

Dear William,

I am writing to you in your capacity as Chairman of the NI Public Accounts Committee.

On Monday I had a meeting with Colette Kane of the NI Audit Office. Colette is the Director with responsibility for Infrastructure. The NI Audit Office's report in December makes reference to a legal challenge which DfI claims to have added £11m to the cost of the A6 Randalstown - Castledawson Dualling Scheme (A6 R-C). I should be grateful if the PAC would ask DfI to provide a detailed breakdown and timeline of this figure.

It is my understanding that it is costing the department tens of millions of pounds to meet its obligations under the scheme's purported environmental mitigation, which includes payments to consultants, researchers, landowners' grazing subsidies and fees for amalgamating fields as well as a five and half months moratorium on construction each winter. This is because the department's preferred route impacts on a protected wetland, the feeding and roosting ground of overwintering Whooper Swans and other protected species. This additional cost to the scheme is regardless of any legal challenge, which ceased in March 2018.

The UN has declared a Climate and Biodiversity Emergency and I am heartened to note that the NI Assembly has also declared a Climate Emergency. Part of this scheme includes a 4km section of new road that goes offline through a floodplain which is a wetland of international importance for birds including the Icelandic Whooper Swan. You may have seen herds of these wild swans grazing near the current A6 alignment between The Elk and the Lower Bann, outside Toomebridge. These swan fields are known as The Creagh Meadows or the 'Toome Complex' and represent Ireland's single most important site for this species. The Whooper Swan is protected on Annex 1 of the Birds Directive and classified as 'vulnerable' by Birdwatch Ireland and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) on the All-Ireland Red Data List.

It is my opinion that the department, its consultants and consultees (as members of DfI's Whooper Swan Working Group) are involved in covering up serious irregularities including conflicts of interest which is leading directly to these few kilometres exacerbating the climate and biodiversity crises.

I have a large volume of evidence that demonstrates this 4km section of the scheme has from the outset been infected with such bias that this and future generations are being systematically defrauded of their heritage and a wide range of wetland ecosystem services. This offline 4km section has been described by the RSPB as a good example of worst practice. In view of the climate emergency how can building in a floodplain possibly be justified, let alone provide the tax payer with value for money?

I should appreciate the opportunity to meet you to discuss these concerns at your earliest convenience.

Kind regards,

Chris Murphy