100,000 to bring significant improvements to the visitor experience in both layout and technology. The review also highlighted that short term investment may create a short term bounce in visitor numbers but was unlikely to be sustainable in the long term. A study carried out for the new Riverside Museum in Glasgow showed that digital interpretation is important as it can constantly change and be kept up to date. It also proved that different target audiences expect different things from a visitor experience, with younger people looking for more innovative technology. It would be difficult and expensive to bring Pictavia up to a standard to meet these expectations.

It was recognised that securing such major investment was likely be unrealistic from the public sector in this period of budget constraints. Therefore **Options 3 and 4** were recommended as the most appropriate alternatives.

**Option 3** is limited by the terms of the agreement between Angus Council and Brechin Castle Centre Limited. This agreement states that in the event that Pictavia ceases to be a viable concern the Council may use the building for a suitable alternative use subject to the approval of Lord Ramsay, and compatible with the Brechin Castle Centre.

Given the issues outlined above, the only practical option available to Angus Council is the closure and disposal of Pictavia. As per the terms of the agreement between Angus Council and Brechin Castle Centre Limited, in the first instance the building must be offered for lease or sale to Brechin Castle Centre Limited. The Agreement sets out the terms and conditions which would be applied to such a sale or lease.

##### **Pictavia as a Visitor Information Centre**

VisitScotland operates a Visitor Information Centre (VIC) at the front desk of Pictavia. VisitScotland staff are also responsible for taking Pictavia entry fees. Footfall to the VIC has also fallen over the past few years and is now at such a low level that VisitScotland would not usually consider keeping a fully manned service in operation at that location. However, VisitScotland remains committed to providing a high level of visitor information in Angus.

VisitScotland feel that this type of provision in Brechin is no longer fit for purpose and is investigating different ways of working in partnership with local authorities and communities to provide more appropriate and up to date information for visitors to the area. This will include presenting information in different ways, for example, through web and digital technologies such as apps, as well as continuing to provide an excellent pre-arrival information service. It is also committed to working with Angus Council to ensure an excellent fixed point provision through the Council's own tourism information points.

## 5. PROPOSALS

It is proposed that Pictavia be closed as a visitor attraction at the conclusion of the current season on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014. Current seasonal staff contracts also terminate on 31 October 2014. The building will then be offered for sale or lease to Brechin Castle Centre Limited in the first instance, as per the terms of the agreement.

Pictavia currently holds seven genuine Pictish carved stones which are important artefacts to the area. It has been confirmed that all the 7 stones can be re-housed at appropriate facilities in Angus.

There are other educational resources including interactive computer games and activity books at Pictavia. The review did highlight the strength of Pictavia as an educational resource as many local schools study the Picts as part of their curriculum. It is important that the educational aspects of Pictavia are retained and that there is a facility in the area for visitors and residents to learn about Pictish history. Angus Council has committed to provide the educational resource at appropriate facilities by not only displaying the carved stones but also providing activities for children and interpretation regarding Pictish life.

The Pictish Arts Society use Pictavia as its administrative base. It has been involved in the entire review process and will be informed of any decisions and timescales.

To ensure that visitor provision is not impacted by the closure of Pictavia, the visitor information provision will move to Brechin Library as of 1 November 2014, and be managed by Angus Council staff. This also gives the opportunity for Angus Council to work with VisitScotland to improve its collective visitor information across Angus, through increased support of the Council's own tourist information points. This is also an opportunity to review and improve in line with customer research for a more varied mix of information channels. The effectiveness of the VIC in Brechin library will be reviewed as part of the overall annual review of the Minute of Agreement with VisitScotland.

A programme of training and work shadowing has been put in place to ensure continuity of the level and quality of visitor information available in Angus. This includes ensuring that visitor information is available at the most suitable location in each town. The following steps are also being taken:

- A good quality PC and colour printer procured for every tourist information point so that staff can print out useful information for visitors from [www.angusahead.com](http://www.angusahead.com) and other websites
- World Host Customer Service training for Council staff at tourist information points, including local knowledge training
- Work shadowing for Council staff at the Arbroath VisitScotland Information Centre to make staff aware of the most commonly asked questions and the resources available to them to answer these questions
- Investigation into provision of information in different ways to visitors, such as digital touch screens in locations across Angus

## 6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The average annual operating cost of Pictavia over the past 4 years is £37,000 offset by ticket income of circa £10,000 – thus a net cost of £27,000 per annum. There will however be budget implications to Angus Council in terms of costs for maintaining the empty building. These will be approximately £14,000 per annum including rates, heating, security etc. Closure could therefore result in a net revenue overall savings to Angus Council of £13,000 in the short term. This would increase to the full £27,000 per annum once the building is disposed of.

The lease or sale of the building will generate income to the council, excluding any costs associated with the disposal albeit these costs cannot be determined at this stage. These issues will be addressed in a further report to the appropriate committee setting out details of the disposal and the costs associated with this.

Consideration will also be given to the costs paid to VisitScotland as part of the Minute of Agreement from April 2015 for running the remaining VIC in Arbroath but a further report will be brought to committee in early 2015 when negotiations are finalised.

**NOTE:** No background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

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Appendix:

[Appendix](#) – Review of Pictavia – Final Report Executive Summary June 2014