



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

National Parks: Fermanagh Lakeland
Tourism Briefing

4 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Environment

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Francie Molloy
Lord Maurice Morrow of Clogher Valley
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Ms Tanya Cathcart	Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism
Mrs Wendy McChesney	Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism
Mr Charles Plunket	Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism
Mr Rodney Watson	Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism

The Chairperson: You are all very welcome. I know that you do not have a paper for us, is that right?

Ms Tanya Cathcart (Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism): We have copies of some of our concerns, which I can pass round.

The Chairperson: We are very short of time. I wonder whether we could just start asking questions, and we can take away your paper to look through later. We have 20 minutes, at the absolute maximum.

Are you in favour or not? *[Laughter.]* I am cutting to the chase.

Lord Morrow: Yes or no?

The Chairperson: Are you for or against?

Ms Cathcart: We obviously discussed this at our board meeting. If I give you some background as to who we are and the level of organisations that we represent —

Mr Molloy: You are politicians; you did not answer the question. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Cathcart: Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism is the marketing organisation that promotes Fermanagh locally and overseas. We were established in 1999. We are a membership organisation; we have about 380 members from around 20 different business sectors, including accommodation, visitor attractions and tourism providers. However, not all our members' businesses are directly involved in tourism. It could be farming, retail or restaurants; there is a wide range of members in our organisation. Relevant to what one member brought up earlier is the fact that we were already involved in a vision for tourism strategy, Destination Fermanagh, which was instigated in 2006 by Fermanagh District Council and the Tourist Board. The strategy already recognises the importance of future tourism development, and a number of priorities have already been identified with regard to tourism development in Fermanagh, marketing, visitor servicing, training, infrastructure and delivery. So, there is a document there that recognises the importance of tourism and how we should go on in the future.

Opinions on the possibility of a national park in Fermanagh have elicited mixed responses from members of Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism. Some members have considered the potential of the designation and that it could very well put us on the tourism map. However, even those people have said that we need clarity, and we do understand that it could be detrimental to some tourism businesses. We obviously have other members who feel that it would be completely detrimental to the county and have an adverse effect, particularly in the farming community, and a lot of our members are from farming backgrounds, particularly those in the guest house and self-catering sectors. With such polarised views, it is imperative that there is more detailed discussion and clarity on this. We really need to consider the needs of all sectors and the local communities.

The Chairperson: You said that even some people in the tourist industry say that it could be detrimental to their business. Why? They should see it as an expansion of the business.

Ms Cathcart: The fear is of the additional legislation and restrictions that may be put on their businesses, especially with regard to planning and the issues that were raised during the previous briefings by the council and the Ulster Farmers' Union. It is that additional layer of bureaucracy and potential additional legislation.

The Chairperson: Yet they do not know whether that is going to be true.

Ms Cathcart: Again, as was said by previous groups, that is one of the problems. A lot of people might not be aware because there is not enough clarity on what exactly the situation will be.

The Chairperson: From our visit, we can certainly see the huge arena of tourism, from boating and water activities to B&Bs, accommodation and restaurants — everything. Personally, I think it gives a lot of room for expansion in the tourism sector. I understand the concerns of the farming community. Go to the Lake District and Loch Lomond; I think that there are certainly a lot of opportunities for tourism in Fermanagh.

Mr Rodney Watson (Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism): With regard to hotel expansion, it is widely known that the Tourist Board would like to see GDP rise from 2% to 6%. Another 100,000 to 200,000 bedrooms would be required in Northern Ireland for that to happen. Obviously, planning would need to exist in order for those rooms to be developed and built in the likes of Gleneagles and those sorts of resorts, which we see this county being well able to sustain.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you. Cathal.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Chair. I am first this time.

The Chairperson: You were first the last time, too.

Mr Boylan: Thanks very much for your presentation. I have just a couple of points. I appreciate your vision for tourism, and we will talk about that in one minute. I was looking forward to seeing how they do things in Cumbria, but I was kind of disappointed when I got there because the place has been spoilt by signage. It is taking away from the beautiful landscape and the architecture of the buildings, and it has been totally destroyed by thousands upon thousands of signs. That is one observation. I certainly would not want that anywhere. I am trying to promote tourism in Armagh, because it is a big product for us as well.

I will cut to the chase here. I think that the key element in all this, beside your vision for the future in your strategy, is about policy and what you are allowed to develop and how to grow, as opposed to a national parks brand per se. That is why I asked the council about this. There are areas where it is operating and working well. Tourism in Fermanagh is a big seller. I know that some councillors have been up to the Assembly to talk to us about PPS 16 specifically, which is the tourism policy. I think that we need to look at that and others — PPS 5, and everything else — if we are to bring in a policy in order to provide opportunities. We may bring all the agencies together to work on this, but we should not go down the road of putting together another quango, as Francie calls it, to run this, because we have seen what has happened over there. I know that it is not a case of one size fits all, because, uniquely, a lot of farmers here own their land, and it is completely different over there.

Ms Cathcart: We introduced a new tourism brand, Fermanagh Lakelands, in the past year or so. We have been very lucky, because one local authority area and one marketing organisation covered the entire county. From a marketing point of view, that has been very advantageous for us. In the past year, we have reintroduced Fermanagh Lakelands as our strapline. For a couple of years, we used Find Fermanagh. The whole lakelands and what it embodies is all to do with the natural landscape and the environment. We are concerned that adding another brand would, perhaps, be confusing.

Mr Boylan: I am not suggesting that. What I am saying is that you have it here, whatever it is, but how you sell it and how you promote it —

Mr Watson: We call it our best-kept secret.

The Chairperson: You do not want it to be a secret, though.

Mr Boylan: I fish in Lough Erne myself; it is not a bad place to go.

What I am saying is that I have seen the way they have gone about it over there, and it has been completely destroyed. That is one element of it. I do not think that you need to designate a national park brand to sell the product here. You need to look and rethink the way you want to go. You need support in the form of policy, and that may be a job for central government to look at. I do not think that you need a designated national park. To be honest with you, from looking at that map, I think that you have enough areas designated. Those are my views.

Mr Molloy: Thanks for the presentation. One of the things that struck me when we went to Loch Lomond and the Lake District was that they said the national park structure was put in place to manage tourism, not to bring the tourism, because the tourists were already there. That is the difference. Your job is to try to promote it and draw people in. To some extent, they put in place a management structure to deal with an overpopulated tourist market.

The issue is that you have one local government structure and promotion. You have what is required here; you do not need a national park to come in as an authority on top of another authority. I go back to the point that the national park is an international standard. If you invite people into an international standard but you have not got that then — because there is so much more to a national park than just tourism — the danger is that people will be disappointed because they will have come with an expectation. The local structure might fall down because it is overwhelmed by the national park.

I have those concerns, but my big concern is the idea of a quango managing it. When we talked to the chief executive in the Lake District, his attitude was: we are the people who are dealing with this every day of the week, and we know best. You are the people who are dealing with this every day of the week, and you probably know best.

Mr Elliott: Thanks for the presentation, folks. When we were over in Loch Lomond and the Lake District, I noticed quite a number of visitors going to the areas, but I did not sense any great amount of accommodation. You will recall that I asked a question about static caravan parks. There seemed to be a dearth of permanent accommodation. Apart from one or two hotels and campsites, where people came and pitched their tents, I got the distinct feeling that a lot of them were day visitors who did not leave significant revenue in the area.

The Chairperson: We did not go to the right place.

Mr Elliott: We went where we went.

The Chairperson: We did not go to Windermere. That is where you will see streets and streets of —

Mr Elliott: We were in Windermere. The point that I am trying to make is that I did not sense any huge amount of revenue being left in the area by people staying for long periods. All that I sensed were day visitors who came and pitched their tents. We heard of people bringing their chainsaws out on boats to cut down trees on the islands so that they could make fires for their barbecues or whatever. Things like that worry me. However, I am more concerned about accommodation and what is left in the area. Is that something that you have considered? We have a pretty good range of accommodation in Fermanagh, but I do not think that a national park would bring anything further.

Mr Watson: Tom, the big danger of not having enough accommodation in the area is that people will reside in the cities and just come to the natural areas for a day out. We would obviously like to address that and have more accommodation here than in the city. The city has a problem in that it now has too many beds. The Tourist Board and Invest Northern Ireland have addressed that in that there is no assistance for any development within a 10-mile radius of the city, which is good. However, market forces and whatever will dictate that. The complement of planning has to be good and bad. It has to be very carefully managed in relation to where the need is, and to sustainability, obviously.

The Chairperson: As Francie mentioned, their estimate is that tourism brings in about £900 million a year from accommodation, activities, and so on.

Mr Molloy: I want to address another point to Mr Watson. One restaurant that we were in quoted their rates as having risen from £8,000 to £44,000 because it is based on their turnover.

Mr Watson: There is a bit of an anomaly in Northern Ireland in that hotels pay rates but other businesses do not. Our rateable value is dictated by our turnover. If you are doing the business, you can pay the rates; there is never a problem with that. Our biggest problem is paying VAT at 20%, but that is another can of worms altogether.

Mr Charles Plunket (Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism): When I first left school, I spent about a year working in a national park. I was a pupil at Chatsworth Estate, which owns a huge part of the Peak District national park. I was very young at the time, and my memory is fading a bit, but I remember that there were certain planning restrictions, particularly on farm buildings. I remember that there was a restriction on the height of buildings, their colour and the materials that could be used. I know, certainly, that it was a hoop that the estate had to go through. If it comes into Fermanagh, it will be one of many hoops that you will have to jump through to comply with policies.

I also want to say that I could not agree more with you about the business of car parks and, particularly, litter bins all over the place. It spoils the natural beauty of any county or area if you have it purely for tourists. I think that the local population has to be brought into consideration.

Mr Molloy: Local stone and local materials was one of the things they talked about. There had to be stone finishes on buildings. However, the quarries were all closed down because they could not operate in the national park and most of the stone comes from China and America. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Watson: Just so that there is no misunderstanding, I should say that we had our board meeting. Maybe our chair, Wendy, would say how our recent board meeting went with regard to this?

Mrs Wendy McChesney (Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism): A lot of people voiced concerns. All those concerns have been mentioned already today by previous speakers. In addition, there are some concerns that we have not properly addressed. At the time that we were collating our information, we were unaware of the extent of the project — that is the size of the area — and another issue was the time frame. The consensus of the board is mostly against it.

The Chairperson: This is only enabling legislation, which allows us to designate a national park, or a number of them, in Northern Ireland. That is all the legislation does.

Thank you very much indeed. If I may make another point about that restaurant: yes, the rate has increased so much. However, it started up with something like £260,000, and now its turnover is £1.2

million. The owners said that they were quite happy to pay more rates because the turnover has multiplied so many times.

Ms Cathcart: In conclusion, I think that the tourism industry wants things to move on. However, we want to do it taking everyone into consideration. There are other things that we did not get to, but they have been included and they are in our document. They include the cost implications. We have a tourism strategy, and we are finding it difficult to get funding to implement that as it is, never mind finding another £2 million or £3 million perhaps, for a national park.

There is also concern that house prices might rise and that further restrictions will be imposed. A lot more clarity and consultation are required.

The Chairperson: I understand. People said that the demand for second homes and holiday homes would push up the prices.

Mr Boylan: Following on from that, I mean, the concerns and the issues with policy and everything that you have — it is not all in this paper you gave us today, is it?

Mr Watson: No, it is not. That is pretty short.

Mr Boylan: Will you send that information on to the Committee then?

Mr Watson: We could send you plenty of stuff. We have a lot of concerns — a lot of moans.
[Laughter.]

Mr Molloy: We do not want to hear the moans.

Mr Boylan: If you keep it to two pages, we will read it, but any more than that —

Mr Watson: When we go to see the Tourist Board, they say, "They are coming from Fermanagh to moan again."

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed.