

SUMMARY STATEMENT

of

COUNCILLOR ANNE ROBERTSON

Introduction

My name is Councillor Anne Robertson. I am an elected member for Turriff & District. My involvement with the Council is set out in my main precognition.

While I was not involved in the consideration of this application by Infrastructure Services Committee, I was involved in considering the application as a member of the Formartine Area Committee and attended the meetings on 18 September and 20 November as well as the hearing on 27 September. In that capacity I had full access to the papers produced to Councillors and I was one of the 7 Councillors who voted to grant planning permission at the Formartine Area Committee on 20 November. I made that decision fully aware of the conflicting views which were clear from the hearing on 27 September (and otherwise).

The handling of the application

The history of the consideration of this application is well documented and is set out in the Council's Statement of Case.

Dealing with complex planning applications is not easy, and different people can come to different views about whether or not they should be granted. Detailed and careful consideration was given to this application both by the officers of the Council and by its elected members. The officers' recommendation, after a lot of hard work and detailed discussions with the applicant, was (in effect) encapsulated in the Committee Report submitted to the Formartine Area Committee of 18 September. Dr Christine Gore is to give evidence to this Inquiry in relation to that professional assessment of the matters material to the consideration of the application.

I would however like to make clear that I accept, without question, the conclusion reached in that Committee paper to the effect that the proposal was not in conformity with the Development Plan. Notwithstanding this, at the Formartine Area Committee we resolved to grant planning permission having regard to the benefits which we perceived would be derived from the scheme particularly in the economic context.

The issues that arose out of the Infrastructure Services Committee decision on 29 November have been exhaustively commented upon in the Press. I respect the views of the Councillors who voted against the grant of planning permission. What I would say, however, is that I do not think that those views reflected the views of the Council generally, given the decision of the Full Council on 12 December 2007 and confirmed on 24 April of this year. My understanding is that the Councillors who voted for these resolutions accepted the underlying arguments which had led to the decision made by the Formartine Area Committee.

Economic Issues

Apart from its role in the planning system however, the Council in my view needs to have a much wider vision. In that connection we are guided by a vision which is set out in our strategic priorities document at page 2 (AC1). The strategic priorities form part of a broader strategic framework that is intended to and does guide the work of the Council. My main preoccupation identifies those particularly relevant. I think in looking at these priorities it is helpful to do so in the context of the Aberdeenshire economy.

The economy of Aberdeenshire has been very buoyant over the last 30 years or so reflecting the significant benefits which have accrued from the North Sea. While that is a benefit it is equally a challenge going forward. This is recognised by the Aberdeen City and Shire Economic Forum (ACSEF). The Council is a

partner to that organisation and I am member of the Board representing Aberdeenshire Council within the partnership.

The most recent economic review published by ACSEF (AC4) dates from the summer of last year and provides a very good summary of the economic position and indeed reflects the buoyancy of the economy. It does, however, recognise that there are challenges to be faced including dependency on oil and gas and concerns in relation to other traditional markets which are under pressure. To me one of the very key issues for Aberdeenshire Council to address going forward is sustaining the economy and vitality of the area in the knowledge that over the foreseeable future reliance on oil cannot continue and we are going to have to address issues with other traditional industries.

In the latter part of 2006 the Council approved a policy document entitled "Economic Development Priorities to 2011" (AC2). This document identifies some of the issues facing the area in economic terms and some of the key bodies operating to support the area. I accept it correctly paints a healthy picture for the economy. It does however point to a significant level of employment both in the oil and gas and manufacturing sectors and identifies decline in both of these. Significantly the decline in oil employment is projected to be by 30% over the next 10-15 years (see page 5 - AC2).

The analysis in that document does identify amongst the opportunities the Aberdeenshire coast and recreational tourism. It sets out our aspirations including in Table 1 on page 8 having acquired by 2011 a world class reputation for recreational tourism. That aspiration in my view is consistent with objectives ACSEF have previously set out which are summarised in Appendix A of this document on page 13 particularly objectives 3 and 4.

Briefly I refer to another ACSEF document published from August 2007 (Building on Energy – AC3). This sets out an economic manifesto with a vision to 2025. To me this vision is all about dealing with what is necessary to ensure

the continuing economic strength of our area. It identifies a range of issues and opportunities but specifically identifies establishing Aberdeen and the area as a major tourist destination (see page 5).

In summary therefore, while I accept the area has been economically vibrant, one issue which faces Aberdeenshire Council and its partners is to seek to ensure that for the future in the context of significant global pressures and issues which will impact directly upon the area.

Understandably none of these documents specifically refer to this application. However to me this application would provide significant benefits which support what we need to do and what we are trying to do. It will provide jobs. While I accept unemployment in the area is lower than many parts of the country there are unemployed people here and all jobs are welcome. Furthermore, going forward we need to diversify our economy, providing different kinds of jobs to reflect the fact that areas of economic activity which have provided them in the past are going to slowly but inevitably decline. The proposal would also provide significant direct economic benefit for the area in terms of direct expenditure. While there may be debate about the extent of the direct economic benefit the information the Council had suggested it would be significant and that was verified independently by EKOS and Mhairi Donaghy of EKOS will give evidence. To me, on any basis the economic investment resulting from this proposal is significant to our economy. Critically however, and possibly more significantly it provides us with a world class facility that enhances the reputation of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire in the global economy. What we will have, in my view, will be a world class development which will undoubtedly assist in promoting Aberdeenshire internationally as a location for leisure. Lastly, but by no means least, it will provide facilities that we badly need in terms of a top level hotel facility close to Aberdeen.

It is not surprising to me therefore that this proposal is so strongly supported by the business sector in the area, many of whom I know have written in support of the proposal.

I think we should not lose sight of the fact that tourism in itself is a generator of significant income in Scotland and there is support for proposals such as this one in that context as well. I thought it might be helpful therefore just to refer to some of these albeit briefly. Both the Scottish Government and their Executive Agency, VisitScotland, identify the importance of tourism to the national economy. The Executive in 2006 published a document entitled "Scottish Tourism - The Next Decade" (AC17) which identified tourism as an important sector globally and sought to identify how Scotland should benefit within that market. Perhaps more specifically VisitScotland published their Tourism Prospectus in 2007 (AC10). While this looks at the whole tourism business in Scotland it specifically identifies means to improve and develop further financial benefits from tourism in Scotland. One of these, a significant one, is capital investment (see page 11). It identifies as an example the investment which has already taken place (including the St Andrews Bay golf development) but equally identifies the potential that developments such as this one (which is specifically referred to) will bring both in international tourism and business tourism. The ambitions of this document are high - 50% growth in tourism in Scotland.

More locally we have the North East Scotland Tourism Partnership which equally has a strategy and action plan for growth (see documents AC14, 15 and 16).

In my view the development at Balmedie assists in meeting the aspirations of the tourist industry as well as directly supporting the aspirations of my Council and the Regional Economy Forum.

The Minute of the meeting of the Formartine Area Committee identifies that the reason for recommending that this application should be approved as a departure from the Development Plan was the overriding economic circumstances including diversifying the local economy, supporting the development of tourism and increasing the national and international profile and attractiveness of Aberdeenshire and Scotland as a whole in terms of inward investment opportunities. I accept that there will be significant environmental impacts from this proposal. I accept that in any difficult planning application there requires to be a balancing of the issues. That is now a matter for Scottish Ministers. Opportunities such as this rarely come along. If consent is not granted I doubt if any alternative will emerge. It is because of the economic benefits that this development will bring that the Council so strongly supports it. I would therefore urge Scottish Ministers to grant planning permission for the development subject always to the matters that the Council has identified.