



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the  
Economy: Northern Ireland Tourist Board

11 June 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)  
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr John Dallat  
Mr Alex Easton  
Mr Ross Hussey  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr David McNarry  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Ms Aine Kearney	Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Ms Susie McCullough	Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Ms Kathryn Thomson	Northern Ireland Tourist Board

**The Chairperson:** From the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), I welcome Kathryn Thomson, the chief operating officer; Aine Kearney, the director of product development; and Susie McCullough, the director of business support and events. I ask you to make a short presentation and then leave yourselves open for questions from members. I remind you that everything you say is being reported by Hansard, as with all our evidence sessions.

**Ms Kathryn Thomson (Northern Ireland Tourist Board):** That is grand. Thank you very much indeed. We are very grateful to have the opportunity to talk to you this morning. I will make a few introductory remarks and then leave the rest of the time as an opportunity for you to ask questions. I will begin by talking about tourism and its benefits to the Northern Ireland economy and then maybe drill down into activity tourism and cycling and where we see its role in that context.

Tourism is certainly very much a growing part of the Northern Ireland economy. Between 2012 and 2013, the revenue that it delivers to the economy grew by 5% and is now worth £723 million. In 2013, 4.1 million overnight trips were taken in Northern Ireland. That included 2.1 million trips from out of state, which means non-domestic. However, tourism has a much wider effect than just the direct benefit. When you take in all the multiplier effects, you see that tourism is worth about £1.6 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. The industry supports 43,000 jobs across Northern Ireland, and that is set to grow to 55,000 by 2025. From a GDP perspective, tourism is worth about 5.8% of the economy and is forecast to grow a lot faster than other sectors, such as manufacturing, construction and retail. So, it represents a very real opportunity. The benefits of tourism to the economy are not just direct benefits. We also put a value on some indirect benefits. Tourism offers a window to the world for

Northern Ireland and a real opportunity to reposition Northern Ireland, change perceptions and demonstrate that it is a positive place, not just to visit but to live, work, study, learn and invest.

Activity tourism, which we are here to talk about today, is an important part of the tourism offering, and it includes cycling. The latest available figures show that activity tourism in Northern Ireland, including cycling and mountain biking, is estimated to be worth about £100 million to the economy here. In addition to those direct benefits, the evidence is plentiful of the wider benefits of activities, and cycling in particular, in helping to tackle wider issues in our society, such as creating jobs, improving productivity, boosting the vitality of our towns and centres, providing health benefits and reducing traffic congestion.

For us at the Tourist Board, the activity tourism sector plays a key role in our plans for making better use of our natural resources and beautiful countryside whilst helping us to develop a high-quality visitor experience. Outdoor activities, in particular, really help us to promote the very best of our beautiful environment and stunning natural heritage in Northern Ireland. Cycling is a key part of our product development strategy. Future plans will focus on helping to develop and promote cycle routes that can showcase the very best of Northern Ireland to our visitors. We have invested over £2.2 million in development projects for mountain biking trails and off-road cycling trails over the last two years. We now have mountain bike trails in areas such as Castlewellan, Rostrevor, Davagh forest and Barnett demesne in Belfast. Rostrevor, in particular, is quickly becoming recognised as one of the best mountain bike cycle routes in the world. We have also funded several multi-use cycling and walking trails at Castleward, Divis, Black Mountain and Blessingbourne estate. That provides a mix of different types of activity for people to participate in, depending on their level.

In addition to our investment in capital infrastructure, attracting major global events to Northern Ireland has been a key part of our strategy. With that in mind, obviously the investment in delivering the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza last month had a key role in raising the profile of cycling here amongst our visitors and in the local communities, as well as providing an opportunity for us to showcase our destination. We hope that the Giro will have helped to deliver an anticipated economic impact of £2.5 million to local businesses. When the final figures are complete, we anticipate visitor numbers to have exceeded the target of 140,000. Most importantly, it gave us an opportunity to project iconic images of our cities, towns and countryside to more than 125 million households in 175 countries, with a global audience reach of 775 million people. So, it has really helped us to showcase the investment in our signature projects over recent years as well as all our dramatic landscapes, our iconic architecture, our living legends and, particularly, our friendly people. We are growing our reputation as a destination that can host major events, and having the opportunity to have a major cycling event here also helped us to profile cycling.

A key element of hosting the Giro d'Italia, and of particular interest to the Committee, is the legacy and what that will deliver for us. What are the long-term benefits to our economy and for those who have an interest in cycling? The legacy plan was developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders, including DRD, and showed a number of possible legacy benefits to Northern Ireland as a result of hosting the event. These include the potential to host mass participation cycling events, to enable additional engagements with schools, particularly with active travel to school, and a number of health and well-being targets. We are working on plans for Northern Ireland to become a venue for the official Giro sportive, which is known as the Gran Fondo. Legacy events like that can help us to attract visitors to come here and to ride the Giro stages and other parts of our beautiful countryside.

Given the number of events that we have delivered over the last number of years, including the Giro d'Italia, the key lesson for us is that all these things are delivered in partnership, and it is only by working with our partners that we deliver these successfully. For cycling and activity tourism, we work closely with Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI), which is responsible for industry engagement and the promotion of activity tourism in Northern Ireland. We also work in partnership with other stakeholders such as Sustrans, and we have undertaken significant development work with it. Within the objectives of the Belfast strategic tourism framework, we have looked at issues such as connectivity across the city for our visitors, which involved identifying traffic-free cycling and walking routes.

As we look forward, what are the new development opportunities? We believe that there are new and exciting product development opportunities for the creation and enhancement of cycling and walking trails across Northern Ireland. We believe that the Northern Ireland tourism industry could benefit significantly from developments such as the Great Western Greenway in County Mayo, and I know that a number of you have visited it. The figures from Fáilte Ireland demonstrate that its €5.6 million investment in the 42-kilometre greenway has helped it to generate €7.2 million in economic benefit in

its first year alone. That shows the scale of the opportunity. Again, these developments can be delivered only if we work in partnership with the likes of DRD, Sport NI, Outdoor Recreation, Sustrans and the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC).

While we are here, we will wrap up by talking about our wider relationship with DRD because we are intrinsically linked with that Department and work with it very closely, particularly on the need to provide easy and convenient travel links around Northern Ireland for visitors and to offer integrated visitor-focused travel options. A number of our visitors want to travel by public transport. From that perspective, joined-up modes of transport, ease of access to information and customer-focused services are all key elements of a modern transport infrastructure that can bring mutual benefit to visitors and to the wider public. We have worked closely with DRD, particularly on the delivery of some of our major events such as the Giro d'Italia and the 2012 Irish Open, where the transport infrastructure and the mass movement of visitors has played an absolutely key role.

Building on this collaborative approach, we think that there are ongoing opportunities for the Tourist Board to work with DRD to identify initiatives and shared interests to deliver a transport experience that will meet the expectations of all users, including visitors to Northern Ireland as well as the public. We believe that the development of enhanced cycle networks is a key element and opportunity.

We believe that the benefits that cycling can bring to our tourist industry and wider economy are becoming more and more apparent as the popularity of on-road and off-road cycling grows. We see those as key parts of the cycling product. The Giro obviously provided a fantastic opportunity and is an example of how well Departments and agencies across government can work to deliver a major global event. The event drew mass community participation and helped to showcase the very best that Northern Ireland has to offer in our civic pride and friendly welcome as well as showcasing cycling and the opportunities for cycling in Northern Ireland. We believe that cycling can provide a catalyst for investment and improvements to our economy and wider society.

We believe that this is an opportune time to coordinate investment, to build on further collaboration among key stakeholders and to maximise the benefits that cycling can deliver to the Northern Ireland economy. We welcome the opportunity to be part of the interdepartmental working group being led by DRD, which will help to develop a cycle strategy for Northern Ireland.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Kathryn. Certainly, in the aftermath of the Giro, everybody was pleased at how the whole event went off, and everybody worked with you in partnership to present a world-class event. I will stick with that theme. We received evidence that there is a possibility of Northern Ireland getting a leg of what I think is called the World Cup of downhill cycling. Are you aware of that, or have you had any conversations with the folks involved? Most of the tracks are in the south Down and Mourne area, and it is a bit disappointing that some other parks have not picked that up. Maybe you will comment on that. For instance, the parks that are run by the DOE and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency seem to have some sort of mental block that bikes just cannot be involved, whereas cycling has been fully embraced by DARD and the Forest Service in the areas that they own. Do you think that there could be a major enhancement of off-road cycling? How would that affect the tourist potential to bring folk in.

**Ms Thomson:** I will ask Susie to answer the question that is specific to the event. Aine will then talk about product development.

**Ms Susie McCullough (Northern Ireland Tourist Board):** We have a vision in the Tourist Board to bid to host one global iconic event a year. We have been working closely with ORNI on our events strategy, which the Minister launched last September, and we can certainly send copies to members if they have not seen it. We are working with ORNI on a bidding structure over the next four to five years. We will probably need to host a few national championships, and we will then go for European events with the hope of being able to bid for world events.

ORNI is doing work that will look at what it will take to put those bids together. Certainly, the infrastructure for downhill cycling is there. The tracks in Rostrevor are some of the best in the world, and we need to check whether we have the infrastructure for visitors and the entourage that comes with an event. We are fairly confident that we will put in a collective bid with ORNI to host that.

Kathryn told you that we hope to have the Giro Gran Fondo, as it is known. Our aspiration, working with key partners, is to develop a two-week cycling festival for Northern Ireland. From conversations that we have had with DRD and other key stakeholders, we know that they are keen to look at that.

The aspiration is that that will turn into a cycling festival that will look at using forest parks and general parks for kids' events and integrating mountain biking into that. ORNI will help with that. So, we are working with ORNI to bid for major global iconic events, and we also aspire to develop more cycling events around the Giro Gran Fondo.

**The Chairperson:** Before we move on to Aine, what conversations have representatives of the newly formed cycling unit had with you about what you have just explained to us?

**Ms McCullough:** Do you mean the DRD unit?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Ms McCullough:** It has been heavily involved. Representatives from the unit sit on the Giro committee. We had our last race committee yesterday, and everybody has agreed to set up a committee for the Gran Fondo, with the aspiration of developing a one- to two-week cycling festival. They have agreed to be heavily involved in that committee.

Bike Week is an easy win that will happen during the Gran Fondo week, and they are looking at easy wins to begin with. All the key stakeholders, including Sustrans and CTC, have been heavily involved in the Giro committee. We will set up a Giro Gran Fondo committee as a legacy of the Giro work.

**The Chairperson:** Have they had conversations with you about the future vision outside of the Giro and those events?

**Ms McCullough:** Yes. We have had significant conversations with them about the vision of hopefully establishing a one- to two-week cycling festival, and they have very much bought into that. Aine will probably touch on that. We have had conversations about producing a Northern Ireland cycling strategy, which is one of the visions in the legacy plan. That will look across tourism, the local infrastructure and right across the board. We have had those conversations about developing a holistic vision for cycling.

**Ms Aine Kearney (Northern Ireland Tourist Board):** For the development of cycling tourism, and in answer to your question about our recent investment in mountain biking trails, we primarily work through Outdoor Recreation, and I know that its representatives gave evidence to the Committee on the development and promotion of recreational and activity tourism. We have focused on four centres of excellence that can help to get Northern Ireland standout in activity tourism. That has been achieved through the investment that has been brought to Castlewellan, Rostrevor, Davagh and other major sites across Northern Ireland. We are now at the stage that we really need to look at what comes next. That is why we propose to work with Outdoor Recreation and other key partners to develop a cycling strategy for Northern Ireland. We will look at feasibility studies for opportunities for greenways that can link iconic tourist attractions and major hub towns.

We work closely with the Forest Service. That followed some feasibility work that we did, aligned to the tourism and economic opportunities that are presented in forest parks. As a result of that collaborative work, the Forest Service bid for £4 million of infrastructural investment through the economy and jobs initiative. Through our subsequent work with many of the destinations on the enhancements that they feel can be made at a local level, we know that an estimated further £13 million of investment could be carried out over the next five years. We are working with local authorities and the Forest Service to look at the impact that that will have on the next comprehensive spending review and what we can do collectively to ensure that those opportunities are maximised.

**The Chairperson:** I want to ask about the tourist board setting the strategy. DRD has responsibility for cycling issues, and Sport NI has responsibility for sport. Do you not think that DRD should be taking the lead and trying to develop a strategy that your expertise would buy into and give serious advice to. Is DRD not failing in its obligations?

**Ms Kearney:** Aligned to what Kathryn said, the more joined-up that we can be across government, the better opportunity we will have to deliver on multiple objectives. When I referred to a cycling strategy for Northern Ireland, I meant that in tourism —

**The Chairperson:** I am not criticising you for that, by the way.

**Ms Kearney:** We welcome the opportunity to become even more engaged. Aligned to what Susie said, I know that that is one of the legacy areas. Given the breadth of the remit of the Regional Development Department, and aligned to what Kathryn said about looking holistically at multiple forms of transport to move our tourists from one end of the country to the other, we welcome the opportunity for the Department to continue to play its part and, if possible, a more informed part.

**Ms Thomson:** I completely agree with Aine. We have hosted major events, and, because they have come at a specific point in time and there has been a great focus on them, a lot of partners have come together and given us a blueprint for how collaboration works across government and all its agencies. Everybody has slightly different priorities, but we can all buy into the overarching vision. We have the opportunity to look beyond major global events to other priorities that cut across government and how we can join up all our resources and efforts in one coherent strategy.

**Mr Lynch:** Thanks for the presentation. You mentioned stakeholders such as Fáilte Ireland, which has had a cycling strategy since 2007 and has been fairly successful. We were down at the greenway in Mayo, and they intend to extend it right down the west coast and up to Donegal. They have been doing that for a number of years. You talked about drawing up a strategy, so have you linked up with Fáilte Ireland on its successes so that you are not rewriting a plan that could be transferred to this part of Ireland?

**Ms Kearney:** Absolutely. One of the big things that we often do is to see what other people have done successfully rather than having to reinvent the wheel. We look at how we can use that to do things better and more quickly from a Northern Ireland perspective. Aligned to all our development, we have regular engagements with Fáilte Ireland, especially with activities such as that and, for instance, the Wild Atlantic Way and what we have done with the Causeway coastal route. So, there is integration and collaboration.

We are in the early days of scoping that strategy because we have just set the road map of strategic priorities for the next number of years. Given that one of the focuses is on unique outdoors and activity tourism, we will pick up a lot more detail on what will probably be a learning journey with some of our trade.

**Mr Dallat:** Does the name John Boyd Dunlop mean anything to you?

**Ms McCullough:** Yes.

**Mr Dallat:** Here is one of the most important pieces of history: John Boyd Dunlop was a Belfast surgeon who invented the pneumatic tyre. He took his fellow travellers off to Dublin, where they won all the cycle races. You never see that anywhere, do you?

**Ms McCullough:** As part of the Giro, we tried to encourage partners to grasp the Dunlop idea because, around that time, it was the anniversary of the invention of the tyre that reshaped cycling. A blue plaque was put down. As part of the Giro festival, National Museums did some work and brought out old bikes and so on, but I think that we could do a lot more. We are in conversation with the CTC and Belfast City Council, and, as part of the cycling festival, our ambition is that they create a whole Dunlop children's and family event when you could bring out the old bikes, have races and dress up in costume.

There had been an aspiration to do that as part of the Giro this year. Unfortunately, the committee had gone to the organisers to ask whether they could do that after the team time trial on the Friday night, but the roads could not be kept closed. It would probably be better to have it in one of the Belfast parks, so the aspiration is to do something with the Dunlop tyre as part of the festival.

**Mr Dallat:** Aspirations are useful, and I hope that they materialise into something, because the history of sport is important. Young people should realise how incredible that piece of history is and how it has led us to what we are talking about today.

Seán referred to the success of cycling tourism in the South. In days when it was not so quiet, I used to go off to the Aran Islands, and I still do that. Every day, 1,000 tourists pay €25 to go on a ferry to an island eight miles long. Can you hire cycles at our airports or ferry ports? Why is it that the roads in the west of Ireland — I suppose it is now called the Wild Atlantic Way — are cluttered with tourists on bicycles, yet that is not happening here?

**Ms Kearney:** I will pick that up. Across Northern Ireland, we have 136 cycle routes and more than 18 specialist cycle providers that visitors can use. We invested in projects at Divis, Blessingbourne and the mountain bike trails at Rostrevor, Castleward and so on, and the numbers being achieved far exceed expectations. The bike trails in the Mourne had over 35,000 visitors last year alone. We recognise the opportunity there and the need for a further level of strategy development to see how we can maximise those opportunities. To pick up on your point about our local heroes, one of the most important things that we have done over the past year is to work with the activity providers to encourage them to recognise the importance not only of getting out to cycle but of using cycling as an opportunity to tell the stories of the people and the place.

It is really interesting to look at other destinations that are able to upsell and cross-sell activity tourism. Hiring a bike might cost £5 a day. Adding a picnic made up of local produce might increase that price to £12. By adding a guide who gives you the story of the place and connects people with other providers, you are able to increase the economic value to the local economy, make the products different to visitors and thereby enhance the quality of their experience. That is central to the work that we will be doing with the industry over forthcoming years to ensure that every investment that we have made is being maximised at multiple layers, not just in a very singular, specific way where someone delivers an activity and that is it. It gives us opportunities for those activity providers to connect into key hub towns and drive further benefit to other businesses in other sectors that sit around them, whether those are restaurants, accommodation providers or local shops.

**Ms Thomson:** The comments about the number of cyclists that we have compared with the number in the South are not really unique to cycling. I talked at the beginning about the benefits of tourism to our economy, and one of the things that we do know is that the value of tourism to the economy in Northern Ireland is a lot less than it is to the economies of our nearest competitors. That is why we have a huge opportunity and have been galvanising ourselves over the past 10 years, with a significant investment of over £300 million having been made in the tourism infrastructure.

Since the ni2012: Our Time Our Place initiative, we have been attracting major global events, such as the MTV awards, the Irish Open and the G8. All of that is part of opening up Northern Ireland as a destination. It is about showcasing this place, growing tourism and maximising the opportunity that we have.

**Mr Dallat:** That is useful.

**Mr McNarry:** You are very welcome. I am not so sure that we do provide an attraction for cycling tourists. That is part of the reason that we are having this inquiry. My questions are inquisitive; they are not meant to be hostile.

Our Research and Information Service (RalSe) briefing paper states:

*"From the Northern Ireland perspective a fuller understanding of the current cycling tourist market is required."*

What is meant by that? To me, that means that we ain't got it.

We are then told that there are different circumstances in Northern Ireland from those in the Republic of Ireland. The paper states:

*"For example, we have an existing National Cycle Network, yet there is no data on how widely this is used by tourists or indeed what tourists like or dislike about it."*

Have we not got a problem? How can you set about devising a strategy without having the data? What are you doing to get the data?

**Ms Kearney:** The focus from a tourism perspective in the past five years has primarily been on gaining an international profile for Northern Ireland through investment in signature projects. A big focus of NITB's activities has been on those areas, and there has been a lot of work done around that. Each of those major investments is starting to give Northern Ireland the opportunity to get differentiation and stand out on a global platform. It is only in the past two years that we have really started to look at the next layer, which activity tourism is part of.

The investments in the past number of years have been significant. As part of that, each of the promoters is responsible for a collation of key market research information at a local level. We are in the process of pooling all that information and working with Outdoor Recreation NI and other providers to try to get further research that is more in-depth and more than just —

**Mr McNarry:** I understand recreation, and I understand the role that that will play. Let us talk specifically about tourists. Let us talk about the buck that will be earned, which is basically what we are all interested in, and whether the return is there for any investment. I do not understand how you can have a strategy if you do not have the information, but can you distinguish for me in the strategy that you are talking about between a visitor and a tourist?

**Ms Kearney:** In a cycling strategy or an activity strategy? We do not have one. We are in the process of developing it.

**Mr McNarry:** Look, this is a cycling inquiry, right?

**Ms Kearney:** Yes.

**Mr McNarry:** I am interested in all that you had to talk about: the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and how wonderful it is. OK?

**Ms Kearney:** Yes.

**Mr McNarry:** Specifically, for this inquiry and the issue that we are dealing with, can you tell me the difference between a visitor and a tourist when it comes to earning the buck for the Northern Ireland economy?

**Ms Kearney:** The way in which we normally break down visitor numbers to site is by looking at visitors who may come from the local area versus visitors who come from outside the area for a day trip versus visitors who come from outside the area and stay overnight. Associated with each of those visitors, we have a value that they spend and bring to the local area. Every single project that we invest in goes through an economic appraisal that looks at the breakdown. Some of the sites that we have invested in are more focused on out-of-state visitors, especially those such as Rostrevor, which has the ability to attract people from out of state because of the quality of the project.

**Mr McNarry:** Forgive me. I am not tuned into your words "out of state".

**Ms Kearney:** Out-of-state visitors are people who come from outside Northern Ireland, who deliver a higher economic return to the Province than those from Northern Ireland. They have a higher spend per head and per night. If we look at the mountain bike trails at Kilbroney in Rostrevor, the estimated value of an out-of-state visitor is £100 a day.

**Mr McNarry:** Those are people coming to participate in a form of cycling.

**Ms Kearney:** They are coming to participate in a form of cycling.

**Mr McNarry:** Mountain biking.

**Ms Kearney:** Yes.

**Mr McNarry:** I can understand that and can see that people would be attracted to that. What is the value earned from people who, in my lay terms, are cycling tourists, who have come from somewhere else to cycle in parts of Northern Ireland? How many did we have in that category last year, how much did they earn for the economy and where did they come from?

**Ms Kearney:** We do not have that information. That is the information that we are collecting at present and on which we are looking to do a more in-depth study with Outdoor Recreation across the sites that have been developed in Northern Ireland in the past two years.

**Mr McNarry:** When will you have it?



**Ms Kearney:** We hope to have it after the tourist season.

**Mr McNarry:** You are collating only this year's information.

**Ms Kearney:** We have basic information coming from each of the sites that have been invested in. We now recognise the need to be able to drill into that information to a much deeper level.

**Mr McNarry:** Is there a brochure that one can get a hold of as a cycling tourist that will tell you where you are going, what the costs are and what you can do?

**Ms Kearney:** All that information is available through Outdoor Recreation's range of websites. There is the CycleNI website. Through a service level agreement, Outdoor Recreation provides all that information, servicing the visitor. As well as that, we work closely with local destinations and the owners of sites to ensure that they are providing as much information as possible through their own marketing platforms.

**Mr McNarry:** Right. Thank you very much.

**Mr McCarthy:** Your draft tourism strategy categorises the cycling tourism market as "'hobby' visitors". Is that an appropriate description? The same document mentions cycling twice, which is the same number of times that it mentions gardens. Is that indicative of your stated focus?

**Ms Thomson:** The draft tourism strategy, which was developed by our Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, was developed probably back around 2009-2010. We have moved probably quite a long way as a destination since then, particularly as at that time we did not know that we were going to secure the Giro d'Italia. That has really projected Northern Ireland, and cycling in Northern Ireland, on to a different level. It is an opportune time for the strategy to be reviewed and revised, and we will be working with our Department on that.

**Mr McCarthy:** OK, that is encouraging. Somewhere in your presentation, you mentioned working in partnership. That, I understand, means working in partnership with other Departments. Stormont is not famed for cross-departmental working, as I am sure that Committee members and you know. We understand that that is the best way forward. How are you going to crack that nut to ensure that every Department inputs into what we want to see as the end result?

**Ms Thomson:** As I said, some of the major events that we have had have provided a really good blueprint for that. They have also helped us to understand who the different people are in the relevant agencies. Building those relationships has really helped us to start looking for opportunities for us to collaborate further in future around projects or priorities that are outside of an event and that may be part of a longer-term strategy or vision of what we want to achieve. A huge amount of ground has been made up on building relationships. That is the first step that you need for collaboration. Off the back of the major events, which have been very focused and have forced people together, we can really look more broadly at how we collaborate. From a Tourist Board perspective, everything that we deliver is with partners. No matter what project we have, we will set up working groups of partners and relevant partners, but there are opportunities to explore that further.

**Mr McAleer:** You mentioned in your presentation your awareness of the greenway in Mulranny, County Mayo. I, along with other members, went down there as part of a fact-finding trip. What we witnessed was hugely impressive, and we learned about the impact on the local economy. Based on the report that came out of the Department a few weeks back, there is no great deal of hope of us getting the railways back in Tyrone and down in the west. There is certainly a lot of old railway infrastructure there. From listening to the people in Mayo, the engineering side of it is pretty straightforward, because the tracks are there. Has any thought been given from your perspective to trying to utilise some of the old railway lines in the west? The Great Northern Railway, for example, went through Omagh and other parts of the west. A lot of people fondly remember those days. Has any thought been given to reactivating some of the infrastructure that still exists underground?

**Ms Kearney:** Aligned with what I mentioned earlier, we have had recent discussions with Outdoor Recreation NI and other major providers about the need for a feasibility study to look at disused railways and the opportunities through pathways along canals and rivers, and so on. It will also look at the utilisation of the existing walkways, such as the Ulster Way, at other investments that we have made, at where we have connectivity and at where there are gaps. It will then size up the economic

opportunity that can be presented if we invest in that. It is exactly all those areas that we hope to cover through a future feasibility study.

**Mr McAleer:** Obviously, the Giro was a good success, and I welcome that. In the west, we looked on enviously as it passed through other parts of the country. To achieve a legacy, are you looking at the possibility of getting large-scale events into picturesque areas, such as the Sperrins, the lakes in Fermanagh and other parts of the west?

**Ms McCullough:** Yes. RCS Sport, the owners of the Giro, picked the route.

**Mr McAleer:** I appreciate that.

**Ms McCullough:** It will also pick the route for the Gran Fondo, if we are successful, for three years. RCS has said that it will pick different routes throughout Northern Ireland for those three years. There is a great opportunity there.

We also have a vision to look for the Tour de France and the World Championships. If we are able to secure the Worlds, that is a week-long event. All our research into that indicates that we would be able to utilise the whole of Northern Ireland for it, which would be a wonderful opportunity to showcase the stunning scenery that we have throughout Northern Ireland. There is certainly an ambition to move cycling or similar events around the rest of the Province.

**Mr McAleer:** We would appreciate you using your influence to get them spread out as far as possible.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Thank you, ladies. At a recent conference that I was at, one of the major projects was the EuroVelo route, which is a big European project. It is, in theory, to be finished by 2020 and will be very attractive to high-spending tourists — those who will part with considerable amounts of money. I have heard very little talk about the EuroVelo route in this part of Ireland. I think that, when it comes to promoting ourselves, we made another mistake with the Wild Atlantic Way, which runs through Mayo and Cork and finishes, I think, in Derry. It does not come any further along the north coast.

Has the Tourist Board missed a trick in attracting the higher-spend tourist who may be travelling the EuroVelo route, which runs right across Europe, from as far north as Norway to as far south as Portugal?

**Ms Kearney:** I am not aware of the EuroVelo route. I am explaining what our priorities have been and the fact that activity tourism is now only starting to appear majorly on the radar. We explained that we hope to look at a cycle tourism strategy for Northern Ireland, and it is opportunities such as that that need to be explored so that we know what other parts of Europe are doing and what we can connect into. That is an important part, because we have found that the more that we can connect with Europe on other projects, the further opportunity that you have to be able to access European money for investment. I will take note of that and ensure that, when we start to work through our strategy, it is one of the initiatives that are looked at.

The Wild Atlantic Way, as its name suggests, runs along the Atlantic. We have been working closely with Fáilte Ireland to ensure that there is connectivity as we come into Derry to the Causeway coastal route and then on down to the Mourne coastal route. We have been working with Tourism Ireland to ensure that, for not only for the Wild Atlantic Way but the Causeway and the Mournes, the promotional opportunities for the coastal product on offer are maximised across the world.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** I remember a report coming out in 2005 that referred to visitors specifically coming up the west coast from the likes of Shannon Airport or the airport at Knock and crossing into the North to access the north coast. There was quite a substantial number at the time. Unfortunately, the integral part of the infrastructure there is the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, which is haphazard to say the least. It is hit-and-miss. There is a piece of work to be done there.

**Mr Easton:** Thank you for your presentation. You stated that activity tourism is estimated to be worth around £100 million. What percentage of the total tourism income does that represent, and what do you deem to be its potential worth? Does this kind of tourism create bed nights?

**Ms Thomson:** Tourism in 2013 was worth £723 to the economy, and the £100 million figure for the value that we put on activity tourism was drawn from our 2011 research. That may mean that people

are not coming here purely to partake in activity tourism. They may not be here purely as a cyclist or a walker but have taken part in that activity while here or as part of their experience while here. We do not have a direct link to show how many of the tourists responsible for that £100 million stayed overnight. The research is not broken down like that.

**The Chairperson:** No other members have indicated that they wish to speak. I thank all three of you very much indeed for the evidence that you have given. It is very helpful as we continue the inquiry.