

Nairn West & Suburban Community Council

NWSCC Commentary on Selection of Opportunity Cromarty Firth as a Green Freeport

News has emerged that one of the two new freeports and enterprise zones in Scotland is to be at the Cromarty Firth. The other is in the Firth of Forth.

The decision is likely to be a game-changer for the Inner Moray Firth region. It will bring some major threats and challenges. It will also, we hope, bring opportunities. Nairn community organisations and businesses are going to need to do some quick and radical thinking about how to react.

Here are some initial discussion points from NWSCC on the implications of this decision.

1. A Strategic Shift For The Highlands' Economy From Tourism To Industry And Commerce

For the past 20-30 years, in the aftermath of the North Sea oil boom, the main driver of the regional economy has been tourism (Loch Ness, NC500, cruise ships, coasts and nature, outdoor recreation, history and heritage etc), with Inverness in particular trying to capture also the bulk of the public sector and services employment and retail enterprise (UHI, Raigmore, medical and social services, local government agencies and administration, and retail parks).

The free port/enterprise zone/green hub will target public funding and private investment much more towards industry and commerce, both "heavy" (energy related construction, steelworks, etc) and "light" (assembly plants, warehousing, etc). The Cromarty Firth bid identifies three main zones: Invergordon, Nigg, and the northern half of Inverness from the Harbour to the Longman estate and including the Inverness UHI campus.

How large the actual special enterprise area will be has yet to be confirmed but towns beyond the immediate zones - which might include Dornoch, Brora, Dingwall, Beauly, and indeed Nairn will be interested to learn if they may be eligible for some of the grant-funding, tax-breaks and investment associated with the freeport concept. In Nairnshire, Ardersier Port will be aiming to piggy-back on to, and profit from, the Freeport arrangements.

2. The Decision Presents Some Threats For Nairn

Less money. We feel that Nairn has long missed out on a 'fair share' of available funding. The emphasis on the freeport and associated industry may channel public funding and investment very dramatically towards that area. Governments, Council, HIE and others may all be obliged to prioritise that part of the Inner Moray Firth;

Less attention. Planners, service providers, and local administration will be required to devote much more of their staff and capacity into enabling and supporting the launch and growth of the freeport. That means less capacity for the management and delivery of public services elsewhere;

Less chance of infrastructure improvement. The available funding will still be limited. So calls to improve roads, rail, civic amenities and - perhaps especially - broadband in the freeport area may be given priority over the rest of the region.

More pressure to build large-scale large-volume housing. The business and industry activity will be concentrated in the port zone. But there will be greater pressure to deliver residential housing beyond and outside that zone. There could be a commuter-belt concrete boom comparable to what happened in the towns and villages around Aberdeen. Nairn will be a real and early target for developers (again). It's easy to foresee more pressure to implement high-density housing on sites like Sandown

Greater burdens on services. Schooling, social and medical care, water supply, road capacity are already under strain across the region. If the NC500 and the current school-building programme are examples, the local service provision will lag far behind the likely demand stimulated by a significant business and industrial expansion around the Cromarty Firth.

Serious impact on the local environment. Both the Firth and the coast will be significantly affected by a major expansion in onshore industrial activity and heavier seaborne traffic, whether rigs, turbines, platforms or shipping. The consequences not only for marine life, SSSIs and beaches could be substantial. There would also be implications for tourism, and leisure and recreation as well as for what's left of inshore fishing. We could be looking at a re-run of some of the debate around ship-to-ship oil transfers which Cromarty Port was so keen to pursue a few years ago.

Land value inflation and house-price inflation. Great for landowners and developers, not so much for local communities looking for 'affordable' places to live and pleasantly green surroundings.

3. The Decision Presents Some Opportunities For Nairn

Quicker infrastructure delivery. While money might be reassigned to the freeport areas, there is also a chance that the freeport might strengthen the arguments for, and hasten the delivery of, A9 and A96 dualling and a Nairn bypass.

Boost to local businesses and services. More business activity means more jobs and more money into the local economy. How might local shops and services in Nairn (from hotels to hairdressers) attract more customers? This requires more effective destination-management and marketing.

New employment opportunities. If there are available and affordable sites in Nairn - like Balmakeith/Grigorhill - and if the support services (water, electric power, fibre broadband) are sufficiently reliable and high quality, then growth at the free port would give opportunity for ancillary businesses to get established locally. Much would depend on the incentives available and political encouragement.

4. *There Are Clear Challenges Going Forward*

Capacity. Highland Council's performance on most metrics has long been lacking and faced with a substantial workload increase, the Council's decision-making and service delivery will be under more pressure. Staffing and resources allocated to planning and managing the launch and growth of the freeport zone will mean less capacity to serve the rest of the region.

Political clout (and competition). Every community in the region - and thus every elected councillor - will be lobbying for investment and attention. Nairn's representatives will need to be at their most skilful and influential to prevent Nairn being marginalised even further within the hinterland of Inverness.

Political choices. Elected representatives will come under huge pressure to back volume housebuilding, job creation, and "growth", all in the name of making the freeport concept a success. The arguments for green space, improved leisure facilities, environmental protection, clean beaches, dolphins and wildlife etc., may be drowned out or dismissed.

Accountability. Freeports are supposedly free of red tape and the usual obligations to comply with planning rules, tax regulations, and other controls. That means they can't be "held to account" very easily. The governance arrangements for the Port of Cromarty Firth are even now rather opaque (as we found at the time of the 'oily ships' campaign). It will be interesting to see how far Highland Council or indeed the Scottish government (which means Councillors and Ministers) can scrutinise or limit what the (free)port authority chooses to do.

5. *Defining A Long-Term Vision for Nairn Has Become More Critical*

What does Nairn want to be - a tourist destination, a local service centre for the surrounding largely rural hinterland, an industrial/retail/distribution/business centre, a retirement community, or what? The local community hasn't been able to answer this question even before the freeport issue. Without a clear, united and coherent view of what the town does - or doesn't - want, and without a definite strategy for achieving its objectives, Nairn will be at risk of being dumped on and disadvantaged by decisions made and imposed from elsewhere. There is a pressing need for Community Groups and Businesses to get on to the front foot and not simply be forced into reacting to what happens elsewhere. The momentum behind the creation of a Local Place Plan must be maintained. The Cromarty freeport decision has suddenly and dramatically raised the stakes in terms of local planning and decision-making in Nairn.

Nairn West & Suburban Community Council
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