



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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From: Stella McArdle,
To: Members, Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development
Date: 19th June 2014
Subject: Potential for bringing Lough Neagh into Public Ownership

The Committee will receive an oral briefing from DARD officials on the scoping study for the “Potential for bringing Lough Neagh into Public Ownership”. A copy of the report outlining the findings and way forward of the study is in the packs at pages 104 – 154.

Background

1. After an Assembly debate (April 2012) on the issue the DARD Minister created a cross departmental working group to carry out a high level scoping exercise to investigate the potential for bringing Lough Neagh into public ownership.
2. The ARD Committee previously received an oral briefing on this issue on 4th December 2012. This addressed issues around the remit, membership and working methodology of the cross departmental working group. There have also been a number of Assembly Questions about the scoping study and recently there had been some inquiry around the delay in publishing the Scoping Report.

Key Conclusions of the Scoping Study

3. The key conclusions of the scoping study are
 - There is no identifiable risk to the abstraction of 50% of Northern Ireland’s drinking water due to the bed and soil of Lough Neagh remaining in private ownership.
 - A new more inclusive management structure for Lough Neagh would provide for a more focused, strategic and co-ordinated approach in availing of the opportunities and potential that the Lough has to offer.

- The Working Group has been unable to identify any tangible benefits to the effective management of the Lough, should it be brought into public ownership. The implementation of a potential new, overarching management structure is considered to be the best approach to delivering the diverse range of objectives sought by stakeholders.

Lough Neagh Working Group Recommendations

4. The recommendations are at page 4 of the DARD Report and are:-

- The Working Group recommends that the Executive agree that there are no compelling grounds, to pursue the transfer of ownership of the bed and soil of Lough Neagh to public ownership.
- The Working Group recommends that the Executive task the Working Group to undertake further consideration of a revised, more representative management structure, incorporating both operational and strategic activity using some of the considerations presented in the DCAL Report referred to at 1.3.8 (see page 3 of the DARD Report).
- The Working Group recommends that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is positioned as the lead department in taking forward any Executive recommendations.

Way Forward

- The Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development will present this report and associated recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive for its consideration. Relevant departments will then be commissioned to take forward the recommendations agreed by the Executive.

The Working Group

5. The Membership of the working group is
- Grade 3, Deputy Secretary, DARD (Chair of the Working Group)
 - Grade 5, Chief Executive, DARD Rivers Agency;
 - Grade 6, Director of Operations, DARD Rivers Agency;
 - Grade 5, Director of Water Policy Division, DRD;
 - Grade 5, Director of Environmental Protection, DOE Northern Ireland Environment Agency;
 - Grade 5, Director of Museums Libraries and Recreation Division, DCAL;
- and

- Grade 5, Director with responsibility for Tourism, DETI.

Terms of Reference

6. The original terms of reference for the working group are reproduced in full at appendix 1 of the DARD papers (page 33) but its main actions were
 - To identify the current contributions made by NI Departments in respect of the ongoing management of Lough Neagh;
 - To identify and assess the potential improvements in management and sustainable management structures of Lough Neagh for each NI Department if it were brought into public ownership;
 - To identify potential benefits to the Executive if Lough Neagh is brought into public ownership;
 - To produce a current valuation for the Lough Neagh estate;
 - Identify and assess legal implications in proceeding with the purchase or compulsory purchase of Lough Neagh;
 - To make recommendations where appropriate.