

# Extension to MacDuff Aquarium



## Context

Full Planning Permission application (APP/2023/2313) for the alterations and extension to Macduff Aquarium to provide a café/restaurant (Class 3 Use) associated landscaping and alterations to car park were submitted by Live Life Aberdeenshire Council on 22 December 2023. The planning permission was granted on 18 April 2024 following determination by the Banff & Buchan Area Committee on 16 April 2024.

The proposal is to be funded by a share of the £20 million bid that was awarded to Aberdeenshire Council from the UK Government's Levelling Up Fund. The existing tourism facility, run by Live Life Aberdeenshire, has been operated by the Council for more than 25 years. It regularly welcomes more than 50,000 visitors annually, contributing to the local area's economy and complimenting other existing tourist attractions along the Northeast 250 route.

This significant extension to this tourism facility aims to promote and enhance the visitor experience via the modernization of the visitor experience exhibits and educational programmes and constitutes a high-profile project envisaged as contributing a positive



impact to the local area via social, physical health, outdoor recreation along with wider economic and tourism benefits. Both Visit Aberdeenshire and Visit Scotland had indicated their support for the proposal recognising that the scheme has the potential to make a “significant contribution to the North East tourism offer” and would not only provide the opportunity to transform the visitor experience with the aquarium itself, but that the improved landscaping and links to coastal paths would also “enhance the wider destination offering, helping to encourage extended, year-round visits and spend in Macduff and the surrounding area”.

## What Happened

Prior to the submission of the planning application, the Planning & Economy Service were approached for pre-application advice on the proposal in June 2022, as part of this process consultation was undertaken with 8 consultees. A response was provided by the Service in July 2022 providing advice on the key planning issues and clarity on elements of the initially submitted proposal requiring further consideration; summarising the responses from consultees and setting out the requirements for supporting information to accompany any future planning application.

Further pre-application was sought on a revised proposal in July 2023, as part of this process consultation was undertaken with 7 consultees. A response was provided by the Service in September 2023, again summarising the responses from consultees, confirming the requirements for supporting information and the Service view on the proposal.

Public and stakeholder engagement events were undertaken by the applicants in September 2022 and were attended by local business groups and residents. A summary of the comments received, and responses were outlined within the Design and Access Statement which accompanied the formal planning application submission.

Following the detailed pre-application discussions, the application was validated with the relevant supporting information provided at the validation stage to allow the Service and key consultees to comment on the proposal in a timeous manner.

The application was determined under the Council’s Scheme of Governance, with the application recommended for approval to the Banff & Buchan Area Committee on 14 April 2024. Following a unanimous decision of support at the Area Committee meeting from Members, the application was issued on 16 April 2024.

The planning report presented to the Area Committee meeting of 14 April 2024 provided a summary of the proposal, key planning issues and material considerations raised and assessed and includes a recommendation on the proposal. A copy of valid representations received were also made available to the Area Committee members.

At the Area Committee meeting, the lead officer presented the item, via the use of a powerpoint including application drawings and site photographs and was available to



answer any questions raised by Members at the meeting. The Area Committee meeting is live streamed, and members of the public can view the meeting live, or the meeting recorded and made available for future viewing. Both the applicant/agent and third parties, who have submitted a valid representation, could submit a request to speak to address Committee on a planning item, in this case no interested parties submitted a request to address the Area Committee on this proposal.

## Areas of Collaboration

The case study is an example of collaborative working and project management to provide pre application advice on a high-profile development that was the subject of key funding. It was considered that a development of this type would generate public interest and would require the input and agreement of several consultees. The aim was to engage with stakeholders at the pre-application stage to allow the Service to clearly set out requirements and identify issues, with a view to receiving a complete submission with all the relevant supporting information to allow the Service to assess and determine the application in an efficient and effective manner and with a view to reaching a positive outcome.

Lead Officer- Development Management Planner (Banff & Buchan/Garioch area team)- Stakeholder input and assistance was dependent upon the different stages of the pre-application and formal planning application determination processes.

At the pre-application stage, Development Management engaged in communications with the applicant and internal and external consultees, namely Roads Development, Environmental Health, Contaminated Land, Built and Natural Environment, Flood and Coastal Protection and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. This process involved seeking views on the proposal from consultees and feeding back info to inform the development of the proposal prior to the submission of a formal planning application.

At the formal planning application stage, Development Management continued earlier engagement with the applicant and the key internal and external consultees. The planning application was the subject of advertisement and neighbour notification which allowed interested third parties the opportunity to submit representations. All relevant material issues raised within consultation responses and representations were duly considered by the lead officer during the determination stage, with information and points of clarification discussed with the applicant and relevant consultees and representees to allow the lead officer to reach an informed recommendation on the acceptability of the submission.

## Overall Result

The proposal is seen as complimentary to the existing Macduff Aquarium tourist facility, being delivered by the Council to serve the tourism and growth in the local town and surrounding area. Work is scheduled to commence late 2024.



The case demonstrates the benefits of positive engagement with stakeholders including consultees and the Planning Service at the pre-application stage, to allow analysis and clear communication of issues, process, and expectations. The approach adopted demonstrates the benefits of collaborative working and that important developments that could raise complex matters to resolve can be dealt with in an efficient and effective manner.

The approach adopted by the Service ensured that the planning application, on validation, included all relevant supporting information and statements to allow consultees and interested third parties an opportunity to submit comments in line with statutory deadlines. The early engagement and proactive approach to the processing of the formal planning application allowed the Service to report the planning application and issue the decision within an acceptable timeframe. The Service maintained good levels of communication at all stages to ensure that the applicant was provided with regular updates on the progress of the proposal both pre-and post-planning application submission.

The key outcomes from this project validate, the importance of continuing to develop positive working relationships and maintaining clear communication with the wide range of stakeholders and customers that we interact with as part of our service delivery. In a wider context and linked to Customer Service Excellence (CSE), Development Management continue to focus on improvement projects to improve service delivery and the customer service and continue to actively liaise with key consultees on areas of good practice.

## Lessons Learned

The ability to front-load the process, provide consistency in terms of contact and communication from members of Development Management and understand how the project was intended to be implemented allowed consistent advice to be given and any issues to be resolved quickly.

