

Friends of Penzance Harbour

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Address to the European Parliament's Petitions Committee delivered by John Maggs on 15th July 2010

Greetings from Cornwall, Great Britain's most south-westerly province, and thank you for considering our petition and for allowing me to speak to you today.

I come from Penzance, a town of 20,000 people on the coast of Cornwall, near Land's End. It is a beautiful seaside town, with an historic seafront, elegant buildings, granite cottages and an unspoilt marine environment that attracts thousands of tourists each year while remaining an honest working town.

But all this is under threat. Cornwall Council wants to spend EU funds to build a development resembling an industrial estate – *une zone industrielle* – in the middle of our beautiful historic seafront. They call it "improving the harbour". That is, extending it to accommodate a proposed new ferry boat that will travel between Penzance and the Isles of Scilly, out in the Atlantic Ocean. If it is built, the development will obliterate a much-loved beach, and it will bury – under infill and concrete – the historically most significant parts of the South Pier, one of the UK's most important historic piers, recently Grade II* listed and dating back in-part to the 1300s. The development will compromise both the fabric and the setting of our unique Art Deco seawater swimming pool and Victorian Promenade, and it will threaten important protected species, including a bird called the Purple Sandpiper, whose current roost will be entirely destroyed. There isn't a more sensitive site historically, environmentally or culturally anywhere in our town.

[The economic justification is flawed]

We are told that the proposed project will produce jobs and contribute to economic regeneration in the Penzance area but it will do exactly the opposite. The new ferry and harbour improvements are not designed to carry any more passengers or freight than at present. It will put jobs at risk. The proposed single combined passenger & freight ferry will replace separate passenger and freight ferries (which is the preferred arrangement of the current operator) and need fewer crew, and the new ferry will be too big to be repaired in the town's own Dry Dock, putting marine engineering jobs at risk in what is an important local marginal business. And the last thing a tourist destination needs is an industrial estate-style development in the middle of its scenic seafront. A recent consultation commissioned by Cornwall Council itself has shown that a

pedestrian-friendly seafront and harbour area is essential to the future economic importance of the town, but the proposed project will ensure that heavy lorries continue to blight the area making this long-standing ambition of the town impossible.

We are also told that without the project the ferry service will fail or have to move to another port. This is entirely without foundation. The service has operated successfully from Penzance for the last ninety years and everyone, including the current operator and Cornwall Council's own consultants, has said it cannot operate successfully from anywhere else. The next nearest port is around 40 km (70%) further away from the Scilly Islands, meaning a much longer journey time and much higher operating costs. And the current operator has made it absolutely clear that they have no intention of operating from anywhere other than Penzance and would continue to do so with or without public funding. So the Council's argument that the project is securing the existing link and protecting jobs in Penzance is entirely bogus.

[Missed opportunity]

Cornwall Council's choice of scheme represents a massive missed opportunity. The harbour facilities do need improving, traffic and other problems in the harbour area need addressing, the link to the Scillies could be made more attractive - and people are supportive of action - but the Council's whole approach is wrong. Alternative schemes have been put forward, that respect the seafront and harbour area and address the genuine needs of the town and of travellers to and from the Scillies. These include using a fast ferry, and locating the lorry terminal and warehouses out of town. But these have not been properly investigated. Cornwall Council made up its mind years ago to persist with its preferred scheme, and has been deaf to suggestions that alternatives should be impartially investigated.

We have learned recently that the helicopter service between Penzance and the Scillies is almost certain to close in the next few years, because the helicopters are very old and they are very heavy on fuel. The Council has completely ignored this in planning its project. A fast ferry would go a long way to filling the gap left by the helicopter, and unlike the proposed new - and slow - ferry would provide Islanders with the possibility of getting to and from the mainland in a day.

[The process is flawed]

You are told by the Commission, in your 'Notice to Members', that **it appears** that the process surrounding the project is taking place in line with applicable regulations and procedures. That is wrong. (Appearances can be deceptive!) The process has been undemocratic in the extreme.

We have been denied the protection which the statutory planning procedure is supposed to give us. The Council told the public that we would have the opportunity to object to the plans. Meanwhile it secured from the former Government a Harbour Revision Order, and then told us that this Order meant that apart from Listed Building Consent it did not need to go through the normal planning process.

From the moment that the plans were published the inhabitants of Penzance have been overwhelmingly against them. The Town Council has repeatedly voted against them. Not one candidate in last year's Cornwall Council elections supported them. The area's Member of Parliament in Westminster is against them. And English Heritage, the government's advisor on historic buildings, is opposed to them.

[A grandiose 'vanity project']

In these difficult financial times, when Cornwall Council should be looking at cost-effectiveness, its leaders appear more interested in the grandiose "vanity project". One Councillor Hicks, the elected official responsible for the scheme, is actually on record as saying that "the prime concern [of the Council] has not been to reduce capital costs, [because they will] be covered by grant funding"!

While every community welcomes public grant aid it is important that it meets a genuine need and is spent wisely. Please help us not just to protect what is best about our town but to ensure that valuable EU funds are spent on a project that enhances the town and carries the support of local people.

END.