

# The Highland Council

30 OCTOBER 2014

## Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs) Update Report

### Report by the Chief Executive

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| Agenda Item | 11       |
| Report No   | HC/25/14 |

#### Summary

This report provides background to the Council's campaign for the UK Government to reinstate adequate coastal protection measures for the Highlands and Islands. It also provides an update on the actions undertaken by the Council since the incident at the beginning of October when a fire on the MV Parida resulted in the vessel losing power whilst carrying a shipment of nuclear material from Scrabster to Antwerp.

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 In 2010, the UK Government announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review that the 4 vessels making up the UK ETV (Emergency Towing Vessel) fleet would cease to receive funding from September 2011. Following on from a lobbying campaign led by the Highlands and Islands local authorities, the Scotland Office agreed to establish a working group to identify an alternative model for provision. The Highland Council was a lead participant in the working group and, by the end of 2012, the UK Government had agreed to reintroduce a single government funded ETV, to be based in Kirkwall, and had reached an agreement with UK Oil and Gas for an industry-led solution for the Northern Isles to supplement the state provision.
- 1.2 Whilst a significant improvement on the UK Government's original plans to remove all ETV coverage from the Highlands and Islands coastal waters, it was still a reduction in the protection previously provided. Crucially, the Minches, which had previously been covered by an ETV based in Stornoway, had been left without any dedicated protection and was reliant on the Kirkwall based tug being dispatched at times of need. The Council's Programme, Working Together for the Highlands, confirmed the Administration's commitment to continue to press for the same level of protection as previously provided by two emergency towing vessels covering the Minch and the Northern Isles.
- 1.3 The Government funded ETV was originally only due to be in place until the end of the spending review period, which would have seen the provision terminated in April 2015. Consequently, in July this year the Leader of The Highland Council wrote to the UK Government to press for a commitment to re-establish the ETV Working Group to consider options for coastal protection post April 2015. The Secretary of State for Scotland replied in September 2014 that the new ETV contract had been extended to March 2016 and consequently he believed it would be premature for the Scottish ETV Group to be reconvened at this stage.

## 2. Recent Developments – the MV Parida

- 2.1 On 7 October 2014 there was a fire on board a vessel, the MV Parida, which caused it to lose power whilst carrying a shipment of nuclear material from Scrabster to Antwerp. The vessel ended up drifting 20 miles off Wick and posed a risk to the Beatrice oil platform which had to be evacuated. The Coastguard ETV in Kirkwall was tasked to assist but before it arrived on the scene the owners of the MV Parida were able to agree a commercial tow with Pacific Champion which towed the vessel to outside the narrows of the Cromarty Firth.
- 2.2 This accident has come at a time when the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority is intending to start the regular shipment of nuclear material from Scrabster to Sellafield. The route is likely to be via the Pentland Firth and the Minches.
- 2.3 On 8 October 2014 the Council issued a press statement and the Leader of the Council wrote to the UK Secretary of State for Transport and the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, stressing the importance of the UK Government reinstating the level of protection previously provided by 2 ETVs, one stationed in the Minch and one in the Northern Isles. The point was made that accidents can and do happen and even the most resilient and capable vessels can lose power. Furthermore, the potential for a vessel carrying nuclear material to have an accident in the Minches represented a significant and increased level of risk. Under current arrangements, there would be no assistance available to a ship in distress for several hours. In the event of an accident, the consequences for the communities and the environment could be devastating, could be permanent, and could not be ignored.
- 2.4 The Council's position, regularly stated, is that the lack of a commercial solution demonstrates clear market failure and the UK Government has to intervene and procure an ETV to be permanently on standby for this area. The Council will continue to lobby on this front and will ensure members are kept informed of any further developments in this regard.

### **Recommendation**

Members are asked to note the report and agree that the Council should continue to press the UK Government to reinstate an ETV in the Minches without further delay and to commit to extending the lease for the ETV, based in Kirkwall, beyond the current cut-off date of March 2016.

Signed: Steve Barron  
Designation: Chief Executive  
Date: 16 October 2014

Author: Kate Lackie, Business Manager