

St Athan guarantee is needed from all parties

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COMMENT

THE planned Defence Technical College at St Athan represents a huge potential shot in the arm for the Welsh economy, but the prize seems forever to be dangling just out of reach.

Ever since St Athan was chosen as the venue for a bold new venture, to centralise training for the whole of the British armed services, there seem to have been setbacks and delays.

Yesterday the Ministry of Defence announced that the final sign-off on the whole project – a whopping £13bn investment – will not come until after the general election. Naturally enough, that has raised fears that the sign-off may not come at all.

The prospective gains for the Welsh economy are so great that backing off now should not be an

option. Wales badly needs the jobs that would come with the Academy and the investment that would surely come in its wake – a glance at the unemployment figures and our puny GDP provide enough of a reason why.

Winning the bid for Wales in 2007 was an example of how politicians can work together for the greater good; it would be disastrous if the project faltered as politicians engaged in a race to find cutbacks at any cost.

To pull out now would be a body blow to Wales and a let-down to all those who campaigned so hard to bring the project to St Athan, and all

those who would benefit. The Ministry of Defence should hold its nerve.

That goes for the Conservatives too, for if the opinion polls are right and they win the general election, then this issue will land at the top of their in-tray.

David Cameron and his team have made supportive noises so far, accepting for instance that simply cancelling the contract would not save the Exchequer much money – as some have claimed. Armed services training would still have to continue somewhere else.

But we need a stronger commitment from Mr Cameron that he

backs the project, and will ensure that it is delivered on time if he becomes Prime Minister.

We shouldn't get too down-hearted just yet. The project has not been ditched by the Ministry of Defence, and numerous hurdles, including planning permission, have already been overcome.

Jobs are already being advertised, and the consortium behind the scheme is confident it will go ahead, opening on time in 2014.

Legitimate questions have been asked about the whole enterprise, even to the extent of querying whether privatisation of armed forces training is, in itself, a good idea. It's true too that many of the 5,000 or so jobs created will be transferred from elsewhere, but to argue that this will have no beneficial impact is nonsense.

The Technical College should go ahead – politicians of all colours need to offer the same clear commitment.