
LOSS OF JOBS AT WEST FREUGH, STRANRAER

1. Reason for Report

1.1 The following Notice of Motion has been received from the six members of Wigtown West Area Committee (Councillors John Agnew, Grahame A Forster, Robert J Higgins, Fred B Murray, William Scobie and Thomas K Sloan):-

“Members are asked:-

“To acknowledge the immediate devastating impact the loss of a further 150 jobs and, in effect the mothballing of West Freugh base, recently announced by the MOD, will have on the local area. The impact of the loss of 200 high quality jobs on this rural area is comparable to the closure of Ravenscraig.

“To take the appropriate action, together with partner organisations, to secure as many of the 150 jobs at West Freugh as possible, thereby minimising the impact of the loss of jobs, and further to attract investment and employment to the Stranraer area as a matter of urgency.”

1.2 The Secretary to the Council has confirmed that the subject of this motion stands delegated to the Community Resources Committee and that in order to debate the motion Members will require to remove that delegation.

2. Background

2.1 The West Freugh air range and airfield has been a major employer in the west of the region for many years. Originally under the direct control of the Ministry of Defence, the facility is now operated on behalf of MOD on an agency basis by QinetiQ, an MOD owned science and technology organisation.

2.2 QinetiQ recently undertook a major review of Test and Evaluation air ranges, and their plans for a rationalisation of these ranges was announced in parliament on 24 July 2002. These plans are a key feature of proposals submitted by QinetiQ to the MOD as part of negotiations for the long term contract to operate Test and Evaluation air ranges.

2.3 The QinetiQ proposals include the reduction to campaign status of the West Freugh Range with the loss of an estimated 125 jobs in the period to March 2003, leaving only 10 jobs at the Range.

3. West Freugh Steering Group

3.1 Following the announcement by QinetiQ consultations took place immediately with Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway (SEDG). As a result of these consultations it was agreed that SEDG would take the lead role, as the Government’s economic development agency covering Dumfries and Galloway, in co-ordinating a response to the serious threat to the local economy arising from the job losses at West Freugh.

3.2 Following consultation with the Board of Stranraer Small Towns Initiative, it was agreed to establish a West Freugh Steering Group, to include representatives of SEDG, the Council, Stranraer STI, QinetiQ, the relevant Trade Unions, Stranraer Chamber of Commerce, and the local MP and MSP.

3.3 The first meeting of the Steering Group took place on 2 September 2002, when the Council was represented by Councillor Grahame Forster and by the Director for Community Resources. Councillor Thomas Sloan attended as an STI representative.

3.4 The Steering Group considered a presentation by economic consultants DTZ Pidea of their findings following a detailed economic impact assessment of the projected job losses at West Freugh. The study highlighted that the run-down of West Freugh could have the following impact:

- 125 direct job losses in period up to March 2003
- a loss of around £2.25M from the local economy annually in terms of wages and salaries
- a possible loss of a further 9 jobs in the local economy through the knock-on effects of the job losses at West Freugh.

3.5 It is estimated that the majority of the economic impact will come from direct job losses. The indirect impact on local suppliers appears to be low, due to the site being almost self-contained.

3.6 A further meeting of the Steering Group will be held on Monday 16 September and an update on outcomes will be available for the full Council meeting on 24 September.

3.7 Issues currently under consideration by the Steering Group include:-

- Maximising the potential for retaining jobs at West Freugh
- seeking co-operation with QinetiQ and MOD on the future use of the West Freugh site
- pressing for central government support for the economic regeneration of Wigtownshire
- clarifying the term 'campaign status' and its implications for future employment and the future of the site.

4. Discussion

4.1 The QinetiQ proposals represent a major threat to the already fragile economy of Wigtownshire. It is important that the Council continues to face this threat through a partnership approach with SEDG, the local workforce and other interests.

4.2 The Council can contribute to this approach in a number of ways. A member of Community Resources staff based in Stranraer has been made available to provide support and assistance to SEDG on any West Freugh issues. Funding for special initiatives can also be provided from economic development budgets controlled by the Community Resources Committee and it is intended to submit a report on this subject to the Committee in October.

Finally, the full range of Council research, facilities and expertise can be made available for the use of the Steering Group.

4.3 In the meantime the Council, through the Chief Executive and through Community Resources staff, is keeping in touch with SEDG on a regular basis as the West Freugh situation develops.

4.4 It is recommended that the Council should continue to channel its response to the West Freugh situation through the medium of the West Freugh Steering Group.

5. Member Representation of Steering Group

As indicated earlier, Councillor Grahame Forster, as the local Member, represented the Council at the first meeting of the Steering Group on 2 September. It is recommended that the Council confirm that Councillor Forster should be the Council's nominated representative to serve on the Steering Group.

6. Recommendation

Members are asked to:

6.1 Remove delegation and consider the motion by the members of Wigtown West Area Committee;

6.2 Note the action taken to date by the Council and SEDG in response to the threatened loss of jobs at West Freugh;

6.3 Agree that the Council should continue to channel its efforts in response to the West Freugh job losses through its involvement with the West Freugh Steering Group; and

6.4 Agree that Councillor Grahame Forster should represent the Council on the Steering Group.

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 16 September 2002
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Background Papers

1. Letter dated 2 August 2002 from the Ministry of Defence to the Chief Executive.
2. Papers from meeting of West Freugh Steering Group held on 2 September 2002.

NOTICE OF MOTION THE DRAFT AGRICULTURAL HOLDINGS BILL

1. Reason for Report

A Notice of Motion in the following terms has been received from Robert J Higgins seconded by Fred B Murray:-

That this Council lends its full support to the Scottish Tenant Farmers' Action Group in calling on the Scottish Executive to amend the Draft Agricultural Holdings Bill to give Tenant Farmers the absolute right to buy their holdings.

2. Discussion

2.1 The subject of this Motion does not stand delegated to any of the Council's committees and the Council is therefore free to debate the Motion;

2.2 There is no Officer with the Council with professional knowledge of the subject to provide a report. The proposer and seconder of the motion have intimated, however, that they will be in a position to provide Members with detailed information in advance of the meeting.

3 Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the Notice of Motion.

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17 September 2002
Ref: DGC-AH/MS022

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