



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Maritime Heritage

28 January 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Billy Leonard
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Brian Smart) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Paul Sweeney)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

Good morning, Mr Sweeney and Mr Smart. Paul is the permanent secretary, and Brian is the head of the Department's museums branch. I will ask Mr Sweeney to brief the Committee on maritime heritage.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

With a particular focus on HMS Caroline — is that correct?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr Sweeney:

There is a growing interest in how we can more fully acknowledge our maritime and industrial past, perhaps through a maritime heritage development programme. The Committee's recent inquiry into a museums policy included a recommendation that the policy should address the issue of a maritime museum sector, and how that may be developed.

Maritime heritage covers a wide range of activities. No single Department or body has lead responsibility. The Department of the Environment, for example, has an interest in the built heritage of ports and harbours. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has oversight of National Museums collections. The development of the Titanic signature project and Titanic Quarter involved the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Department for Social Development; the Department for Regional Development; and the Department of the Environment. Docks regeneration, and projects such as Laganside, involved the Department for Social Development; the Tourist Board; and Belfast City Council. The Department for Social Development has taken the lead on the Nomadic, and the Heritage Lottery Fund has taken the lead on the Lagan legacy project.

There are issues of scale, complexity and significant costs associated with maritime heritage. It can be a challenging portfolio. Based on experiences elsewhere, one cannot underestimate the considerable strategic planning that is required, and cost implications. I do not say that we should not aspire, but we have to manage expectations and be realistic about what can be achieved in the current environment. HMS Caroline illustrates a number of points. The vessel remains a commissioned ship of the Royal Navy. The Royal Naval Reserve, which has operated out of HMS Caroline, has decommissioned and is in the process of re-commissioning itself at Thiepval Barracks, Lisburn, as Royal Naval Reserve HMS Hibernia.

As a commissioned ship, any decision on the future of HMS Caroline will, in the first instance, be a matter for the Royal Navy and the Ministry of Defence.

The Naval Heritage Committee, which looks after what it calls orphan ships, is linked to the National Museum of the Royal Navy, and is considering options for the future of HMS Caroline.

The presumption is that the ship will, in due course, become the property of the National Museum of the Royal Navy. Undoubtedly, one option in that regard would be to relocate the vessel to the National Museum of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.

In principle, the Naval Heritage Committee is willing to consider the option of HMS Caroline remaining in Belfast as part of a heritage offering. If that option were to materialise, it would be on the basis that the title would remain in perpetuity with the National Museum of the Royal Navy, but the presumption would be that perhaps a local entity would take responsibility for managing the vessel as a heritage offering. For the very reason that I stated at the beginning — that there is a multiplicity of agencies and bodies with different degrees of responsibility for maritime heritage — I, as permanent secretary of DCAL, undertook to work with the Royal Navy on a without-prejudice basis to consider the viability of retaining HMS Caroline in Northern Ireland.

The sequence of events is as follows. In working with the stakeholders involved, the Department has agreed to prepare, in the first instance, a high-level strategic outline case, which will consider options, potential costs and benefits, and explore the viability and affordability of those options. That would be a five-page or six-page document; it would not be one of those business cases that are like telephone directories. On its completion, we could then collectively decide either that it is not feasible to proceed any further, and therefore we would not incur any nugatory expenditure on a full business case, or, if we felt that it merited further examination, we would move to prepare a full business case.

All experience in that regard leads to the conclusion that, if a vessel is considered in isolation, it is highly unlikely that a compelling economic business case with a good cost-to-benefit ratio could crystallise. If a project has the potential to succeed, it is better for it to be considered in a strategic maritime context, which might involve a range of complementary supporting attractions — a tourism trail, as it were, of which HMS Caroline might be one component. Indeed, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, in conjunction with Belfast City Council and DSD, is considering the concept of a tourism trail based on maritime heritage.

I will conclude by flagging up a number of considerations. The Navy has maintained the vessel, as you have seen. The integrity of the vessel is fairly sound, and it has been maintained on a care-and-maintenance basis. The current berthing arrangement with the Belfast Harbour

Commissioners has two more years to run. The issue of berthing the vessel is quite significant and would have to be explored. I am stating the obvious in saying that the security costs of the enterprise are significant.

Although the integrity of the vessel is sound, and the Royal Navy has provided the Department with a number of conditional surveys, my guesstimate — which should be treated with caution — is that a figure of £3 million to £4 million would be required to take the vessel from its current state to bring it up to health and safety standards in order to make it accessible to members of the public on a fairly regular basis.

That investment, in itself, would only bring the vessel up to that health-and-safety standard. Thematically, the key challenge is what to do with the vessel to make it a tourist attraction. If it were to be reinstated to a warship, there would be considerable additional cost. As you know, the upper deck has been bastardised — I do not use the term disparagingly — throughout the years in order to facilitate the Royal Naval Reserve. If the goal were to reinstate a vessel to its original warship status, with torpedo tubes, guns, and so on, and, given tourists' expectations today, it were kitted out with displays and a cinema to offer as interactive and modern an experience as possible, one could potentially add on several millions of pounds. Perhaps that could be done incrementally.

There would also be considerable annual running costs and cyclical maintenance costs, which, it is estimated, could be £1 million a year. Based on experience elsewhere, it is estimated that there might be 100,000 or more visitors during the first year. However, for business-planning purposes, you have to look at figures for the fifth year, when the novelty wears off. What would annual visitor numbers be then?

Another important consideration is governance matters. Who would take custodianship of the enterprise or project? The title would remain with the Royal Navy in perpetuity. However, the Navy would seek a partnership, possibly with an historic docklands trust group that might emerge. It could not just be done with enthusiasts; it would have to be done with people who are fairly knowledgeable about the challenges of making an enterprise such as that wash its face. A range of governance matters would have to be explored.

In that regard, one has to see it in the context of the strategic development of the Odyssey

Trust complex and W5, which is a £90 million investment that is now 10 years old. One needs to consider its future. What would be its complementarity with the Titanic signature project, which is almost a £100 million investment? For example, would there, ultimately, be a move towards an integrated ticketing system? Contemplate that, at present, it costs around £30 for a family to visit W5. I have no idea what a visit to the Titanic signature project might cost. If that experience were to cost a family £30, what likelihood is there that they would then go to visit HMS Caroline if its admission cost is also £30? The total for that tourist experience would be £90. Could those attractions be integrated into a critical mass which is offered at a price that is accessible to the general public? That range of issues must be explored.

DSD, Belfast City Council and the Tourist Board are working on that idea of a maritime heritage tourist trail. We will use that to inform the strategic outline business case, which, depending on the work of those organisations, will, I imagine, some time at the other side of Easter, give us an idea of whether that is within the realms of possibility and manageability. If so, the next critical decision would be to commission a full business case, which, I imagine, would be completed in the autumn. That would be based on consideration of a range of other experiences. Presumably, in the autumn, the Northern Ireland Executive would decide whether it is a mission-critical project that is worthy of the cost. However, DCAL's role at the moment is to facilitate the key stakeholders in bringing forward the outline business case, and, perhaps, a full business case.

The Chairperson:

Your brief is to talk about HMS Caroline and the debate surrounding that, but do you want to add anything about maritime heritage provision in general?

Mr Sweeney:

All is possible, depending on resources. I want to make sure that the region rightly aspires to having the best possible scope for acknowledging our maritime and industrial past. However, that needs to be done within current financial constraints. Therefore, I do not want to be seen to be raising expectations unduly. The museum sector struggles.

Lord Browne:

Thank you for your briefing paper. If we are to have a maritime heritage policy, it is important that HMS Caroline remains the focal point of that. You made four key assertions about the HMS

Caroline project in your briefing paper and report to the Committee.

The first was that the future of HMS Caroline ultimately lies in the hands of the Royal Navy. In essence, however, the Royal Navy has already decided that it will not scrap the ship, but keep it as a museum. It would, therefore, be useful if the Department made known its intent to keep the ship here, because it is now up to us to make the moves. Even a basic expression of intent from the Department would let the Royal Navy know that there is a genuine interest in keeping the vessel here as a museum. That would allow you to make a proper costing and viability report. I would welcome such a step.

Your second assertion was that development of a proposal for a sea museum stopped in 2003 to devote more resources to the Titanic signature project. I am concerned about that, because if the Department was genuine, it was only a matter of resources that prevented a report on that being carried forward. I am not sure that the Department considers HMS Caroline an important part of the Titanic signature project. If it did, it would be very foolish to divert resources from it, which has been the case over the past seven years. HMS Caroline has the potential, as a floating museum, to be an integral part of that signature project. It would provide a focal point centre for visitors to the Titanic exhibition to find out more about Northern Ireland's history with the sea. That would also help to increase the number of tourists visiting that project.

Thirdly, the Department said that it had been consulting with stakeholders. Who, exactly, are the stakeholders, how many meetings were held, and where? I was concerned to read on the Minister's blog that those meetings were informal. I would like to see them put on a more formal footing. The Committee was accompanied on its visit to HMS Caroline by historical interest groups, and they could provide valuable advice about not only the project's viability but about the artefacts that could be on the ship. Are any more such meetings scheduled, and could they be placed on a more formal business footing?

Finally, you said that no decision, not even a provisional decision, can be made about HMS Caroline until a review of costs is made. I welcome the fact that you are preparing a paper for completion by Easter. That should not be too difficult, because the Royal Navy has been maintaining the vessel for 97 years, so there should be a lot of information on maintenance costs. There have been projects in the rest of the United Kingdom in keeping similar ships. It would be useful to have information from those projects about running costs, tourist numbers and prices.

We are all aware of the cost of removing asbestos, and I do not know whether that has been taken into the equation as part of the health and safety issues. However, I assume that the cost of that would be easy to obtain, because similar work has been carried out on ships in the rest of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the cost of removing the asbestos would be offset by the cost of towing it to another destination in the UK.

I want the Department to express more of an interest. I also want meetings to take place between stakeholders, and to know who the stakeholders are.

Mr Sweeney:

With respect to the Department's statement of intent, I did say that the Department chaired the stakeholder meeting — to use some 'Yes, Minister' phraseology — on a without-prejudice basis. The Minister has also visited the vessel and, in principle, would be supportive of the project.

Representatives from the Royal Navy, including Captain John Rees from the National Museum of the Royal Navy, two senior naval officers from Northern Ireland and, importantly, someone from the defence equipment and support unit of the MOD — which is carrying out all of the condition surveys on the vessel — are all on the stakeholder group. All of the Royal Navy representatives report to Rear Admiral Martin Alabaster, who is responsible for Scotland, northern England and Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Department is absolutely dealing with the correct people in the Royal Navy and there is no doubt that the Royal Navy is very seriously engaged with the project.

In addition to the Royal Navy stakeholders, local stakeholders such as Belfast City Council, the Tourist Board, DSD, the Heritage Lottery Fund, its Northern Ireland chair, Ronnie Spence, and the Belfast Harbour Commission are all involved. That group has taken it upon itself to work up the outline business case. It not meant to be an elitist or exclusive group, and if other people or groups can add to it, that would be beneficial. However, they are the critical players that can bring the outline business case forward.

With respect to whether the Department has made a statement of intent, the Royal Navy has said that it is content with the approach that the Department is taking. If I am coming across as quite reserved today, it is because the Royal Navy is also quite reserved, because it does not want

to raise any expectations.

Importantly, the Department has also examined a number of similar projects. I hosted a workshop in April 2008 and delivered a case study on the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, and Bill Ferris, its chief executive, came to the workshop and gave a presentation. The trust is one of the success stories in this area; it receives 150,000 visitors each year and it is right in the epicentre of the south-east of England. However, without lacking ambition, I must temper expectations. Although people get very excited about maritime heritage and vessels, the reality is that many of those projects struggle as visitor attractions, because they require significant capital investment and revenue costs. Indeed, one only needs to look at how much it costs to maintain HMS Belfast, and that vessel is in the heart of London on the Thames. The Department has examined a range of case studies, and it would advise the adoption of a cautious and realistic approach at this time.

With respect to whether minutes of the meetings have been taken, I can advise that minutes were taken of the workshop, and that departmental minutes were taken for the meeting of the outline business case group. Currently, a date has not been set for the next meeting of that group. The next action point is for departmental economists to work up a draft outline business case and to marry that with the work that the Tourist Board, Belfast City Council and DSD are doing on a strategy for maritime heritage. The group will meet again when those two documents are married together, which will either be just before or after Easter 2010.

Lord Browne:

I am concerned because time is of the essence. I understand that the MOD may be making a decision on the vessel imminently, and I am concerned that, if we delay, we may lose the opportunity of keeping HMS Caroline in Northern Ireland. I urge that we move forward as quickly as possible on the strategic outlines, and so on.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you very much, Paul, for your comprehensive overview of the situation. I welcome Sean Neeson to the Public Gallery. Sean is currently the Northern Ireland representative on the UK Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships, and he will know that we are particularly blessed in Belfast in that we have three of the vessels on the core list of that organisation sitting in Belfast Harbour — well, one of them is not; I notice that it is sitting under a very expensive

tarpaulin in Cultra. The Department has a very dismal record so far in looking after historic ships. I am talking about the Result, which has tarpaulin over the top of it, and, I believe, a hole in the bottom to allow access to it. The precedent set by the Result does not give us great confidence.

The Nomadic is undergoing repairs and enhancement at the moment, and will hopefully be a vital part of the 2012 focus on the Titanic. Those who have been on board the ship will realise that there is, in fact, a critical mass in the harbour area. On the County Antrim side of the harbour there are graving docks, and the ship project people are involved in some work vis-à-vis the dockers. Although they are talking specifically about deep-sea dockers, I would like to see all the dockers in the port of Belfast recognised for the work they did in the past and their contribution to the history of the city.

At the moment there is a vacuum down there. We have enough parts to pull the whole project together, and HMS Caroline would be an important part of that. With the Caroline, the Nomadic, the Result, and the other little trawler that was mentioned, the double-ended mackerel driver, the Mary Joseph, we have a critical mass. There is also the Sir Samuel Kelly sitting in Donaghadee, the lifeboat that brought the survivors back from the Princess Victoria — the anniversary of that disaster is this weekend, incidentally. There is a lot down there.

What gives me hope is that I remember dealing with you, Paul, when working on the Save Our Railways campaign, when it was all gloom and doom. The lines were going to be torn up and we would all have had to travel by bus and car and would pollute the atmosphere. Fortunately, from that dismal scenario we resurrected and regenerated the railways, passenger numbers have improved, and the railways have been given a new sustainable transport dimension. Here we have an opportunity to create a critical mass. You stole my thunder, as did Wallace, as you mentioned all of the points that I was going to make. The critical mass is already there; there is a steam crane from Harland and Wolff that actually built such ships. The Titanic slipway is, frankly, two big bits of concrete at the moment. I feel embarrassed when I take tourists down there.

You have something concrete in those ships. That may be the wrong term to use; in the case of the Caroline there was concrete in her at one stage. We have something that we can build around. You mentioned Belfast City Council, which I think is well aware of what is possible.

The Harbour Commissioners are certainly well aware of that. Although the current berthing contract may have two years to run, I do not think they are in any particular hurry to see the ship go anywhere else. It is a matter of pulling the disparate ends together.

Brian is here representing the museums branch; we have seen what has turned the Ulster Museum around from a place that was not awfully exciting to a place that is generating interest. Belfast and Northern Ireland need a mass of visitor attractions. What do our visitors do when they get here? What do you do with all those cruise liners that are going to tie up at the Stormont Wharf immediately facing the current location of the Caroline? They will be looking across at a World War I ship sitting there, and wondering how on earth they can get on it, what it is doing there, and what is the history of it.

You may have seen a recent programme about the Queen Mary cutting in two a similar ship during the war. An American serviceman took a photograph of the incident as he was trooped into Europe, and came back some time later. Where did he go to stand and retell his story and show his photographs? The deck of HMS Caroline. She is world class, and we should not let her slip out of Northern Ireland to Portsmouth, or, indeed, to Birkenhead. When Raymond and I were in Liverpool, when we were not giving radio interviews I was closely watching the Birkenhead site, because a maritime museum is being developed there, and that is where HMS Caroline was built.

Are we going to lose HMS Caroline to a site across the water? There is great potential, and I ask the working group to continue with the work that it is doing. Paul will head off for educational pastures shortly, and, despite my joy for him personally, I am concerned that there will be a gap when the new permanent secretary is appointed. I ask that steps are taken to ensure that there is no slippage at this critical time.

Those of us with an interest in HMS Caroline thought that 2012 would be the key date. However, events elsewhere in the world have meant that the naval and Ministry of Defence date is now 2010. Therefore, we have a lot of catching up to do and a very short period in which to do it. You will be looking at the matter in isolation. However, as Wallace and I have tried to outline, it would be helpful if the business case were set in the context of the tremendous potential for this project to be part of an overall Belfast and Northern Ireland jigsaw.

When Pat Ramsey was on the Committee, he spoke to me about the great interest in bringing one of the German U-boats from off the Donegal coast to Londonderry as a representation of its role in world affairs during World War II. Such representation has disappeared almost entirely, and the city is trying to restore its position from that time. I hope that my suggestions are helpful. I draw parallels with the success of the railways project, because this project is doable as long as the will exists.

The Chairperson:

I would definitely buy a book that had been co-written by Ken Robinson, Wallace Browne and Sean Neeson; you all know your stuff.

Mr Sweeney:

I would too, and, indeed, I too want to acknowledge Sean Neeson's presence. Sean brought the National Historic Ships Advisory Committee to a dinner that was hosted in this Building. Those people talked with great enthusiasm about HMS Caroline being part of the core national historic fleet. They made the point, which Ken has also just made, that many regions would give their eye teeth to have such a critical mass, or even the Nomadic and HMS Caroline alone. The thrust of the discussions at that dinner was the potential that exists, and an independent advisory group reinforced that point.

The Chairperson:

One of Ken's points is that there is joined-up work to be done.

Mr Sweeney:

The appointment of DCAL's new permanent secretary is at a very advanced stage, and it will be my role to ensure a smooth handover. The issues of focus for the Committee will be a core part of my handover to the new permanent secretary. I give the undertaking that I will share the deliberations, spirit and thrust of today's meeting with the new permanent secretary.

I pay tribute to the departmental economist, because her work will ensure continuity. She will work hand-in-glove with Royal Navy personnel. If we undertook a standalone project tonight, it would be a slam-dunk case of "do not go there". It is important that the project be placed in the context of the strategic maritime heritage so that we can draw out the type of investment has been made to date. We need to ask ourselves about the extent to which the HMS Caroline could

optimise and exploit the available investment. We need that type of narrative, because, if the outline business case is written in isolation, it will not get past first base.

The Chairperson:

I will move the discussion on to related maritime issues and invite Kieran and Raymond to ask questions. The session will last another 10 minutes, so I ask you to be as brief as possible.

Mr McCarthy:

Thanks very much for your presentation, Paul. The people who have given evidence today are clearly totally and utterly committed to bringing about an end result. We had the pleasure of being out and about last week, and that opened my eyes to the potential for transformation.

I want to talk about another SHIP, which is the Shared History Interpretive Project. Are you aware of that? You mentioned regeneration of the docks area. That organisation is concerned about regeneration in another of Belfast's dockland areas. In December 2009, the Minister sent correspondence to the Committee which stated that he had refused to meet SHIP representatives.

Mr Sweeney:

Oh, SHIP. I am with you now.

Mr McCarthy:

In your briefing, you stated that one of the original primary objectives of the Titanic signature project is to fulfil the aspirations of local communities in Belfast with regard to recording and celebrating the maritime and industrial heritage of the city. Surely SHIP, an organisation that represents a local community and, I must say, does excellent work, would be key to that process? Why did the Department decline a meeting? Will the Department offer any funding for SHIP? As we saw last week, it aims to preserve the history of the deep-sea dockers from the early 1900s to the present day. Last week, we saw its tremendous work. The way that the Department has treated SHIP has been to refuse it a meeting. It needs support and funding in order to contribute to the regeneration of that part of the River Lagan.

Mr McCartney:

I want to preface my remarks by acknowledging that you may not have been here earlier when the Committee was briefed on the policy for maritime history. Ken made a point about the

impact that maritime history has had on places. Derry is a good example: its maritime history is exhibited in the Harbour Museum. When we visited the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, I was not so much impressed by being able to see the interesting artefacts as I was by the impact that the city's maritime history has made on its people.

When we consider maritime history and its impact, places such as Derry, where a number of key events took place, such as its role in the spread of Christianity; 'The Mountjoy' breaking the boom; the siege and its impact on European history; naval boats being positioned there; right up to the current regeneration package, which will be based on two former British navel sites, are important. I see that the Result was built at Carrickfergus shipyard. Therefore, although Harland and Wolff, the Titanic and Belfast's industrial aspects have made an important contribution to maritime history, so, too, have other places.

The Chairperson:

I want to mention that an exhibition by SHIP will start at Belfast City Hall on 1 February 2010. There is huge focus on the subject.

Mr K Robinson:

I thought for an awful moment, Chair, that you were inviting us to the Omagh shipyards.
[Laughter.]

The Chairperson:

I try hard, but I could not do that.

Mr Sweeney:

I apologise to Kieran for my confusion earlier — I thought he referred to a ship, rather than the acronym SHIP. I would like to double-check the facts about a refusal to hold a meeting. I do not recall that the organisation wrote to the Minister, although I am sure that it did. It wrote to me, however. As a result, I asked the then head of museums — not Brian Smart, but his predecessor — to meet the group. Before I go any further, I want to confirm that that meeting took place, and what happened in it. Is it OK that I clarify that, through the Chair?

The Chairperson:

That is fair enough.

Mr Sweeney:

I concur absolutely with comments about the role of Sailortown and the deep-sea dockers. There is a narrative in that area. In response to Raymond's point: yes, we are a Department for the region. We cannot be a Belfast-specific Department. When we look at harbours and docks and all of that naval experience throughout the region, there is a rich story to be told. It needs to be manifest in the 10-year strategy that National Museums Northern Ireland is formulating at present. Parallel to that, the Department is working on a museums policy, an element of which will focus on maritime heritage. Therefore, as regards core principles, it is important that we look at that rich maritime history throughout the region and see what local authorities have done.

A number of local authorities have done some excellent work. We can exploit the good work that has been done, and, when opportunities come along, such as the two former naval bases, we can look at ways in which we can exploit those situations.

I come back to the point that resources are key. People would be unforgiving if we raised expectations unduly. Therefore, we need to marry aspirations and strategic planning with a sensible envelope of affordability. For example, the key issue around the Save Our Railways campaign was that the Department at the time put the cost and benefits of railway infrastructure into the public domain in a very transparent way. That included information on running costs and capital investment. Therefore, the Executive and the Assembly could make informed decisions. That is key to the process.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Brian and Paul, for coming along today. I will remember that the permanent secretary's parting words were about financial constraints. We would be disappointed in him if he did not leave us with those words.

Mr K Robinson:

It may be worthwhile expressing our gratitude to Paul in his role. I wish him all the best for the future, and I say that from the bottom of my heart.

Mr Brian Smart (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

I want to make one point in relation to the paper. Thank you very much for your comments on

how helpful that has been. However, there is one inaccuracy in it that I want to correct, and, therefore, I will reissue the paper this afternoon.

Mr Sweeney:

It has been a privilege and pleasure to work with the Committee. As a Department, DCAL has so many itsy-bitsy parts, all of which are extremely important and all of which people care very passionately about, be that language, culture, arts or sports. Nobody is right and nobody is wrong. However, I pay tribute to the Committee. DCAL is a small Department, but the areas that you cover impact daily on people's lives, and the Committee's workload has been second to none. At all times, I have sought for the Department and officials to be open, frank and candid with the Committee at every stage. Thank you, to all members.

The Chairperson:

We know where to find you in Rathgael House. *[Laughter.]*