

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Todds Leap Activity Centre

9 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Todds Leap Activity Centre

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Barry McElduff

Witnesses:

Mr Benny O'Hanlon Todds Leap Activity Centre

The Chairperson: I welcome Benny.

Mr Benny O'Hanlon (Todds Leap Activity Centre): Good afternoon. I was delighted to be asked to come here. I would like to congratulate you on what I have seen here — politics working in Northern Ireland. I am delighted to see it, and I have nothing but praise for the way that you conduct your business. As a businessperson, to see politics working at a local level is very impressive. I want to put that on record, if at all possible.

Todds Leap is a truly commercial enterprise, and unashamedly so. We have been sailing our own boat for a very long time. We recently got some funding from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and South West Action for Rural Development (SWARD), and it was most gratefully received. I have a short presentation that covers a lot of things. Everybody asks me where the idea of Todds Leap came from. It came from this boy here, the boy in the picture.

The Chairperson: It is like Barry McElduff's election poster. [Laughter.]

Ms Gildernew: It is more like my election poster. Look at that hair.

Mr O'Hanlon: I am famous for one thing in St Ciaran's College in Ballygawley: I was the first pupil with long hair ever to be allowed to stay at the school. We got the rules changed, and when we did, I got it all cut off. I use that photograph in my presentation because it shows me at the age I was when I had the idea for the business. I did not realise that there would be Land Rovers involved or what it would be, but when I was 11 years of age, I knew what I was going to do and I knew where I was going to do it. I have always believed that all of your dreams can come true if you have the courage to pursue them.

Todds Leap is many things, and it did not happen overnight. It is something that I worked very hard for. We have four businesses on the site. We have an activity centre. We have a pallet racking and shelving business, which operates across the 32 counties of Ireland and into Scotland, Wales and England. We have a garage where we sell and service Land Rover vehicles, and we build speciality vehicles for the mining industry and the off-road industries. We famously built for the Film Commission in Southern Ireland. It was doing some big film in Wexford, and the health and safety people raised a flag that the toilets had to be within 600 yards of the set, which was in the middle of a forest. We were commissioned to put two portaloos on the back of a Land Rover. So, we built a truly off-road mobile loo. [Laughter.]

The Chairperson: That is definitely a special purposes vehicle.

Mr O'Hanlon: We did not use any of the photographs for our marketing literature, but that is the sort of thing that we do at the edges. We also have our hospitality. We have Benjamin's Restaurant and we have accommodation on site.

At 11 years of age, I was asked to take a rambling group on a tour of Pole hill, as it was then, and I received 10 shillings — that was pre-decimal. Whenever anybody said that the view was great at our place, my father, God rest him, always said, "Aye, but it does not feed the horses". On that day, when I got paid that amount of money for doing something — just showing people round — my whole perception of the beauty of Tyrone, particularly the Todds Leap area, changed. Years later, I combined that lesson with my love of off-road driving and meeting new people, and Todds Leap was born.

I will give a quick overview of the pallet racking and shelving business. We buy it, we sell it, we make it, we construct it and we deliver it. Until very recently, we were the sole installers for Tesco Ireland, and we have worked on 158 stores since it came here. I call the racking business work, and I call the activity centre play.

The activity centre started a lot of years ago in black and white, when we had old Land Rovers and a lot of mud. Only three of the Land Rovers in the photograph belong to me; the rest are customers' vehicles. From those humble beginnings, we moved on with our mission statement, which is:

"to deliver an exhilarating, fun and safe experience to EVERY customer, EVERY time".

From the start, we had very high standards as regards what we did and where we wanted to go. Very early on, we got involved with Tessa Jowell's Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) manifesto. We signed up to that and agreed with what she was doing. That was about 12 or 15 years ago. Recently, we were awarded the first Learning Outside the Classroom badge in Northern Ireland.

We started early. In 23 years, we have become the largest, safest and most exciting facility. We pioneer staff motivation and team-building days, we lead the way, we add new experiences and we use the most up-to-date team building and motivational techniques. I spent time with a guy called Anthony Robbins for personal development and training purposes, and I use a lot of his techniques in my delivery of team building and so on. On Saturday, while I was at Windsor Park playing football with Mr McAuley and "The Pocket Rocket", the Strathroy Harps football team was at Todds Leap. Mickey Harte stood in for me for the motivational speech, and the team went on to win the game that day.

Mr McElduff: They won the game 4-1.

Mr O'Hanlon: They did well.

We have 19 activities, and the most recent addition is the giant swing. It is 50 feet above the edge of a cliff, so when you swing out you are 120 feet in the air. It is quite safe. We have not officially opened it.

The Chairperson: I am a bit worried about the word "quite".

Mr O'Hanlon: It is all relative.

I will give a quick run-through of the activities. We have hill rally stages, paintballing, the 500-metre zip line and the biggest inflatable slide in the world. In the Guinness book of records, Disney claims to have it, but its slide is 175 feet long and ours is 225 feet long. However, it will cost us £8,000 to take the title, so we are happy enough just to let you know. [Laughter.] We do clay pigeon shooting and off-road driving — you might have seen a photograph of that around Belfast. We did a marketing campaign in Belfast, on the big hoardings. We had to be very careful to depict Todds Leap and not Land Rover so that it did not appear that we were trying to sell Land Rovers. It is very difficult to promote our business without promoting other things.

The activity in the next picture is body zorbing, which we call the evolution of zorb. The sport of zorbing involves getting inside a ball and being pushed down a hill by someone. We are bringing different types of balls in from all over the world. You can get up and run about, a wee bit like a tadpole, and then get knocked flying. They would be very useful in a heated debate in the Chamber.

The Chairperson: This is more like a heated debate in the Chamber. [Laughter.]

Mr O'Hanlon: I hold the patent for the device in the next photograph, which is called the Drop Zone. The idea came from jumping off a wardrobe onto a bed when I was a child. [Laughter.]

Ms Gildernew: Are you sure you were a child, Benny?

Mr O'Hanlon: I always liked the idea of that free fall. We were looking for something that would allow people to test their ability. When you are doing motivational stuff with people, you can talk away to people with low self-esteem at the top of the tower, and, if you get through to them, they will jump. If you do not, they will come back down again. So, it is a great test. The bag deflates and lets you down safely to the ground.

We have log cabins, and we can take 50 people for residentials. We have a restaurant, which is child-friendly. We have a couple of really good chefs in there, and we look after everybody very well.

The next picture is of the new corporate centre that we opened for conferences. That was funded by SWARD and NITB. The picture was taken on the opening day, and it has been very successful so far. We take in a lot of schools and do a lot of work with local schools, such as St Ciaran's College, and the South West College campuses in Omagh, Cookstown, Enniskillen and Dungannon. We have the LOtC quality badge, which effectively means that any school or college can use our premises for teaching. We were the first place in Northern Ireland to get that badge.

We were also the very first company in Ireland to get the British Activity Holiday Association (BAHA) badge. That is a similar accreditation to ISO 9002, so it was extremely difficult to get it and we wear it very proudly. It is unlikely that anybody else will have that in a short time. We also have the Adventuremark, which is the quality assurance mark for working and playing outside.

Why do people come to us? We are an ideal destination. We have fun activities, we have a restaurant and we have accommodation. We are centrally located: only 20 minutes from Omagh or Monaghan and 45 minutes from Belfast with the new road, which I thank the Department for building for me. When that road was being built everybody asked me what it was, and I said, "It is our new lane." [Laughter.]

The Chairperson: Is it the same with the A5?

Mr O'Hanlon: That is the back lane; it takes a bit longer.

The Chairperson: I wondered why these things were happening. Now I know who to go to, Benny.

Mr O'Hanlon: That is how to win friends and influence people: build a place and they will come.

We are the official sponsor of the Ulster Rally, and the events last year and the year before were among the highest attended sporting events in Northern Ireland after the North West 200, bringing in 27,000 people and contributing £2·4 million to the Northern Ireland economy. This will be our fifth year sponsoring the Ulster Rally.

We also work with a lot of community groups and publicly funded youth groups. A lot of our youth groups come to us on a not-for-profit basis: we cover our costs and are happy enough. We work a lot with young children with learning disabilities and all sorts of groups that would not normally have access to an outdoor activity centre. We have photographs, which are not very politically correct, of boys driving about in Land Rovers with wheelchairs ratchet-strapped to the roofs and very happy people inside them.

So, we will push the boundaries to involve disadvantaged people, whether they are physically disadvantaged, mentally disadvantaged or from a disadvantaged area. It is telling that, in the July period one year, we had upper Ardoyne and lower Ardoyne youth groups with us in the same week. That was the first Twelfth weekend in living memory when there was no rioting. We cannot say much about that in our marketing, but that happened. That is the sort of effect we have; we have a calming effect on people, and we let young people see a whole new life and a whole new way of life. We are firm and fair, and we engage with the young people, especially those from socially excluded or poor backgrounds, and do a lot of work with them.

This is a photograph of some of the fleet. We have 70 vehicles of our own, and we have an excellent reputation for working with Land Rovers. A lot of garages ring us up to get advice or even leave vehicles with us for repair. There is a Land Rover dealership in Northern Ireland, but we are on the wings and help a lot of people out. We have a race team, and this photograph shows us all having a bit of fun, including my son-in-law and me. We race as far as Europe. We do quad racing and off-road racing. We generally have a good time, and we always fly the flag for Todds Leap and bring a lot of people with us. The next photograph shows what I do in my spare time. I am retired, or, as actors would say, resting. The vehicle in the photograph is in Australia taking part in and winning the Australian Off Road Championship. Basil, you would love to get in the passenger seat when I get it back.

The Chairperson: Is it not supposed to be on the ground? That is what is worrying me. It seems to be about 3 metres off the ground.

Mr O'Hanlon: I do not like flying, but I am all right with that. There are some shots of the Ulster Rally.

The next bit is where it gets interesting. Who makes it all happen at Todds Leap? Everyone says to me that I have created a great business, but I do not acknowledge that. My business is fantastic because of the help that I receive from, first, my staff, and, secondly, outside bodies: NITB, SWARD and South West Regional College. I could never have done what the innovation centre did with our smartphone app. A wee girl called Gemma Begley from Carrickmore does all of that work.

The Chairperson: Does she know Barry?

Mr O'Hanlon: Vaguely. She heard of him once. He was mentioned in dispatches. [Laughter.] Our staff are not normal staff. I mean that in a good way, and I will show you why. I have random photographs. They were not posed for. When you walk into our place with a camera, you usually get a funny look. We have all sorts of people, from Amanda who does accounts, right through to Milan, who is 72 years of age. We call him "Pops". That guy is getting chemotherapy twice a week and still turns up to work three days a week at 72 years of age. He is from Slovakia. He salutes everyone when he comes in each morning. That is the sort of effect we have on people. He just loves the place. I love the place, and you can see the carry-on. It is not a hard place to work in. The bottom row of the next photograph shows the staff, and the top row shows the rally crew.

The staff are the most important aspect of our visitors' experience, and, without them, we are going nowhere. We are a training centre, and all of our staff have the opportunity to become professional offroad drivers or do trailer handling. Any of the courses that we do are given to staff either for free or for

cost price, so we bring them on. We work with the Steps to Work programme through South West Regional College. We currently have two placements under that programme. We take on staff every year, and that is a very difficult process for us as a business. If I were to take all of you on as staff, only about four of you would survive in the job. It is not that there would be anything wrong with your ability, but, in our business, it takes a very special person who can do the job and do it safely and mix with people and be good craic. You can get lunatics who are real good craic but will kill everybody. Likewise, there will be people who are really safe but who cannot bring the craic out of anybody.

The Chairperson: I know exactly what you mean. [Laughter.]

Mr O'Hanlon: You will have seen a few of those in your time.

The Steps to Work programme is an opportunity for us to give someone six weeks to see how they get on. There is no cost to us or to the candidate, and, so far, it is working very well for us. It is an excellent opportunity for us to find staff. The candidates go on an eight-week to 26-week training programme. They get to try the range of activities and build their confidence, and, if they prove themselves, they have the opportunity to get a full-time job. For us, it reduces the cost of training staff, which is a big thing. We see whether a potential employee will fit in. We recruit staff without the cost of advertising and all of the other stuff that goes on. We have a diverse range of staff. As well as doing the instructing, we do all of our own expanding, building, mechanical work and so on.

I will talk about my rules for success. I always add this when I am doing school projects. I have a high level of drive and energy. I have enough self-confidence to take carefully calculated, moderate risks. I have a clear idea of money as a way of keeping score and as a means of generating more money still. I am not in this for wealth; money is a way of generating business. I have an ability to get others to work productively for me. I have high and realistic goals and the belief that you can control your own destiny. I have a readiness to learn from my own mistakes and a long-term vision of the future of the business. Everyone asks me how we are getting on in the recession, and my answer is that I do not officially recognise it. I refuse to recognise it. We just go on without the recession. We are just beating on. We have to have an intense competitive urge, with self-imposed standards; we compete only with ourselves.

The Chairperson: You are not Greek, are you? [Laughter.]

Mr O'Hanlon: No. We are not getting involved in the recession. We still do our marketing.

The Chairperson: I get the general gist.

Mr O'Hanlon: We still do our marketing. We have brought our prices down to get people in. We have turned up the heat in our own business. We compete with ourselves. Every visitor is asked to fill in an evaluation form, and all the forms are collated. We are our own worst enemy; we pick holes in our own business before somebody else does. We get feedback from all customers, young and old, about what we did well and what we did not do well. That is what we do.

That is Todds Leap. That is a picture of me jumping off the platform, and that is me finished. Any questions?

Ms Gildernew: Thanks. I have been there. I thought that Peter Canavan was never going to play football again because I was squeezing his leg that hard.

The Chairperson: I just love Hansard, don't you? [Laughter.] I think that it will have to do a fair bit of redacting.

Ms Gildernew: I have two questions, Benny. We will not appreciate it until we see where you are, but how many part-time and full-time staff do you employ?

Mr O'Hanlon: I took on the most recent part-time member of staff last Saturday. His badge number was 86, but that is not strictly correct; we probably have about 70 staff. We have people in transition;

some part-time staff do not do an awful lot of work. In the next few weeks, we will take on 10 or 15 more staff, most of whom will be students. I get a couple of phone calls every day from people who say, "It is not just because it is my wee Jonny; he is a really, really good fella and we need a wee job for him." I get all that. We take on a lot of people; we take on as many local people as we can. Some of our staff live in Lisburn. We have a member of staff who lives in Bangor, but most of them are from Dungannon, Coalisland, Cookstown, Pomeroy and Ballygawley. We have a broad range of staff. I think that we have 38 full-time staff.

Ms Gildernew: So, you are a major employer in the area. A lot of my constituents are employed there. When Benny says that he looks after everybody, it is very true; he is a fabulous employer. Will you tell us about the zero-carbon thing?

Mr O'Hanlon: I started out in the business in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and we were getting the argument that 4x4s are destroying the world, and so on. I do not actually buy into that, but that is another story. When we laid out the whole centre, we planted 27,500 indigenous species broadleaf trees, and we put in a pond and introduced our own wildlife and all to it. We use end-of-life vehicles, not because they are old but because they are more reliable. So, we use end-of life vehicles that are rebuilt to do what we do. We have had our carbon footprint measured academically, and we have a positive carbon footprint. That is quite good for a 4x4 centre with 40 or 50 4x4s. So, we are doing our best.

Mr Douglas: Benny, thanks very much for that presentation. It was very encouraging and inspirational in many ways. Jim Potts from upper Ardoyne sends you his best regards; he is a good friend of mine. I know that Jim has been down here a number of times.

The Chairperson: Were you in the north Ardoyne group or the south Ardoyne group? [Laughter.]

Ms Gildernew: And were you rioting? That is what I want to know.

Mr Douglas: It is the orange bit of Ardoyne.

When I was at Windsor Park on Saturday, I saw a "zorb" — is that what you call those things?

Mr O'Hanlon: Body zorbing. Did you see me giving Dave "Boy" McAuley a standing count for being knocked down three times?

Ms Gildernew: You are a worse name-dropper than Barry McElduff.

Mr Douglas: I saw Wayne McCullough. He was there. It was the first time that I saw him getting knocked down.

I am very interested in the Steps to Work programme. Will you tell us a wee bit about your experience of how that programme worked and about how you work with officials?

Mr O'Hanlon: The officials have been OK so far. Last week, I did interviews in the Dungannon campus of South West College. I think that we interviewed 20 or 22 people, and we had a range of people. Some were so enthusiastic that they wanted to come home with me. When I returned to Todds Leap, one of the people I interviewed was sitting on the street. He said, "When you were interviewing me, I did not tell you that I can do this and that." He was very eager. Another girl who I interviewed showed total apathy. She wanted to bring her friend into the interview and was not allowed to, and, after five minutes of trying to get to the bottom of it, I said that I would give her a score of 1 out of 10. She said, "That is OK", and I told her that she got 1 because she got there for the interview. There was no other way of dealing with it. However, by and large, 80% or 90% of the people whom I have interviewed on the Steps to Work programme are interested in trying to do something. However, the danger is — I root them out fairly quickly — that some people use the Steps to Work programme to keep their benefits. I say straight up to them, "If you are looking for a job, I will speak to you, but if you want to keep your benefits, I will just say that you are not suitable." It is a good start to an interview. Five people in Dungannon last week said, "I am not interested", and that is OK.

I do not like the candidates to think that they are being forced to take a job, and there is wee grey area there where you have to tread carefully. One guy came across as being really interested in work, but I happen to know that he works for his father, and I happen to know that his father is a very successful businessman. That guy ain't going to work for nobody. That aside, we have some fantastic people. On the ground, when the people arrive, you have six or, in some cases, 26 weeks. With the last guy, we had six weeks to ascertain, and, in the first two weeks, he was fantastic. He waned after that to the point that he stopped coming in. That was an inexpensive lesson. So, from an employer's point of view, it is a bonus.

It is a wee bit delicate to get going, and somebody said once that time will always out the truth. When you pay somebody to interview people, advertise in the paper at £400 or £500 and waste a lot of management time interviewing people and you pick two duds, it is very expensive for a company. It is not about the ad in the paper; it is about the management time spent on sorting it out and on training. It is disappointing to find out six weeks into a training programme that a person will not work out and has no intention of working out. However, the Steps to Work programme gives you a chance to do that without spending any of your own money, and I say bring on more of it.

Mr McElduff: We have all become familiar with the term "NEETs", and I am familiar, to some degree, with some of the work that Todds Leap does with groups such as those that Jim Potts might bring. For example, you work with people from disadvantaged communities, and it makes a difference to their lives.

Mr O'Hanlon: It definitely makes a difference. I cannot do you a graph, but I was going through Castle Court with my Todds Leap jacket on and a young fella came up to me and said, "You are the Todds Leap man". I said, "Aye, that is right", and he said, "You are some fella." I asked, "Why is that?", and he said, "Whenever I left your place, I got a job." You cannot measure that. Did I make the difference? I do not know whether I did. When I am doing motivational stuff, I always say that the motivational door is locked from the outside and only openable from the inside. So, if you help somebody on your way, that is fair and good. We try to help everybody, and our ethos is to make sure that everybody has a good time.

The Chairperson: We get that general point, but you are running a business and have shown us advertising and things like that. Excluding the bits where you cover your cost, in the context of profitearning, how many people go through your premises?

Mr O'Hanlon: At the minute, we average 600 visitors a week.

The Chairperson: I am not talking about people with learning disabilities or physical disabilities, but what percentage of that is, shall we say, regular folk?

Mr O'Hanlon: The disabled groups are a small number percentage-wise, but there is certainly one group every month. On a given Saturday, you could have a church group, a birthday party, a hen group and maybe three stags and/or a football team. You could have a school and a football team or a youth group and a stag.

The Chairperson: Do they come for a day or a weekend?

Mr O'Hanlon: A lot of weekends are two-day residentials, or, if it is a stag or hen, they do a stopover. We had a local school with 11- to 14-year-olds, recognised as children of low esteem, for three days. We did a lot of work with them. We got a bag of mice off the bus, and we could hardly get them back on the bus. They were going ballistic. It is a bit like giving very small children Coke. It is people letting their hair down and it is just an experience. You have to be there.

The Chairperson: Hopefully, some of us will go. I will certainly go to have a look. You spoke about maybe getting help and support from the Committee. We, as a public body, as you will understand, have to be careful about what we do with private concerns.

Mr O'Hanlon: It has been a major disadvantage for Todds Leap as a business that it is a commercial business with regards to funding and help and getting involved with Departments and so on. There is no other way to run the business other than as a commercial concern. If it was a charity, for example, it would be open to all sorts of funding but then there would be nobody to run it. It simply would not run. We looked at the possibility of doing that but decided against it. It has to run commercially to make it run, and that is just unfortunate. There is no other way.

The Chairperson: There are a couple of things I have to suggest to you but time is moving on and the proof of the pudding, as Michelle said, is in the eating. We can go out and have a look and see.

How much of a draw do you get from schools or people outside this area? You would be well known in and around Ballygawley. What about Belfast? You said that you advertised there. Do you get much reach in there?

Mr O'Hanlon: We do. We have a school coming from Wexford this week. We get a lot of schools from Donegal, particularly north Donegal. We have schools from Sligo and Dublin. We get an awful lot of private schools. I took part in the NITB tourism tours to Old Trafford last year. From that, I met the funder for a vulnerable adults and carers group in Birmingham. She came and inspected our premises and was delighted. She has a directive that she is not allowed to send people outside the UK. In other words, they are not allowed to go overseas. She was sending them to places such as the Yorkshire Dales. Now she has included us. We have not had any business out of that yet but we are likely to get business out of it.

Mr McElduff: I noticed this morning during our visit to the jobs and benefits office that Todds Leap is being nominated for best disability employer or something like that.

Mr O'Hanlon: I heard something about that lately.

Mr McElduff: I heard that this morning.

The Chairperson: The Committee Clerk mentioned that. I am interested in that, and we will pick it up. This is a more profound question: how far does the zip slide go? [Laughter.]

Mr O'Hanlon: Four-hundred and ninety-seven metres.

The Chairperson: Is that a record?

Mr O'Hanlon: No. You will find that, every time somebody opens a zip line, it is said the longest zip line in Ireland, to coin a phrase.

The Chairperson: How do you get the zip back up quickly so that you can get a lot of throughput?

Mr O'Hanlon: Unlike other people who take the zip back up, we invested in 20 trolleys, so we just hook you off at the end and keep you going. We can put 300 people a day down it.

The Chairperson: Here is my contribution, though I do not know whether we can do it in the timescale. This is bizarre, but I was thinking only a week ago, even before I met you, about a zip line down the front of Stormont. I will tell you what is coming up, and I do not need any laughing from the audience, please, but it is a tremendous hill. We have a family fun day on 4 June and Pudsey Bear is there and this, that and the other. It depends on the weather, obviously, but you can get 20,000 people at it. There may not be time given what you have now but it may be for next year. It is the sort of —

Mr O'Hanlon: Not to cut you off, but from the initial idea of our zip line until we had it on the ground took eight years. The biggest part of that was getting it past —

The Chairperson: Could you not get a few coat hangers? You gave me this bit: if you can dream it, I can build it. We might have to do that big plastic slide. There is a hill there and it should be used for kids and maybe for MLAs as well.

Mr McElduff: I think it was suggested that the zip line may not be safe from the point of view of it having to go over a road at one point. You had a solution for that, Benny. You talked about moving the road.

Mr O'Hanlon: I did say that to an official.

The Chairperson: That is the sort of attitude we want. Benny, we really enjoyed your presentation, and I am looking forward to going to have a look at what you do.

Mr O'Hanlon: As the previous witnesses said, you are more than welcome to come down any time.

The Chairperson: Your insight into what happens on Steps to Work has been really interesting. There was a lot of talk but a certain message came out; namely, the issue about running it as a private business but obviously helping to meet other social targets such as employment and giving confidence to different people. Thank you very much indeed.

Mr O'Hanlon: My pleasure.

The Chairperson: We wish you all the best with the awards.