

Blind leading the blind?

Even Councillor Andrew Burns in his [blog](#) had predicted that the most contentious issue to be discussed at the full council meeting today would be whether or not to close the [Blindcraft](#) factory. In the end the decision was made to start the statutory 30 days consultation period with the Blindcraft staff, a decision which many fear will mean its closure.

The City of Edinburgh Council meeting today went on for quite a while. It started at 14.01 when The Lord Provost, George Grubb, entered the Council Chamber – a fantastically embellished ceiling above the 65 people below who are empowered to conduct city council business. (Note:- About a third of those are women) From this room there is a magnificent view of Princes Street over Waverley station. This would have been a great location for a bit of a distant view of the Papal procession, which by the time the council meeting was starting was well and truly over.

(The quality of the sound in the chamber was pretty bad, notwithstanding the microphones which each of the councillors have, making it quite difficult to hear from the public gallery.)

The full motion before the council today was this:- “The Council is asked to approve the commencement of the statutory 30 days consultation period with the staff at Blindcraft.”

A report was produced to the council to try and show how £700,000 could be saved from the part of the council budget which is used to bolster up the bed-making factory, Blindcraft. The report relates that in 2004, when another attempt was made to decrease the spending on the organisation, some restructuring was carried out. However the organisation is still making a loss and now the current subsidy to the company is costing the Council £1m per annum. The saving of

£700,000 has been ordered to be made from 2011-12 onwards.

According to the report various options are open to the council, including shutting the doors, which is actually the only option which would deliver the saving demanded by budget motion passed by the council meeting in February. The other possibilities include restructuring Blindcraft to become a training organisation, or indeed register it as a charity (which would presumably allow certain tax benefits)

The council allows 10 minutes for any deputation, which is a request by interested parties to put forward their case to the council.

Hannah Lister spoke most eloquently for the recently formed group which is working to save the jobs at risk at Blindcraft. This is the text of her speech:-

Hi. I'd like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak at the Council meeting about a local issue that we feel passionately about.

We are here as the local voice of Edinburgh's community, a group of young people who are keen to support local jobs and protect valuable local organisations.

We read with dismay in the paper last week about the proposed financial cuts to a local organisation with local jobs, and we want to speak up against this.

Blindcraft is a unique organisation, with morally ethical principles. It makes quality British products from locally sourced materials- exactly the sort of organisation Edinburgh rightly prides itself on. It's more than a business, it's a lifeline to many of its employees.

As a council, you have a moral obligation to support these unique organisations in a difficult economic time and it is outrageous that people who have already been through more than most in life are now being faced with the prospect of abandonment and job uncertainty.

Our message is simple- it takes the Council to lead the way

in securing the future of organisations like this, and others alike. By jumping ship at a difficult time, you are abandoning one of the most vulnerable groups in society, with only a message that you are going to 'reinvest the money in to employment opportunities for people with disabilities.' That does not leave any of these employees with confidence about their future or working life.

We must not skip around the fact that for people with visual impairities it is very difficult to get a job. With the most recent figures, 67% of people in the UK who are blind or partially sighted are unemployed.

As much as many 'high street' businesses would like to employ people who are blind, it is not easy for them to adapt. Blindcraft is already adapted- in both a physical sense and in a supportive sense.

Having a job at a company which has many people who have similar disabilities provides a valuable support mechanism and makes employees feel comfortable and not like they are the 'odd one out'.

All Blindcraft's employees feel socially included- something Edinburgh should surely take pride in. It isn't easy to be socially included with such a disability, you often have no choice but to rely on others.

Being able to go out to work, however, to contribute back to the economy, give people with visual impurities a great deal of pride. That feeling of pride is priceless.

It is easy for us to sit here and contemplate the options for Blindcraft. We do not have a visual impairment. The employees of Blindcraft do not sit around moping, they go out to work every single day and get on with making the most out of life. Austerity has become a word that we are all familiar with. However, making the right cuts at this time is crucial, and cutting support for jobs for blind and disabled workers, of which 2/3rds of Blindcraft workers are, is not the right decision.

We urge the Council therefore, not to pull the plug on funding before a sensible option is put in place to secure the jobs of everybody at Blindcraft. The organisation may need a shake up, but this should not mean that anyone at the company finds themselves unemployed- this is targeting the vulnerable.

Our campaign group are prepared to work tirelessly for these employees to ensure that the Council helps the organisation recover from the economic recession in the same way that many other local organisations will need to.

Blindcraft is 200 years old, and with the right management, decisions and leadership can continue on for another 200 years.

We will all know what happened at Glencraft and how the wrong decision by the Council led to outrage, humiliation and shame. Lets not make the wrong decisions in the heart of Scotland. Lets give a hand to people who most need our help and secure the future of jobs for people who are more unlikely to get a job elsewhere.

We urge Edinburgh Council to save and preserve community spirit in Edinburgh, and organisations like Blindcraft are an integral part of our community.

The trade union representative who then had the floor explained that his fear was that the only option the council would entertain was closure. He said:-“We say there is one option only – training based option offering transferable skills. We should consider the valuable contribution from the employees and the chance Blindcraft gives to its employees. The drive for a quick fix in achieving cuts should not be to the detriment of the most vulnerable in society.”

During subsequent discussion it emerged that 23 people might be targetted for redundancy if that is the option which is pursued. Those 23 people are all sight-impaired. None of the

able-bodied staff are currently being considered for redundancy (although this was later disputed). There are 68 staff employed in total.

Councillor Lesley Hinds asked if voluntary redundancy had been looked at as an option, as indeed it had had to be at the Council. The trade union representative explained that one person has been approved for voluntary severance but cannot go because of a dispute between The City of Edinburgh Council and a neighbouring local authority as to who would pay the severance package.

There was an impassioned plea by one of the Blindcraft workers, David Anderson, who said:-“I had difficulties in outside work. An organisation like Blindcraft is a lifeline to me. I don't want to be stuck in a house doing nothing. I don't want a handout I am here to work and benefit my life as well as other people in my society.”

Labour tabled an amendment to the motion which would have allowed “further scrutiny before a final decision is taken, including a full assessment of the costs of the new care and support requirements of those who would be affected by any proposed changes. that assessment should be made available to the council before any decisions on the future of Blindcraft are taken.”

Following the lengthy debate a vote was taken and the motion was carried by 48 votes to 18.

Hannah Lister said after the meeting:-“Party politics should have been put aside for a massive decision on cuts for the most vulnerable. We are disappointed by the outcome but will continue to work to save these jobs. It's sad that after all the heartfelt deputations today the majority of councillors thought with their wallets instead of their hearts. All save blindcraft campaign want is to save the jobs of the most vulnerable workers- many of whom get up every day and want to

work, with no moaning. We will continue to press politicians and the council to make a decision that stops these jobs from going. These qualified workers don't need training. They want to continue to contribute to the economy and be included in society. Cutting only disabled jobs is also highly discriminatory."

Hannah also said:-"We will be meeting the Labour councillors who were on our side next Wednesday to talk about what we can do now. We are going to put the pressure on MSPs and councillors and start an online petition next week."