



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Lough Neagh: DARD Briefing

4 December 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Mr John Mills	Department for Regional Development
Mrs Wendy Johnston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Catherine McCallum	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Philip Mehaffey	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Mick Cory	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Mike Thompson	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Mr Dave Foster	Department of the Environment

The Chairperson: I welcome Wendy Johnston, the deputy secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the chair of the working group; Catherine McCallum, the chief executive of DARD Rivers Agency; Philip Mehaffey, the director of operations of DARD Rivers Agency; John Mills, the director of the water policy division of the Department for Regional Development (DRD); Dave Foster, director of environmental protection in the Department of the Environment's (DOE) Northern Ireland Environment Agency; Mick Cory, the director of the sport, museums, libraries and recreation division of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); and Mike Thompson, the director of tourism in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). You are very welcome, everyone, to the Committee today. Wendy, are you leading off?

Mrs Wendy Johnston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes.

The Chairperson: OK. Without further ado, please continue.

Mrs Johnston: Mr Chairman and members of the Committee, on behalf of the cross-departmental working group, thank you very much for the invitation and your words of welcome and introduction. You will be glad to know that I do not propose to go through those introductions again.

Hopefully, you had time to review the information pack that we provided. As you are aware, the cross-departmental working group was set up to undertake a high-level scoping study of the potential for

bringing Lough Neagh into public ownership. We were to complete our work by the end of November and to report back to the Executive through the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I confirm that the report has not yet been finalised as we wanted to hear any views that the Committee may have. The Minister was content with that.

As you will see from the information pack, the departmental membership of the working group represents the Departments that have an ongoing interest in the lough. That reflects what the researcher said. We have had input from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in terms of professional valuation and legal advice. The focus of our work has very much been to ascertain and record the facts relating to the ownership of the lough, including issues relating to the public water supply, and thus to ensure that our conclusions and recommendations to the Executive are evidence-based.

We are keen to ensure that the report is a single source of relevant high-level information for future reference. We also needed to establish from a wide range of stakeholders their views on the current usage of the lough and any suggestions that they had for further potential benefits for the Executive, for those who live around the lough and for those who derive an income from it, and its use for tourism and recreation.

To get those views, we undertook an informal high-level survey of a range of key stakeholders. We wrote to 59 representative bodies, including the various district councils around the lough, which have an interest. Some 56% — 33 of them — responded. We were encouraged by that; it is a very good response rate.

As you may be aware, as part of the process, DARD and DCAL provided funding to assist with the hosting of the prestigious United Kingdom and Ireland Lakes Network's symposium on Lough Neagh in the Long Gallery here in Parliament Buildings. I, along with the representatives of the working group, attended that event. We had the benefit of hearing input from a number of MLAs, including you, Mr Chairman; your newest Committee member Mr Kinahan; Francie Molloy; and Patsy McGlone. Jim Wells also spoke from the floor that day. We heard case studies relating to Lake Windermere, which is the largest natural lake in England. It is managed by the Lake District national park. We also heard about the Broads, which is managed by the Broads Authority, which is a statutory body.

Also present at the symposium was the Earl of Shaftesbury. I spoke to the earl, and we arranged for the working group to meet his representatives. We have had ongoing discussions with them to clarify a number of matters, wherever possible and where appropriate, given that there are commercial issues around ownerships. They have co-operated with us in a number of ways.

We had the benefit of the Hansard transcript of the debate on 17 April, and we looked at the earlier debate on 21 October that related to tourism around the lough. There was also one more recently on Lough Neagh and the lower Bann advisory committee in February 2010. In addition, the Departments and the working group provided input, setting out their involvement with the lough, including any regulatory functions. A lot of the research equates directly with what was said by your researcher earlier.

The views of stakeholders were obtained variously from the informal consultation, the symposium and the debates. There are a number of key issues. This is not in any particular order. There is a perceived risk to the continued supply of drinking water from the lough. There are concerns around water quality. There is a desire to see a new navigation authority. There is the potential for increased tourism. There is no wish to see additional bureaucracy or costs around the usage of the lough. There is a need for a more cohesive management, including — this came out at the symposium — the need for strong community involvement in that process. There was a concern about the lack of road access, and there is a wish for better co-operation between Departments or the identification of a single lead Department.

It is fair to say that the views of the stakeholders on the potential for public ownership, which is one of the questions that we directly asked in the survey, are mixed. There is clearly support both for bringing the lough into public ownership and for maintaining the status quo. Having said that, some of the responses, both on the positive and negative side, had caveats attached or were qualified. In particular, there was an issue around wanting reassurance about public water supplies. In addition, it is useful to clarify that no one owns the lough per se in a holistic way. Rather, what is, and can be, owned is the bed and soil of the lough, which includes the accreted foreshore.

Our research indicated that, in fact, the ownership of the bed and soil is more complex than most of us had perceived. We have carried out research of land registers, and also with the co-operation of the Shaftesbury estate. We are aware that, although the Shaftesbury estate is the main owner, there are a number of other organisations, including local and central government bodies, but also upwards of 50 private landowners who have purchased the foreshore that abuts their own land for a nominal fee from the estate. As also mentioned, there is a range of lease and licensing arrangements, some of which have been in place for a long time and others that have considerable numbers of years to run yet — one that the estate told us about will run for up to 5,000 years.

In essence, that is a quick résumé of where we are. As I said, the research that we have done, as Mark said earlier, correlates directly with what we have ascertained ourselves.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Wendy, for your presentation. I do not think that, in my time, I have ever seen such a line-up come to give a presentation.

Mrs Johnston: We are delighted that we could all be here.

The Chairperson: I hope that we can make use of all of it. I do not know if there is anybody left in the Departments.

This is a very important issue. I spoke at the symposium, and you will know my view on it, which is that we need better joined-up government to really bring out the full potential of Lough Neagh. However, I am yet to be convinced that we need to own it to have more control of it and achieve the potential of what Lough Neagh could become. Having met the current Earl of Shaftesbury that week, he was at great pains to tell everyone that he was not in fact a big bad wolf and that he was very open to all considerations. As you said, he has basically granted the land to the private landowners around the shore —

Mrs Johnston: For a nominal fee.

The Chairperson: He came across as a very reasonable man. That is perhaps not how the debate that started this process had illustrated him, which did a degree of injustice to the individual. Why is the report not here? Is it simply because you wanted to hear the views of the Committee?

Mrs Johnston: The report is to go to the Executive, so the Executive will make the decision. We will make recommendations, but, ultimately, whether they accept, partially accept or reject those is a matter for the Executive. We are not at liberty to disclose what we will be recommending to the Committee either. That is the process that we have to go through.

The Chairperson: When will that be given to the Executive? Is there a date?

Mrs Johnston: Our intention is, following today, to have our final meeting on what those final recommendations should be. We did not want to prejudge whatever views we heard today, so we will definitely have it with my Minister before Christmas.

The Chairperson: So it will go to the Agriculture Minister?

Mrs Johnston: Yes, and she will present it to the Executive.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that the views of this Committee could well impact on that report?

Mrs Johnston: Subject to whatever you say today, yes. We are happy to take on any views.

The Chairperson: It is hard to ask you questions without trying to find the detail of the report.

Mrs Johnston: I can appreciate that.

The Chairperson: How have you found all of the other Departments that are involved in the process? How have you found them around the working group?

Mrs Johnston: The working group has been very constructive and hard-working. We have not had any dissent around the table whatsoever. We have all brought our knowledge of what the individual Departments do, but we have also been very constructive and objective in everything that we have pursued.

The Chairperson: Sorry for going over old ground again, but did you say that 33% of people who you consulted responded?

Mrs Johnston: It is 56% and 33 responses.

The Chairperson: OK. You said that, of those 33 responses, 50:50 with regard to ownership.

Mrs Johnston: Not everybody responded to that question. Some made no comment whatsoever and were not fussed one way or the other. A rough percentage is that 30% gave a straight yes, 18% gave a qualified yes and 46% said no. It is fairly evenly balanced.

The Chairperson: How was the consultation paper formatted? That is a very direct question. I am not saying that the bodies do not have knowledge of Lough Neagh, but it could be fair to say that most or all of the groups might not know the whole picture about Lough Neagh. Was the question in the consultation document as stark as that? How was that put in context? Some people might have aspirations and a view on public ownership but not necessarily know the detail and the intricacies of the current arrangements.

Mrs Johnston: It was a very short questionnaire. They were direct questions, but we asked them to clarify and explain the reason for their views. I am happy to send you a copy of the questionnaire if that is helpful.

The Chairperson: It would be useful to have the questionnaire just to know in our own minds how it was formatted.

Your job on this piece of work is, I suppose, coming to an end, and we had the debate and then the symposium, which was very helpful, even if it was just to inform and educate the stakeholders and to put across views. That work will come to an end when you hand your paper over to the Minister, who will give it to the Executive. Are you under time pressure in that you needed or wanted to do something else but did not have the time to? Or are you satisfied that you have had enough time and consulted enough people to make good, clear recommendations?

Mrs Johnston: I am satisfied that what we have done is proportionate to what we were asked to do, which is the high-level scoping based on the volume of research and the information that we had available from the debates, the symposium and everything else.

The Chairperson: Through your work and the answers that you gleaned from the consultation, is there something that you were tasked to do? Do you now think that what you were tasked to do has given an overall picture or is something missing? Is something staring the group in the face that the Assembly should have asked you to do but did not?

Mrs Johnston: I do not think that we have not delivered on anything that was in our power to deliver.

The Chairperson: I will leave it there. I will bring in Danny as he has to go at 3.00 pm.

Mr Kinahan: I am grateful for that, thanks. You know my views, and I am keen to get to the issue of the other private owners, not the big owners. Where do you stop on whether an owner adjoins? Is it just the banks of the lough or is it those that adjoin the rivers and feed it immediately?

Mrs Johnston: We are not party to the decision between the estate and the purchaser. It is viewed as the accreted foreshore, and we are not party to how that is legally defined in those agreements.

Mr Kinahan: So, there was no one really looking to see who else owned land or may have had concerns?

Mrs Johnston: No. We work on the basis that there are prescribed levels of the lough. That is probably why, since 1968, it has not altered, because the legislation was from the 1950s. There is a minimum and a maximum that were required subject to climatic change that we can operate within.

Mr Kinahan: I have one more question. The issue of fish stocks has been raised in the Chamber, and we have been pushing for studies. Have you gone into that in detail? That is a vital part of the tourism.

Mrs Johnston: That is not a detail we have gone into. It is worth recording that, in addition to the DARD interests, research has been done by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, which is one of our NDPBs. That is ongoing and is looking at those issues.

The Chairperson: I remind members — I maybe should have said this at the start — that the session is being reported by Hansard. We did agree to share it with all the other Departments involved with Lough Neagh.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your presentation. In September, in answer to a question for oral answer from Mr Molloy, and which has been included in the information provided to us, the Minister said that she is:

"pleased to report that the working group is on track to meet its objectives".

Will you outline exactly what your objectives were?

Mrs Johnston: The objective was to consider the potential for bringing the lough into public ownership.

Mrs Dobson: It was as simple as that?

Mrs Johnston: As simple as that.

Mrs Dobson: As an MLA whose constituency borders the lough, I know that it would be great to see further leisure facilities. Would a change of ownership really deliver that?

Mrs Johnston: We have not found any evidence on that. However, it would depend how it is managed as to whether there was other potential there.

Mrs Dobson: So, there is no evidence that a change of ownership would make a difference to future leisure facilities.

I will ask another question, if I may. Why was it initially decided to hold a short, informal consultation, if the Minister believes that, in her own words, the potential benefits of public ownership are tremendous? Why a short, informal consultation?

Mrs Johnston: I might have to ask the Minister for her views on that. The reason for the informal consultation was that we were not asked to carry out an in-depth policy analysis of the issue. We were asked to carry out a high-level scoping exercise.

Mrs Dobson: But why, given the significance, a short, informal consultation?

Mrs Johnston: We had other information available. We had the Assembly's views, through the debates, which we have taken into account in preparing our report.

Mrs Dobson: So you did not feel that there was merit —

Mrs Johnston: As I said, it is not part of a formal policy evaluation. If we were going to do that, we would have to go into in-depth policy across all the areas we have looked at and prepare a consultation document. It would be a much longer exercise.

Mrs Dobson: What do you see as the next steps? The Minister has raised the possibility of commissioning further work. What next?

Mrs Johnston: That is very much for the Executive to decide based on their consideration of our report.

Mrs Dobson: But have you no idea what that will be?

Mrs Johnston: We will, of course, be making recommendations, but we have genuinely not formulated those yet.

Mrs Dobson: And because we have such scant detail before the Committee, we cannot — OK. Thank you.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation from such a high-powered, cross-departmental grouping.

Mrs Johnston: Feel free to ask my colleagues any questions you like. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: They can come in at any time.

Mr Byrne: I want to ask more general, exploratory questions, because we are all in the situation where nobody has defined wisdom in the area.

In relation to the public water supply that comes from the lough, what is the current situation around pollution control and environmental management? Is there a plan for that? Is there a pollution control and environmental management system in place?

Mrs Johnston: I will ask my Northern Ireland Environment Agency colleague to respond to that.

Mr Byrne: I will ask all my questions now, if that is OK.

Mrs Johnston: Go ahead.

Mr Byrne: The second question is: has any sort of modelling exercise been done on a potential public valuation?

Mrs Johnston: We have sought advice from Land and Property Services, which we will include in the report.

Mr Byrne: Has any modelling been done?

Mrs Johnston: I am not sure what VLA has done.

The Chairperson: Are you looking a price, Joe?

Mr Byrne: Is it envisaged that the status, role or function of the eel fisheries co-operative would change going forward from this situation?

Mrs Johnston: I will pass over to my colleague the question on environmental aspects.

Mr Dave Foster (Department of the Environment): I will take the environmental aspects. A number of pieces of European legislation set the overall framework for the environmental management of all the aquatic environment, including that of Lough Neagh and the discharge to it. One, in particular, is the European water framework directive, which sets a requirement for member states to establish or record river basin management plans. One such plan covers the Lough Neagh basin, and was published by the Executive at the end of 2009. That sets out the high-level objectives for maintaining and improving the water status of Lough Neagh and the rivers that flow into it.

Following on from that, DOE, via the Environment Agency, has been working at a more local level to establish what we call "local management area plans", a number of which have been established around the lough and the rivers that discharge into it, to set out more locally based objectives.

Mr Byrne: So, are there specific pollution control and environmental plans in place?

Mr D Foster: There are.

Mr Byrne: Or is there, quite simply, recognition of generic EU regulations?

Mr D Foster: No: there is a specific high-level plan for all of the Lough Neagh basin — all of the land that drains into Lough Neagh and the lough itself. There are more specific local plans that cover individual rivers, such as the Ballinderry River or the Maine River. At a more operational level, there are licensing regimes for controlling the discharge of waste water to rivers and the lough, and also a licensing regime for abstraction of potable water from the lough. The potable water supply that Northern Ireland Water (NIW) abstracts is controlled by an abstraction licence which is issued by DOE.

Mrs Johnston: I will ask Mick from DCAL to address the issue of the eel fishery.

Mr Mick Cory (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Your question related to the change of status of the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society. Is that correct?

Mr Byrne: I am trying to ascertain the status that it currently has and that which it might have if there were a change in use or otherwise.

Mr Cory: It has ownership of all fishing rights on Lough Neagh. We do not see any change to that status.

The Chairperson: To touch on Joe's point about the financial side of things, what financial advice or, even, advice on legal standing did DFP give the group?

Mrs Johnston: DFP provided us with advice on the general duties that Departments have for purchasing land or other assets, and with some advice on the express powers that Departments must have if they wish to vest. Those were the types of legal advice that it provided to us. We have had discussions with them on the valuation side. The estate has provided us with some information. There is a limit to what it will do given the commercial issues. Clearly, if the lough were for sale, it would not disclose those types of issues because that could be a negotiation. So, discussion has been on general issues, rather than on specifics at this point.

The Chairperson: I guess that the main question is whether we have to have public ownership of Lough Neagh in order to achieve its full potential. Surely, you are bound to have recommendations on that. That is a very simplistic question. Questions come out of that. Whether the lough is bought or not, there is no doubt that it needs to be managed better. So, the Executive could buy Lough Neagh, and we could make a real shambles of it, or we could leave it as it is, and still make a real shambles of it. So, even if you do not recommend that we buy or bring it into public ownership, surely there are a lot of recommendations to try to join up the management of Lough Neagh and the responsibilities that we already have.

Mrs Johnston: If that is a view that the Committee would like us to put forward, we are happy to do that, without disclosing what we are recommending, which is part of my difficulty. We have looked at, and I think that it is fair to say to you that we have looked at whether the Executive could buy it and, then, whether they should buy it, and whether there are other options.

The Chairperson: Those are two very distinct questions. As an individual, I am yet to be convinced that you need to own something in order to have major control of it. It is very clear that the Departments have major control of what happens on Lough Neagh. What I would say, and what I am sure of, is that we have not used that control and responsibility well. We have not served the lough or the people who live around it well. Is it within your remit to advise that all of the responsibility should come under one lead agency or Department? In asking that, I am not even sure that it is a wise thing.

Mrs Johnston: We have not been constrained in anything. We have not been told of any predetermined outcomes or anything else. There is a line in there that we can make recommendations if appropriate.

The Chairperson: Even without buying it?

Mrs Johnston: As far as I am concerned, the terms of reference are unfettered, so, provided that we have something that is evidence-based and our conclusions stand up, we can make those recommendations. It is, ultimately, for the Executive to decide whether they accept or not.

The Chairperson: Have you concentrated on that, the nitty-gritty of management, rather than the big, high-level question of ownership?

Mrs Johnston: We have looked at all aspects of it.

The Chairperson: OK. We do not want all this heat to have been generated and all of these people to have been consulted and invited over through a symposium and everything else for the question on public ownership to be put resulting in the answer being no and the whole thing falling away.

Mrs Johnston: One of the actions points was to look at the impact and the potential around what individual Departments do. We have taken that into account and addressed the action points that have been put down here.

The Chairperson: OK. So, no matter whether it comes into public ownership or whether we seek to try to buy it, there will be a job of work at the end of your process that will mean that the management of Lough Neagh will be much more succinct and focused.

Mrs Johnston: I cannot tell you what my recommendations are, but if you want us to reflect that in our report, we will be happy to do so.

Mr Clarke: From the brief that you have had and your engagement with different people, have you found much resistance in their responses or is everyone open-minded to an either/or? Maybe you are not allowed to say.

Mrs Johnston: As I said at the outset, the views have been mixed. In many ways, there is a correlation between what we have heard through Assembly debate and local representatives and what we have heard from individual stakeholder organisations. Some have been positive, some have been negative and some have had no view, genuinely.

Mr Clarke: If you park the political viewpoint, where, on balance, do the views of the real stakeholders fall?

Mrs Johnston: It is 50:50. It is mixed and evenly balanced.

Mr Clarke: I suppose that, for some people, the landscape of their answer would change if they were asked based on whether it would cost them more or less and whether it would be done properly.

Mrs Johnston: A variety of issues would need to be addressed around ongoing costs and changing costs. It is a complex picture and is a difficult issue.

Mr Clarke: Do you agree that it is difficult to get a true measurement of the feeling of those for or against, given that they do not have the full information?

Mrs Johnston: Yes. As I said, some of the caveats were around cost, both to the public purse and to administration and bureaucracy that might come. Those are the views that have been expressed back to us.

The Chairperson: I will elaborate on Trevor's point, which is what I was touching on with regards to the question in the questionnaire that asked whether you think that we should have this in public ownership. Trevor has raised a very valid question. If you were to ask that same question in different ways — do you think that we should buy Lough Neagh for £1 or £1 million or £1 billion? — you will get different answers.

Out of the 33% who responded —

Mrs Johnston: It was 56% and 33 organisations.

The Chairperson: Sorry. Can they be broken down? Were they predominantly local councils?

Mrs Johnston: Yes, we have that analysis. I do not have it to hand.

The Chairperson: Is there a story to be told there? Out of the 56% who responded, are there clear demarcations on who was in favour and who was not? When you look through this, you see that there are local councils, fishing federations, sporting organisations and charities such as the Woodland Trust. Is there a story to be told about who fell what way?

Mrs Johnston: I do not have the analysis. I cannot recall the trends from memory.

The Chairperson: There is nothing striking?

Mrs Johnston: Not that I can recall.

The Chairperson: That could lead you down a different way, depending on who was in favour and who was not. Some may well have responsibility put on them, and others may not.

Mr Byrne: My point relates to the potential economic development of Lough Neagh. There is general agreement that it could be a jewel in the tourism development crown in the long term. That would require navigational development or some sort of navigation scheme to be put in place. What tourism- or navigation-related work has been done to try to formulate that potential economic development? Is that part of your consideration in to trying to help to inform —

Mrs Johnston: It is not part of the actual terms of reference, but we have touched on economic development and navigation issues.

Mr Cory: I will cover the point about navigation and the work that has been done to look at a navigation authority. We have explored and considered the costs of a navigation authority for Lough Neagh. An economic appraisal was carried out in 2009. It was estimated that it would cost in the order of £6.7 million to create one and that the running costs would be around £664,000 per annum. So, it was ruled out on economic grounds.

Part of that proposal was to look at Waterways Ireland extending its remit. That was put to the North/South Ministerial Council, and it was mutually agreed not to extend the remit. There was also the economic case against it. However, the Department is looking at ways in which the navigation markers for Lough Neagh can be improved. A piece of work is under way to try to examine if there is a way to improve navigation markers rather than through creating a navigation authority.

Mr Mike Thompson (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Department and its agency, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, fully recognise the tourism potential that exists in Lough Neagh. We have a draft tourism strategy. From that, we are developing an action plan that will hopefully go to the Executive in the near future. Nine destinations are identified in that, and Lough Neagh is one of those. We recognise the undoubted tourism potential that is there, and we want to work with local authorities and communities to try to maximise that potential.

Mr Byrne: Has the option of opening up the Ulster canal to Lough Neagh been factored into any of the considerations?

Mr Thompson: No, not in this report.

Mrs Johnston: Not in the terms of reference.

The Chairperson: There are a couple of other things that I want to touch on, Wendy. You mentioned the perceived risk and threat to the water supply. That came up at the symposium from time to time. How big a threat is that? I was led to believe that there was no threat to the water supply.

Mrs Johnston: As you know, the Earl himself stood up and made that statement. One of the owners of the bed and soil of the lough is actually NIW; it owns 50 acres of it. That is where its extraction — or abstraction, as it is called — actually takes place. So, there is no threat to that at all.

The Chairperson: Or to the water quality?

Mrs Johnston: Water quality is dealt with by the management plan. A lot of issues around water quality are not within the lough per se. They concern what drains into the rivers that drain into the lough. Therefore, in many ways, they are outside the management of the lough itself.

The Chairperson: But they are still important?

Mrs Johnston: Yes. That is one of the reasons why there is the plan for the lough.

The Chairperson: OK. We talked about the potential for tourism and everything else, but there is another issue that we have not touched on. What about the illegal activity that takes place around the lough? Did you, as a working group, delve into that in any way?

Mrs Johnston: That is not an area that we have touched on, no.

The Chairperson: OK. Of course, that activity could go some way to scuppering any potential.

Mrs Johnston: It has impacts on other things. As you are aware, there are various enforcement officers from DCAL who operate on the lough.

The Chairperson: OK; there are no further questions —

Mr Byrne: Chairman, can I come in?

The Chairperson: Sorry; go on ahead, Joe. We have such a large body of people here. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Byrne: I am trying to help you to justify the opportunity cost of this big assembled team being here.

Mrs Johnston: You are doing a great job.

Mr Byrne: A primary recommendation that might or might not come out of this report will be to advise outright purchase and the lough being taken into public ownership or its remaining the way that it is. Will any consideration be given to a possible hybrid, with ownership being shared between the existing owner and greater public utilisation and development of the lough?

Mrs Johnston: I am happy to take that on board if you would like us to think about it and if it is the Committee's wish.

Mr Byrne: Yes, I would; from a personal perspective.

Mrs Johnston: A lot will depend on our conclusions and recommendations as to whether that is a viable option.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your attendance.

Mrs Johnston: Thank you.