Agenda Item	13
Report No	CIA/9/20

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee:	**City of Inverness Area Committee**
Date:	**20 February 2020**
Report Title:	**Inverness-Scotland.com website**
Report By:	**Inverness City Area Manager**

1.   Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1   This report describes for Members the current position with the Inverness-Scotland website, compares this with the approach taken by Scotland's other cities and suggests potential future options for the Inverness web presence.

2.   Implications

2.1   There are no resource implications arising from some of the recommendations in this report but, depending on what future approach is taken there are likely to be some potentially significant resources required – both in terms of funding and accessing staff expertise that is not currently available in the Council.

2.2   There are no Legal, Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural), Climate Change / Carbon Clever, Risk or Gaelic implications arising directly from this report.

3.   Recommendations

3.1   Members are asked to:

i.   Note the current position with the Inverness-Scotland website; and

ii.   Agree that this site be discontinued while an alternative is agreed with the Council's partners that also reflects current developments and new requirements with the address temporarily redirected to ensure the user experience is protected.

4.   Background

4.1   Following the granting of city status to Inverness, a new website for the city was created in the early 2000s. Over time this became dated and in parallel a number of other Inverness organisations had also improved their own web presence meaning this site was no longer deemed fit for purpose. To address this a number of partner organisations re-formed an Inverness marketing group and this group launched a new website (www.inverness-scotland.com) in early 2012. The site was expanded further in 2013 with the addition of a photo library where all partners and external parties such as tour operators could access royalty free images for the purpose of promoting Inverness. These initial development costs and subsequent hosting costs have been met by the Inverness Common Good Fund.

4.2   The website was primarily designed to be a single "web portal" for the city rather than a comprehensive site and as such did not include detailed content on each subject. Instead pages reflected particular themes such as living here, working here, visiting Inverness, events etc. but with only basic introductory information provided before users were directed to the partner's site that provided detailed content on that particular theme. For example, the visit page gives an overview of what the area offers but directs users to the Visit Inverness Loch Ness website for more detailed information while the events page highlights key events before directing users to sources such as the Inverness Festivals or Eden Court Theatre websites for more detailed information.

5.   Current situation

5.1   For the last few years, changes have largely been limited to essential content updates and there has been no further financial investment in the site and the site's look and feel is therefore becoming dated. At the same time technical challenges are arising around the maintenance and hosting of the site as the underlying technology used is becoming dated and even making content changes is challenging. The original site was built by a local contractor who has since retired and closed the business, so the types of changes now required essentially mean a rebuild of the site will be necessary if it is to continue.

5.2   While the inverness-scotland site has reasonable levels of traffic and generates some useful referrals it is also important to also look at the user experience. At present this can be quite confused and will increasingly give a bad impression, especially where links are broken, or content is out of date. Websites ultimately reach a point where it is better to take them down or replace them rather than leave a poor site in place which potentially damages the brand of the City.

5.3   In recognition of these forthcoming challenges, the organisations who were partners in the marketing group that helped design and provide content for the website have been contacted for their views on the future of the site although responses have been limited suggesting they do not consider this to be a priority. This would mirror some of the views at the time the initial build took place – namely that partners saw a dedicated portal as a useful extra but were they to need to put significant time, effort or funds towards it they would prefer this to be directed towards their own websites which were more targeted at their main purpose / market.

5.4   It is also relevant to note that since the building of the inverness-scotland website a number of partners have also invested in their own websites. This applies both to the public sector partners such as the Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise and VisitScotland but also to business organisations. Perhaps most notable in this sense is Visit Inverness Loch Ness who invested heavily in a new website, including sections in

other languages as part of their joint campaign activity with VisitBritain undertaken in the last few years and are currently investing in further updates and enhancements. This site is the one the majority of inverness-scotland users currently move on to.

6.   Comparisons with elsewhere in Scotland

6.1   In order to help inform any recommendations some basic research has been undertaken into other Scottish City websites and discussions held with VisitScotland who manage the high profile national "Scotland is Now" website (www.scotland.org) on behalf of the Scottish Government as well as their own site www.visitscotland.com which is one of the country's most visited sites with over 22 million visits per annum.

6.2   The scotland.org website does not exist in isolation but instead is one element of the wider "Scotland is now" campaign which sees the Scottish Government, public agencies and academic institutions promote jointly under a single brand and as such functions very effectively as a campaign front door in a small number of highly targeted markets. This approach also requires a very strong team approach to agree common brand, tone, design, content etc across those multiple themes of live, work, invest etc. and is only effective with staff time and expertise as well as significant marketing and campaign spend to promote the portal in key markets.

6.3   In terms of the joint approach this has some similarities with the principle originally intended for Inverness. However, there are also key differences – most notably the approach to using a wide range of other marketing channels which when combined with the cost of managing and keeping the website fresh means a substantial financial investment. While precise figures for this investment have not been sourced, it is understood the campaign costs many hundreds of thousands of pounds per annum.

6.4   When considering approaches taken by Scotland's cities, it is clear there is no single approach taken, although none appear to have a "portal" in quite the same sense as was intended with the Inverness website. Indeed some people now consider the approach of a web portal which then links to other sites is dated as it involves too many steps, something not appreciated by increasingly digitally aware users that want to go straight from search – typically Google – to the content they want. The extra layer of a portal simply slows down that experience and makes it more likely that users will disengage before they reach what they are looking for.

6.5   Amongst other city websites some do have a city specific presence e.g. Glasgow, (https://peoplemakeglasgow.com), Edinburgh (https://edinburgh.org) and Dundee (www.Dundee.com). However, these are predominantly aimed at promoting and providing information regarding visits to the city and as such could be considered to be equivalent to the Visit Inverness Loch Ness website (www.visitinvernesslochness.com) rather than the inverness-scotland website.

6.7   For three of Scotland's cities – Aberdeen, Perth and Stirling, the most prominent sites promote the wider area rather than just the city and with a focus on visiting. In the case of Aberdeen this reflects the joint promotion by the Destination Management Organisation which is supported by both Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils (www.visitabdn.com). Both the Perthshire (www.perthcity.co.uk) and Stirling (www.yourstirling.com) websites promote the whole of their respective Council areas rather than just the city although both have some city specific detail delivered in conjunction with partners such as BIDs. While not specifically acting as a portal, elements of these sites do cover other themes with a good example being the "Invest" part of the Stirling website. In this case the Investment information is on a separate

website but rather than the main Stirling website having basic information and a link clicking the "Invest" tab on the main website connects seamlessly to the external site.

6.8   In a wider Highland context, Council officers have recently been working with the Highland Economic Forum to address similar challenges, particularly around inward investment and talent attraction. This work has reached similar conclusions on the need to consider websites as part of a wider promotional campaign and to undertake further activity to drive website traffic. Further work is proposed – in part through the www.enterprisinghighland.com website but this is not specific to Inverness.

7.   Conclusions

7.1   In considering approaches elsewhere in Scotland it is clear that most cities' web presences are now focussed largely on the visitor market although some incorporate detail on or integrate directly with other websites that cover themes such as investing in the city, film productions or studying there. The one example considered where the portal type approach is still used is at a national rather than city level. In that instance it is clear that rather than the website being essentially passive and directing those finding it to more detailed sources of information it is designed to be a high-quality digital gateway to the country with significant funding allocated to achieve this as part of a wider international awareness/ promotion campaign.

7.2   In terms of the future of the Inverness-scotland website there would appear to be two options - assuming that a "do nothing" option does not exist as the dated technology would likely see the current website become obsolete in the near future.

7.3   The first, and preferred, option would be to discontinue the existing website and accept that the web portal approach is no longer appropriate for Inverness and that an alternative is required. This could be done in parallel with redirecting the address to an alternative (and existing) website to ensure users still receive suitable information about the city. This approach is recommended as it allows a well-considered approach to be taken with relevant partners rather than simply seeking a short-term solution to resolve the current technical problems.

7.4   The alternative option would be to continue the portal approach through investing in a wider digital presence that includes the creation of a new web portal. However, this approach is likely to require a significant budget with digital marketing expertise to lead it. Bearing in mind partners' focus on their own websites and wider activity as described in section 5.3 this is considered difficult to adequately resource. Additionally, and in view of the need to incorporate other work currently under way such as the Inverness Castle development and work by the Highland Economic Forum partners around talent attraction it is considered premature to take this approach at the current time.

Designation:

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