

The Highland Council

8 SEPTEMBER, 2016

Agenda Item	22
Report No	HC/40/16

Fort George Military Barracks

Report by the Director of Development and Infrastructure

Summary

There is speculation over the future of Fort George as an active military barracks as a result of the UK Government defence estate “foot print” review, which aims to reduce the size of the built estate by 30%.

The purpose of this report is to provide members with a briefing on the importance of Fort George remaining an active military barracks and to summarise the lobbying activity that is currently underway.

1. Background

1.1 Fort George is a large 18th-century fortress near Ardersier. The fortification is based on a star design and remains virtually unaltered. Fort George is Grade A listed and a scheduled ancient monument.

2. Previous Closure Threat

2.1 The possibility of Fort George being closed as an active military barracks as surfaced occasionally, most recently in 2011 during the UK Government’s defence review. In response to this Highlands and Islands Enterprise commissioned some economic impact work on the possible closure of Fort George.

2.2 On the basis of the limited information available and having to make a number of assumptions the following impacts were identified:

Direct Impacts

- Loss of employment 530 (Military, 53 (Civilian) & 12 (On-Site Contractors)
- Loss of income £12.2m (Military), £1.1M (Civilian) & £0.3m (On-Site Contractors)

Indirect Impacts

- Loss of indirect employment from goods & services 21 jobs with a loss of £0.5m in income.

Induced Impacts

- Loss of 117 jobs with a loss of £2.2m to the local economy.

Wider impacts

- School Rolls
- Community involvement

Overall the report concluded that the closure of Fort George would result in 732 FTE jobs and £16.3m of related income being lost to the area.

3. Current Closure Threat

3.1 The current speculation over the future of Fort George as an active military barracks stems from the UK Government defence estate “foot print” review which aims to reduce the size of the built estate by 30%. It is expected that the first phase of the review will be completed in September, 2016.

4. Military Operational Activity

4.1 Fort George is currently the home of the Black Watch 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland and operates in the Light Mechanised Infantry role as part of 51 Infantry (Scottish) Brigade. The latest MOD personnel statistics (April, 2016) shows that 560 army personnel are currently based in the Highlands. While it has not been possible to confirm the actual numbers at Fort George, it is the case that the overwhelming majority will be based at Fort George as it is the only sizable army base left in the Highlands.

4.2 In addition to being an army Barracks, the base also hosts the Fort George ranges and training area which, according to Defence Training Estate Scotland, are:

“ideal venues for battalion-level training, and are used in conjunction with training exercises elsewhere in the Highlands. The complex and its surrounding area are a mix of flat links land, gentle hills and metalled roads, and offer much by way of ‘march-and-shoot’ training. The partly-wooded dry training area covers over 600 acres (250 hectares) and is an excellent ‘hide’ for echelon training offering various entry and exit points, and cover from the air”.

5. Military Support Activity

5.1 Single person accommodation is provided at Fort George and service family accommodation is provided in Inverness with some 201 homes available. A significant proportion of the school roll of Raigmore Primary is derived from service families. Previously the Army would move units every 2-3 years known as the arms-plot system, however this has been replaced by have units remaining in a single posting, consequently there is a greater opportunity for these units to build relationships with their communities and become much more involved in the life of their communities.

6. Tourist Activities

6.1 As well as being an active military base, much of the site is also open to the public which is managed by Historic Environment Scotland. Visitors are able to walk around the main rampart, explore the fort's history in the Highlanders Museum, Scotland's largest regimental museum outside Edinburgh, enter the grand magazine, designed to hold 2,672 gunpowder barrels and now home to a collection of weapons, visit the historic barrack rooms to see a graphic recreation of soldiers' living conditions in centuries gone by and visit the garrison chapel. It is estimated that annual visitor numbers to Fort George are around 55,000.

7. Lobbying to retain Fort George

7.1 Significant lobbying has been undertaken which has generated high levels of publicity by the BBC, the Inverness Courier, The Press and Journal and Moray Firth Radio:

- Regular liaison meetings are now taking place between the Scottish Government's Defence Policy Unit and all of the local authorities that are potentially affected by the MOD's Estate Review.
- Keith Brown, Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work has written to the Secretary of State for Defence and has also met with Mark Lancaster MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State.
- The Council has been liaising with Drew Hendry MP and Fergus Ewing MSP who have been campaigning to ensure Fort George is retained as an active military barracks. They have tabled a motion in the House of Commons calling on the UK Government to ensure the base continues to serve the Highlands and the country for many years to come and a Parliamentary Question has also been tabled calling for the UK Government to reveal what consultation has been carried out in relation to the possible closure of north military bases.
- Cllr Margaret Davidson, Leader of the Highland Council, has written to the Secretary of State for Scotland and to the UK Minister for Defence. She has secured a meeting with David Mundell MP, Secretary of State for Scotland and Lord Dunlop, Under-Secretary of State for Scotland and will also be meeting with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence, Mark Lancaster MP.

8. Implications

8.1 There would be significant economic implications if Fort George was to cease operating as an active military barracks. However, the current lobbying activity has no implications for the Council with regard to Resources, Legal, Equality, Climate Change/Carbon Clever, Rural, or Gaelic.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the contents of this report and agree that the Council should continue to use every opportunity to lobby the UK Government on this matter.

Signed: Stuart Black
Director of Development and Infrastructure

Author: Gordon Morrison, 6 September 2016