

# **Council leader under fire over official backing of Green Freeport**

**Edinburgh is to withdraw its official support for a Forth Green Freeport after the council leader came under fire for backing the bid without councillors discussing the matter.**

Opposition councillors accused the leader of 'undermining governance' by not putting proposals for the free trade zone to the council before sending a letter of support to officials at Holyrood and Westminster.

And the anger was increased by the fact that councillors only found out about the situation this week – five months on from the leader's endorsement.

Council officers apologised and explained the decision was "taken under urgency" as there was no available meeting for members to debate the bid in the six days between receiving it and the deadline for submission in June.

If the bid is successful a Firth of Forth Green Freeport (FGFP) would designate reduced tax and trade tariff zones in Leith, Edinburgh Airport, Grangemouth, Rosyth and Burntisland to encourage investment.

Plans drawn up by Forth Ports alongside Babcock, Ineos, Scarborough Muir and Edinburgh Airport claimed it

would support more than 50,000 “high quality, well-paid” new jobs including more than 2,800 in Leith, with tax incentives expected to secure investment of £850 million.

Councillors passed a motion in March (during the last administration) which agreed information on the merits and concerns surrounding Freeport status would need to be presented to councillors “before the council support would be confirmed”.

Despite this, Edinburgh council leader Cllr Cammy Day wrote to the UK and Scottish Governments confirming the authority’s support for the FGFP bid.

The letter, sent on 17 June (which is embedded below) read: “A Green Freeport tax site in Leith, and a customs site in Edinburgh Airport will help us to deliver transformative change for local communities and also our ambitious target of achieving net zero by 2030.

“The Council has been clear throughout that the FGFP bid must deliver real, transformational change to the communities along the Firth of Forth, particularly areas suffering from multiple deprivation.”

**Watch this part of the committee meeting by clicking [here](#).**

But after a meeting on Thursday Cllr Day will now write to both governments again to confirm support for Forth Green Freeport “was given prematurely”.

SNP and Lib Dem members tabled a joint motion at the Policy and Sustainability committee on Thursday criticising the leader for his “failure to bring the decision on supporting a Green Freeport to council for approval”.

Councillors demanded the new letter “will make clear the council currently has not yet made a decision about supporting

the bid and will not be able to confirm support until the council comes to a settled position, agreed by councillors through full council”.

The SNP’s Kate Campbell said: “A letter was sent five months ago today and this is the first time it’s coming in front of committee. For me that feels like a real gap in governance.”

## Amendment by the SNP & Liberal Democrat Groups

### Policy and Sustainability Committee

17 November 2022

#### Item 8.1 – Forth Green Freeport

Replaces recommendation 1.1 with:

1. Committee:

1.1 Notes the Council Leader's failure to bring the decision on supporting a Green Freeport to Council for approval and meant a letter of support was submitted without the endorsement of the Council.

1.2 Notes the Council Leader and senior officers were aware of concerns across parties relating to the content of these proposals and therefore understood this was a politically sensitive decision which made it inappropriate for any decision to be taken under delegated authority.

1.3 Notes the failure to report this decision to the next Policy and Sustainability Committee also constitutes a material breach of Council Governance

1.4 Recognises that while Green Free Ports may be useful in unlocking economic development in some areas, the case for Edinburgh's involvement in the Forth bid has a number of important outstanding questions.

1.5 Therefore agrees to receive a further report within one cycle setting out the full position of aspects of the bid within Edinburgh, including analysis of bid activity already happening versus additional investment and job opportunities, the potential for loss of tax take through the incentives within the Green Freeport plans, and further information on the strength of commitments of both Governments to the enforcement of conditions relating to Fair Work and Climate Change.

1.6 Further agrees the Council Leader and Chief Executive will write again to both Governments within 5 working days to confirm support for Forth Green Freeport was given prematurely. This will make clear the Council currently has not yet made a decision about supporting the bid and will not be able to confirm support until the Council comes to a settled position, agreed by Councillors through Full Council.

**Moved by** Councillor Adam McVey

**Seconded by** Councillor Kevin Lang



Green councillor Alys Mumford said the move “effectively changed the position of the council”.

She said: “The formal request for the bid came in on the 14th of June with a deadline of the 20th of June, so I find that

bizarre first that they would send a formal request with just six days.

“A decision was taken that the majority of council would disagree with.”

SNP group leader Adam McVey pointed out that Glasgow’s bid for a Clyde Green Freeport was supported by the city’s council following an “agreed a position with their councillors,” adding: “Something has went badly wrong”.

The former council leader also accused his Labour successor of ‘undermining governance’ and ‘circumventing our democratic process’.

But Cllr Iain Whyte, the Conservative Group Leader, described the uproar as a “storm in a teacup”.

He said the motion agreed in March came after the two governments agreed a Scottish green freeport prospectus which put the transition to net zero and fair work “front and centre in the agreement”.

Cllr Day said: “I would like to put my apologies on record that we didn’t follow due process as agreed by council.

“All along my ambition has been to ensure there will be a fair work agenda, good jobs, commitment to living wages and all the conditions we would expect including a unionised workforce.”

Director of Place Paul Lawrence also offered apologies to the committee saying the decision was “taken under urgency” and “should have been in consultation with the Lord Provost as well as the council leader”.

He added: “As members will know with an urgency decision it should then immediately go to the next available committee or council as quickly as possible. That has not happened, that’s my responsibility and I apologise to this committee and the

council that that took place.”

Mr Lawrence said the Freeport would enable “regeneration of some of the most heavily contaminated brownfield sites in the central belt”.

“Some of this directly benefits local communities because of job creation, some of it directly benefits local communities because of investment and some of it creates a pot for infrastructure and investment which otherwise would not be available,” he added.




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by Donald Turvill

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