



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and
Investment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Future of Exploris Aquarium: NIPSA and
Friends of Exploris

23 October 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Phil Flanagan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Fearghal McKinney
Mrs Sandra Overend

Witnesses:

Ms Cathie McKimm	Friends of Exploris
Ms Judith Caldwell	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Ms Antoinette McMillan	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

In attendance:

Ms Pam Brown MLA
Ms Anna Lo MLA
Mr Kieran McCarthy MLA
Miss Michelle McIlveen MLA

The Chairperson: The Committee will be briefed today by Antoinette McMillan from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), Judith Caldwell from NIPSA and Ms Cathie McKimm from Friends of Exploris. You are all very welcome. Thank you for giving your time to be with us today. As you probably heard earlier, you have 10 minutes to make your submission, and, as before — you were listening very attentively, I am sure — we will have a question-and-answer session with members.

Ms Antoinette McMillan (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance): I am Antoinette McMillan from NIPSA, and I am accompanied by Cathie McKimm from Friends of Exploris and Judith Caldwell, who is the NIPSA representative for the staff. NIPSA, as the leading public service trade union in Northern Ireland, welcomes the opportunity to address the Committee on the future of Exploris and, in particular, our proposal that such a unique and exciting aquarium should be funded by central government. We have set out the key issues that the delegation will bring forward to the Committee in more detail and expand upon in our oral presentation.

As the Committee will be aware, Exploris aquarium has been in existence since 1987, and the seal sanctuary has been in existence since around 2000. Ards Borough Council explored the possibility of the private sector taking over the running costs, but, for a variety of reasons, the private sector is no longer interested in that. It is clear that the only way that the private sector would have taken over the running of the aquarium was if there were significant changes to staff terms and conditions of employment, including a significant reduction in staff numbers and their contractual entitlements. Of course, that was totally unacceptable to NIPSA and to the staff of Exploris. The staff would have been

made redundant, and any staff who would have been brought would have been on hospitality wages. We would not find that acceptable.

Exploris is a regional asset, and many displays have been developed over many years. The expertise of the aquarists is a regional asset that must be protected for future generations. We believe that the aquarium delivers on the Programme for Government in areas of conservation, education, tourism and socio-economic value for the region as a whole and, especially, fits in precisely with the socio-economic element of:

"a vibrant economy which can transform our society while dealing with the deprivation and poverty which has affected some of our communities for generations."

That is in the Programme for Government, and Exploris is in an area of social and economic deprivation. So, that ties in very strongly with that element.

It is a very rare type of aquarium. It draws its seawater from Strangford lough with only filtering and no chemical treatments, and, along with the construction, that means that it can create close to natural conditions and bring the wonders of the local marine life cameos of its habitats to the surface. For that reason, Portaferry is the best place for the aquarium with its access to the varied marine life of Strangford lough; you could not put this aquarium anywhere else.

The investment conference that was held a few weeks ago was all about bringing jobs to the region. Closing the aquarium would result in a loss of a minimum of 18 to 42 jobs if there was no regional investment in it. We see that as a backward move given that the conference was looking to bring investment into the region.

Strangford lough has been declared a special area of conservation, and part of the application for the designation stated:

"there is a remarkable marine fauna within Strangford Lough and it is one of the most diverse sea loughs in the UK."

On 24 September 2013, the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 came into operation and immediately established Strangford lough as Northern Ireland's first marine conservation zone. Exploris aquarium has a unique role in helping to interpret and assist in the significant work required to develop the area, and we believe that, now more than ever, government should engage with the public on the lough's management. Exploris is in a unique position to ensure that individual interests are captured in the marine environment and can provide a platform for that engagement.

Why should a regionally funded service be there? NIPSA is of the view that central government should fund Exploris on the basis that it is a unique facility for all the people of Northern Ireland. It is of major importance for Northern Ireland as a whole. It is the only aquarium and seal sanctuary in Northern Ireland and, as such, adds to enrichment on a scientific, educational, tourist, economic and conservation basis. With almost one million people living within an hour's drive of Strangford lough, it is a unique opportunity for the Exploris aquarium to educate all age groups about the importance of the new marine habitation and to safeguard it for future generations.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) tourism strategy 2020 says that the priority should be that the tourism product must be authentic and reflect the people and the place. Clearly, that would not fit in with any private investment, which would look to bring in other forms of tropical fish, and would not fit in with the authentic area in the region. Also, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) visitor survey showed that, among tourists coming to the region, the most frequent comment was that they wanted to engage with the people of Northern Ireland and the place and to have an authentic experience. So, anything other than the aquarium being the way that it is, with the lough and species that are in it, will not be an authentic experience and will not fit with the DETI tourism strategy or the NITB.

Exploris links to the curriculum in a lot of ways. That is set out in our paper. I will not go over it all, because we are short of time, and I will be giving some of the time to Cathie to talk about the privatisation elements. It links to a number of Key Stage 4 elements.

We also need to look at the impact on transport in the region. The earlier submission touched on that in relation to the ferry. As we are aware, Down District Council has recently taken a unanimous decision to oppose the closure of Exploris, because it sees that that would have a detrimental effect

on its area. We believe that it would affect the ferry crossings, and, more than that, we believe that it would affect tourism into the area and possibly the bus transport routes. We have no facts and figures for that, but, obviously, if 100,000 people are not going up and down the peninsula, there will be a reduced need for public transport, and that could have a serious detrimental impact not only on Portaferry but on all of the other towns and villages on the route.

It attracts more than 90,000 visitors per annum. The figures may have dropped slightly in the past year or so, but that is not surprising, given the negative publicity and the ongoing saga of whether it will or will not go to the private sector. This has been going on for five to six years, and it has been extremely unsettling for the staff who work there that they do not know whether they have a job or a future and whether their children have a future in the peninsula. Since 2007, there has been no marketing officer, so there has been no marketing spend to bring people to this vital attraction. Even with the lack of marketing, it still generates £3 million to the local economy. What more would it bring if marketing investment were coming from central government?

To save time, I will not go over the full figures from the STEM report, because you heard those in the earlier submission, but not mentioned was the fact that the report found that 6,000 bed nights in local hotels and guest houses came from tourists who went to the aquarium. Closure would have a clear and direct detrimental impact on local hospitality, including pubs, hotels and restaurants, not only in Portaferry but across the peninsula. People have to come through Ards, Kircubbin and other areas to get here, and they stop and spend. They will not be doing that if this aquarium closes. Without doubt, the loss of the aquarium will significantly impact on the economy of the town of Portaferry, the peninsula and Strangford, which is already a deprived area.

When thinking about central government funding, with perhaps some financial input from Ards Borough Council, the other element that we need to take into account is that, under the RPA, Ards Borough Council will be joining with North Down Borough Council. We believe that, if Ards Borough Council were given some indication that it could be given some central funding, it could look at the issue again, and see whether, with a joint partnership approach, the aquarium could be kept open. Obviously, it will need some investment to bring it up to the standard that it requires, and that money could be drawn down from capital investment. It may be that central government have concerns about the longer term, however we propose that, given the aquarium's significance to the economy of that region and the fact that it is the only aquarium in Northern Ireland, coupled with the recent designation of the marine conservation area and what that may mean in the longer term, it is essential that central government fund the aquarium, at least in the medium term to long term, so that this vital resource is not lost. Therefore, we implore the Committee to take the future of Exploris as a regionally funded public service facility. That would assist government to meet their Programme for Government commitments and would assist the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to meet and take forward its tourism strategy and the NITB strategy.

Ards Borough Council will present after us, and it is best placed to tell you how it wants to move forward with the management. That is its role, not ours, and we will work with that. I will now bring in Cathie, because a lot has been said about the private sector.

The Chairperson: You have used your full 10 minutes. Because there are two organisations here, I am prepared to extend that by a few minutes to hear from Friends of Exploris.

Ms Cathie McKimm (Friends of Exploris): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. I am indeed a citizen of Portaferry, and I have been working with Friends of Exploris. We are delighted that you are here today. It means a great deal to us that you have come the whole way down that beautiful drive to be here in Portaferry.

There are three things that I want to say, which I will expand on a little, as I know that you want to go for brevity. You received very good presentations from Portaferry Regeneration Ltd (PRL) and from Antoinette from NIPSA. I make my first point because you have to understand that we have a big campaign going. There are tens of thousands of people out there who have a real emotional connection to this place. For them, there is already a regional sentiment, and this is already their national aquarium. They were surprised that we are not thinking like that. For them, it came as a shock to hear that they do not actually have a national or regional aquarium. So, first, we have a much-loved aquarium, and it is about to close or fall into the wrong hands. Secondly, all the money in the world will not fix it if there is not a will and a vision, and that is why we think that it is very important. Thirdly, we all need to constructively work together on this, and we feel that central government have a crucial role. This is our regional asset. This is our national aquarium.

I want to pick up on and elaborate on some of the points. Antoinette talked about tourism. We have a unique facility here. It is a little glimpse of the under world of Strangford lough, and it has been well established today that it is a very important and unique place. One of the things that has not been mentioned today is the great experimentation with renewable energies that we currently see going on out on the lough. That is a story. People come here and look out onto the lough but have no clue what they are looking at. They see this great apparatus, and, when they hear the story of it, they think that it is incredible. People are coming from all over the world to see the experimentation that is going on with renewable energy. The very first tidal turbine in the world is here, so it has that uniqueness. One reason we do not want to see it privatised is that any private company coming in will be looking at the bottom line and personal profit and not at all of those bigger messages about the local environment, conservation, seals, the marine conservation zone and the area of outstanding natural beauty. Those are the unique things that people who come from different parts of the world want to encounter. They are coming here because it is special and because it is different. They can see a sea life centre anywhere across the world, but there is only one Exploris, and that is why we have to think of it as our national treasure.

We also have the issue that we have a public park that is right beside the aquarium. I would like to hear from Ards Borough Council about the proposal, but, if the aquarium gets sold off, do the local people lose their public park? Is there the possibility that, if it goes into private hands, that park will be closed and you will have to pay to get into it? That is the only public park that we have in Portaferry, so we have to look at that as well.

We welcomed the move by Down District Council of complete support. In my third point, I asked what the future is. I am glad that Doug mentioned all of the settlements of the upper Ards, because we are talking about Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Portavogie, Cloghy, little Kearney village, Kircubbin, Portaferry, Strangford and Loughkeelan. Those areas are looking at a very bleak future if this place closes. It will not reach its full potential if it is not protected as a regional facility, because any private investor who comes in will not be interested in the national asset. They will only be interested in personal profit. This is our aquarium. It is the people's aquarium. That is our message today.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much indeed. Can you give me a bit of clarity on a few of the areas that were raised in the presentation? I picked up two different themes. Is the NIPSA view that it should be totally and exclusively funded from central government? I think that I heard that the NIPSA view is that Ards Borough Council, or whatever council it might be ultimately, should be involved.

Ms McMillan: We believe that investment should come from central government in relation to some regional funding for this —

The Chairperson: Sorry, I am talking about actual ownership of the project.

Ms McMillan: First and foremost, it belongs to Ards Borough Council. However, Ards Borough Council has put money into the facility over the years and it has been a facility for the whole of Northern Ireland, for people right across from Newry. People from all around the Province use this. Therefore, it is a regional facility. As such, the whole bill should not fall to Ards Borough Council; there should be some central funding.

The Chairperson: That is well clarified for me.

I come to this issue with a clean sheet. Earlier, you mentioned that there was a variety of reasons why the private sector is no longer interested, and that staff would potentially have to go over to hospitality rates of pay if a private investor took over. Is there any relevance for the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE) terms and conditions?

Ms McMillan: Part of the reason why the private sector withdrew was the pensions issue. As you are aware, the private sector could not meet the comparable pension required. TUPE was not going to be applied in this case, and our members were advised that they would have to be made redundant.

The Chairperson: It would be a blank redundancy, and then whoever —

Ms McMillan: They would have been made redundant. Yes.

The Chairperson: So, there would have been no transition of staff?

Ms McMillan: There was talk of the staff being moved over. However, one of the issues that we were advised of at the time is that they would possibly be TUPE-ed over but that would be for a few days only and then they would be made redundant. That is clearly not acceptable to NIPSA.

The Chairperson: Who said that?

Ms McMillan: This was when we were going through the negotiation stages in relation to the takeover —

The Chairperson: Negotiation stages with whom?

Ms McMillan: The negotiations in relation to the TUPE-ing of staff across. The big issue was that the pension liability would not be met. One of the main issues for us was that, if staff moved over, the private sector would, potentially, not keep them on long term. They would be made redundant. And they could potentially be hired under new conditions.

The Chairperson: And who pointed this out to you? Did the council say that to you?

Ms McMillan: This was in the negotiation stages. We ended up in a number of stages through the Labour Relations Agency (LRA), and some of this information came to light then.

The Chairperson: That was stated by the council?

Ms McMillan: No. It was not stated by the council. It was stated in negotiations in the LRA, which included the provider and the LRA.

The Chairperson: Who stated it? I am sorry; I am trying to be very specific about this, but I am not hearing the answer.

Ms McMillan: I know, but I need to be careful about what we say about commercial in confidence negotiations, as to how far we can discuss this. Our discussions were within a set parameter. Our understanding was that the private sector investor could not take on the pensions issue and that is why they withdrew. However, there were other issues. Whether those were the main issues as to why the private sector investor withdrew, the main issue that was given to us was the pensions issue. There were other issues, and that is why we said that there were a number of issues, but we were never sure of the overall total, except for the pensions issue.

The Chairperson: You mentioned the educational curriculum, and I am glad that you brought us onto the field of education, which is very valuable. We will ask the council about this, but do you know the number of school visits that come here? If you do not, we will ask the council.

Ms Judith Caldwell (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance): It is not my field of expertise in Exploris, but I believe that 10% of our total visits are by educational groups.

The Chairperson: Thank you. That is grand. A number of members want to ask questions.

Mr McKinney: Chair, you have stolen some of my ground, in that I wanted to talk about the pensions issue. I appreciate your response in that regard. However, we are now in a situation where the council has taken a decision. Where do your jobs stand now, given the council motion and the two-month extension?

Ms McMillan: There is a two-month extension, and should it close at the end of that, obviously, the council would have to go through the proper protocols and procedures that are in place for staff. Until that point, we expect that the employer would come to us to discuss the future of the staff. At that point, we would enter negotiations on that. In closing down the centre, the employer would have to follow the protocols and whatever, and we would have to see where we end up with that. In respect of jobs, it is precarious.

Mr McKinney: What you are saying is that people will potentially lose their jobs.

Ms McMillan: There is the potential for them to lose their jobs.

Mr McKinney: We have heard a lot of evidence this morning that has touched on a whole range of things, from education and the environment to all the benefits etc. Yet, against that backdrop, we are looking at potential closure. Have you heard anything about, or can you contribute anything to, what can be done to extend the timeline to allow for the security of jobs in the meantime?

Ms McMillan: We hope that the various Departments can put up some funding in the short term, if there is any available at the moment, so that we can look at this in more detail in order to get funding possibly in the longer term. So, we hope that the various Departments can put up funding, if there is any about, to keep it going into the future.

Mr McKinney: I will interrogate the council on this later, but, as it stands, its motion is to shut it down. Is that it, as far as you have heard?

Ms McMillan: Our understanding is that the motion has not changed. The decision was taken to close it down after two months. The delay with the closure was to give various groups the opportunity to see whether they could get any regional funding. We hope that the Committees will look favourably on the provision of funding.

Mr Dunne: At the moment, no money is available from central government. If that is the case, what is your attitude towards a contractor coming in to run the business?

Ms McMillan: The situation with contractors has been ongoing over the past five to six years, and none of them has come through. So, we do not see privatisation as the way forward, not only from a trade union perspective —

Mr Dunne: What about a joint venture?

Ms McMillan: We would see a joint venture between central government and the council as being the most sustainable way in which to take it forward.

The Chairperson: For clarification, Gordon, your idea of a joint venture is maybe slightly different from what Ms McMillan is talking about.

Mr Dunne: By joint venture, I mean a contractor running the business on behalf of the council. What is your attitude to that?

Ms McMillan: We believe that public servants are the best people to run the business because they are accountable. They are accountable directly to the public, and that is why we believe that the council is best placed to run it, rather than a contractor.

Mr Dunne: Is it viable to run it as it is? In your opinion, has it proven to be a viable project?

Ms McMillan: Absolutely. It has 90,000 visitors. The private sector would not have been interested in the first place had it not seen it as a viable project. So, yes, we see it as a viable project, and we believe that if it gets some central investment —

Mr Dunne: Are you aware of the running costs?

Ms McMillan: Yes; we know the running costs. However, we believe that if it got an investment, it would be better for the council. The council can advise you on how much it would potentially need, but if there were an investment of perhaps £400,000, we think that that would be a very good way to move it forward.

Mr Dunne: Are you aware that it runs at a loss every year?

Ms McMillan: Yes.

Mr Dunne: Are you aware of how much that is?

Ms McMillan: It was £600,000, but there was some pull back on that because of the tourism coming in. There was a loan, which, as far as we are aware, has now been repaid, and that would bring the figure down significantly. We, as a trade union, believe that public services are not there to make a profit; they are there to serve the public.

Mr Dunne: Who pays for them?

Ms McMillan: The public pays for them.

Mr Dunne: So, at the end of the day, does it not come back to value for money? Is that not an issue?

Ms McMillan: It is value for money, because we believe that, for a small investment of possibly £400,000 and perhaps some capital up front, you can get a minimum return of £3 million into the local economy. In anybody's book, a return of £3 million could not be seen as a bad investment. With some marketing and help from central government, that figure could increase.

Mr Dunne: Are you aware of any other leisure-type facilities, perhaps in nearby council areas, that are run by contractors on behalf of a council? What is your opinion of that?

Ms McMillan: We would oppose contractors coming in. We believe that public services should be run by public servants on the basis of openness, transparency and accountability.

Mr Dunne: What about cost to the ratepayer? Is that an issue for you?

Ms McMillan: I am not sure in what way you mean.

Mr Dunne: Is it regardless of cost?

Ms McMillan: I do not think that this is an expensive facility to run —

Mr Dunne: What about the average ratepayer?

Ms McMillan: There are many average ratepayers on the peninsula here who will not have an income if Exploris closes and there is no investment, so the average ratepayer will not be able to pay their rates because there is no income coming into the area. This is already an area of social and economic deprivation, so if we take the heart out of the peninsula, which is Exploris — which brings people to the peninsula — it is going to affect the ratepayer a lot more.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks for your presentation. Judith, it is particularly good to see you, as a member of staff here, giving the employees a voice. Can I get clarity on why there was a feeling — I do not want you to speak for the council, but from your involvement in the discussions — that the private sector needed to be involved?

Ms McMillan: I cannot really answer that. That is for the council to answer. Because it is a regional service that the council is providing, I can only assume that it believes that there should be some other funding input.

Mr Flanagan: But if it was a regional service, surely the council's first port of call would have been to the Executive, not to a private company.

Ms McMillan: I cannot answer that. You would have to ask the council.

Mr Flanagan: We will continue to speculate. The previous contributors said — I am paraphrasing here — something along the lines that they felt that there needed to be a commercial drive in here. It is often an argument put forward that public sector organisations do not have the capability of running a facility like this in a commercial manner. In your opening address, you said that it was 2007 since somebody was employed here to take care of promotion. Is it any wonder the place is not making

money? Is there any indication of why the council does not have somebody employed here to deal with promoting the place?

Ms McMillan: Part of the reason for that is because of the issues surrounding the potential privatisation of it. Everything was stopped. Grants had been won and were available, but those grants had to be stopped from proceeding because of the potential for the private sector to take it over through the negotiation process. So, there is money that can be drawn down in a number of areas.

The Chairperson: Will you just clarify that point? You said that there had been no marketing in place here since 2007. Is that a marketing officer in situ in the building, or has the council had no marketing of the place since 2007?

Ms McKimm: Our understanding, from an Ards Borough Council report that was produced in 2011 that we have seen, is that there has been no marketing function since 2007 at all. With the level of PR that we have had — not even PR, but just public interest in this — there has been a 30% increase in visitor numbers during the month of October alone. That is just from a Facebook site. As I said at the beginning, it is not necessarily about the money. In my view, the money is very easy to find. It is about having a vision and a will. We are asking where the vision and the will have been.

The Chairperson: Briefly, you mentioned that a marketing grant had been lost. Where was that from? Was it the Tourist Board?

Ms McMillan: There are various grants that the council applied for, and we believe that those could be picked up fairly quickly. They are not lost; they can be applied for again and could be picked up fairly quickly. That would be useful. Obviously, during the period of looking at the private sector and the procurement process, to move forward with those, if the private sector had taken —

The Chairperson: Sorry, I want to clarify this point. Are you saying that grants that should have been applied for were not applied for in that period?

Ms McMillan: No, they were applied for.

The Chairperson: And then were thrown up?

Ms McMillan: I cannot give you the exact figures, but we were told it was something around £370,000. That had to be put on hold because of the procurement exercise, but those grants could very quickly be looked at again.

Ms McKimm: If I may just clarify, my understanding is that the condition of the grant — which totals around £370,000 altogether — was that there must be a 10-year plan for the grant. Because they could not commit to that long-term plan, they had to hand the grant back. That may actually be available if there was a long-term vision.

The Chairperson: That is very useful.

Mr Flanagan: So, there has been no marketing since 2007. Has Ards Borough Council tried at any stage to rectify that, as far as you know, Judith?

Ms McMillan: You would have to ask the council that. It is not our role. It is the council's role to advise you on how it manages it and how it moves forward. If there was some investment in marketing or whatever, it would certainly make a difference to the economy. A facility that is not to the standard that it should be is bringing in £3 million. No economist could see that as not being a good investment for the amount of money that would be required to be put into it.

Mr Flanagan: Your opposition to the privatisation of this facility is easily understood. If a local social enterprise were willing to work with the council to try to take it over and run it, would you be opposed to that? If it were done so that the terms and conditions of workers and their treatment was being done right, and if any potential profit made by the company was returned into the Portaferry or wider area, would you at least consider that?

Ms McMillan: The trade union view is to look after the staff and the service. If there is no service, there are no staff. It is important for us to look after people's employment. Council officers are accountable. The management of that is a matter for the council to bring forward. It is not a role for us to look at the management of it, as a trade union. However, if there were any views that impacted on the staff, the council would need to bring those impacts to us. Obviously, if it affected our members' terms and conditions of employment, we would look at it. We fully believe that the best way for public services to be run is by accountable public servants and elected servants because it is open, transparent and accountable.

Ms McKimm: That is certainly one idea. It concerns me that there has not been a public consultation. Tens of thousands of people are interested in the future of this aquarium. There has never been a public consultation or a feasibility study. There could be a range of options. I am very cautious about jumping into the first thing that pops its head up without having a proper consultation and knowing exactly what the wider view is right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: In case anybody doubts that there is not a problem with promotion, I never heard that this place existed until it was threatened with closure. That is the view of an awful lot of people in Fermanagh. Word never seemed to get that far that this place existed, which is extremely disappointing. I have been to a number of aquaria, and this is by far the best one that I have ever seen. That is disappointing. Hopefully, it does not close.

The Chairperson: We will do our bit, anyway.

Mrs Overend: Thanks very much for your presentation. A lot of my questions have been answered in the discussion. It has been good to have that. You talked about being able to achieve funding, and so you need confirmation of a 10-year plan. Does it matter where that comes from? Are you looking for a 10-year funding scheme from regional funding, or does it matter where that comes from? Do you have details of that?

Ms McMillan: I think that we were talking about the grants available. As part of the grant process, I think that they had to be available for 10 years. It had to be run or whatever. I am not sure of the exact detail. The council could probably tell you more about that. That is where the 10-year element came from. The only sustainable way of moving forward and keeping Exploris as the national treasure that it is is for some form of regional funding to be put in. We see that as a partnership, hopefully, with the council in moving it forward. In the interests of the public of Northern Ireland and the people of the area, a funded service that has total openness, transparency and accountability is the best way forward.

Mrs Overend: It is very concerning that a marketing officer has not been in place since 2007, but we have teased that out. Cathie, from the perspective of Friends of Exploris, are you in agreement with NIPSA about the future ownership of Exploris?

Ms McKimm: After the council took the decision to give the two months to look for central funding, there was a public meeting on 30 September in the Portaferry Hotel. It was packed, and a unanimous decision was taken to look for regional funding.

A group was set up called Save Exploris Aquarium, and we are representatives on that group. We need long-term vision; this is a national asset, and we think that the best security it has is a long-term vision. As a group, we are exploring all kinds of possibilities, but what I am asking this Committee is why has there been no public consultation and why has a feasibility study not been done? It is fair enough having all these wonderful ideas, but they all need to be tested. However, at this moment in time, we feel that government has to listen to the people. Go on to the Facebook site and read what people are saying. It is growing and growing. People have got views on this, and I think that you have to take that into consideration.

Ms Lo: From what I gather from your presentation, negotiation has been ongoing with private investors since something like 2007. I can understand a trade union's role in defending jobs, and certainly a couple of Ministers, when asked questions in the Chamber, were not very supportive of coming in to save Portaferry aquarium. What happens if there is no regional funding? Would it not be better to keep the aquarium alive through privatisation and keeping those jobs? Would it not be better for the 18 staff to have their jobs ongoing as part of a private concern?

Ms McMillan: Well, they have had every opportunity to buy in since 2007, as you said, and it has not happened. It has been under threat and those staff have had their jobs and their livelihood under threat, not knowing whether they can feed their children or pay their mortgages. It has not happened, so we believe that the only way forward is regional funding that will secure the aquarium, secure jobs and secure the services for the people of Northern Ireland in the long term. It is the only way to sustain it.

Ms Lo: Some may say that you are putting a gun to the head of central government to keep this going, by saying that it will close in two months and we need central funding. The budget is very tight, and although I am very sympathetic to the aquarium — I think that it is a super facility — we need to be thinking of different means to sustain it rather than always going to central government.

Ms McMillan: We believe that the only way to sustain a public service such as this in the long term is for some form of central funding to be included. If some funding could be given, the council could look at what it could do in a partnership role. We would see that as the partnership going forward if we could get some central funding, but Cathie made the point that this is not just what we are saying as a trade union; it is what the public meeting said in Portaferry. That meeting was packed, and there were politicians, trade unions, local residents and various groups there who voted unanimously that regional funding was the way forward. The public have spoken, not just NIPSA.

Ms Lo: Did the people from the community come out during the negotiations and say that they do not want it to be privatised?

Ms McMillan: I could not answer that at this time. I do not know.

Ms Lo: Maybe Cathie can.

Ms McKimm: This is my point exactly. First, I think that this place deserves something better than "it is better than nothing", because that is the approach that you are talking about. It has got huge potential to be a showcase for Strangford lough and to allow government to engage with its stakeholders, with the people who use it a lot, with the tourists and with a wide range of people. Why have a solution that is just a knee-jerk reaction that is better than nothing? People here deserve better than nothing; they deserve more than that. What I am saying is why not have the consultation, why not do the feasibility study, why can Ards Borough Council make a decision to close it when that has not happened? That is what I think the people of Northern Ireland want to know: why can a decision such as that be made without public consultation?

Ms Lo: I understand what you are saying and I support you in that there has been no public consultation, but obviously the council has been thinking and negotiating along the line of handing it over to the private sector, and is now saying that all negotiations have fallen down. We do not want it to be a burden on the council. You can understand Ards Borough Council's thinking. Many people just want to keep this facility alive. A lot of people do not care whether that happens through central funding or privatisation. They just want this facility to be here.

Ms McKimm: The general public have a right to feed into the conversation. We cannot withhold all the information. Conversations have been happening in rooms and one to one. We need to have an open dialogue with the general public so that they understand fully what the consequences could be if a private investor comes in, namely that we would no longer have that showcase for Strangford lough and that unique facility.

Ms Lo: Why would you not?

Ms McKimm: If you listen to some of the arguments that have been put forward, you will know that a private investor that comes in will be interested in the bottom line. The seal rescue, the conservation and all the things that go on to ensure that what people engage with here — the 11-degree temperature of Strangford lough — all costs money. That is why we have the public sector; so that we can have orchestras, theatres and all the things that we cannot actually afford. It is the same argument for Exploris. We want to do it properly, and we want to do it well. To do that, we need some subvention. Never, in any private sector scenario, is it going to be able to achieve that. We need to know whether the people of Northern Ireland want that. Are they fully aware of what is going on here? Do they not have a part to play in that discussion?

Ms Lo: The other argument is that, if the private sector takes it over, it will have to make it viable. It will have to make it attractive in order for it to survive. Of course, the private sector will want to make money, but it has to make the place viable to make money. It is not as though this place will go down the tubes once it is handed over to the private sector.

Ms McKimm: Without government intervention, they can basically do what they like to increase profits, which will go into private pockets and will not be shared out among this community. That is the argument.

Ms McMillan: Further than that, it goes against the DETI strategy for an authentic tourist product that reflects the people and the place. The private sector will not do that. It will bring in tropical fish that are not authentic to the area or the conservation elements.

The Chairperson: We cannot indulge in the realm of entire speculation here. The private sector may or may not do certain things, but we are here to establish the factual situation so that we can make our best case.

Miss M McIlveen: It really has been well covered. However, it concerns me that Friends of Exploris has put its lot in with the unions. It was very clear from the presentation that it is public sector investment or nothing. I would have thought that the Friends of Exploris would be much more open to looking at all avenues of funding. It is not very often that I agree with the Alliance Party, but the argument was very well made by the Chair of the Environment Committee. I am concerned that maybe not everyone at the meeting that you referred to understood what you were promoting in relation to excluding any future private investment.

Ms McKimm: The decision that has been made it that we have a very short time frame here; we have two months. We have closure and a death sentence hanging over the aquarium. So the best possible route for us to go down initially is to look at central government intervention and regional funding. As I said earlier, there was surprise among the general public. I do not want to speak on behalf of the general public; I want the general public to be consulted on this so that we know exactly what they think. That is the best approach for us to take.

We are exploring all kinds of things. NIPSA and representatives of Friends of Exploris have had this open conversation. We want to be creative. We want to be innovative. However, it all takes time. Knee-jerk reactions will not serve anybody. At this point, we have a really wonderful opportunity to move forward. I believe that government has a really key role to play to take the lead and give us the vision and the will that this facility has not had. Let us take it forward into the future.

Miss M McIlveen: To be fair to the council, I do not see this as a knee-jerk reaction. It has been looked at for a number of years. I am not here to defend the council; the council officials can do that for themselves when they come in. However, I am concerned at Antoinette's comments in relation to her reluctance to support any type of partnership, with external assistance coming in to give the council the expertise that may have been lacking.

Ms McMillan: Sorry; may I just clarify? We are opposed to privatisation because we do not see that that is the best way forward for a public service. That is the point that we were making. We will oppose privatisation, because we believe that public services are best served by accountable public servants in terms of accountability. Any advice or expertise that the council may need or avail itself of is a matter for the council. It is not our role to advise the council how it should manage it or who it should seek advice from, Michelle. It is very different from saying we oppose privatisation. We do oppose privatisation. However, we would not deign to tell the council how it should manage its service and who it should get advice or help from.

Miss M McIlveen: Unfortunately, from the paper, it seems that NIPSA has been able to give its opinion, quite forcibly, on how it sees the facility moving forward.

Ms McMillan: Sorry?

Miss M McIlveen: In the negotiations on the future of Exploris, the unions were very vocal about how they felt that the council should administer the facility.

Ms McMillan: Do you mean in relation to the private sector offer?

Miss M McIlveen: Yes.

Ms McMillan: Well, obviously. We represent the staff in the area, and we represent the interests of the staff in the area. As we were advised, the private sector withdrew because it could not meet the pension requirements. I fail to see how it is NIPSA's fault that the private sector could not meet the demands of the Executive.

The Chairperson: Just to clarify, as a one-time NIPSA activist, I respect and acknowledge entirely where you are coming from. You are articulating the views of your trade union and doing your job; thank you for that. Now, we have one more in this particular session before we move on. Kieran, if you could be brief on this one, please.

Mr McCarthy: Very briefly, I think it was Anna who said that there had not been some not very positive responses from Ministers in the Assembly, and I know who she is referring to. However, there was a caveat that they wanted more information. The Minister said that they wanted more information. Cathie, you talked about will and vision. Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to the staff of Exploris, who have served the public with civility and welcoming for a number of years, and continue to do so. Cathie and Antoinette, would you be prepared to sit down around the table and work with the council and any support that comes from the Assembly to find a positive way forward to make this place sustainable, or at least to move forward with a smaller deficit than heretofore?

Ms McMillan: Absolutely. We are always willing to discuss it with the council.

Ms McKimm: That is definitely the way forward.

Ms McMillan: Yes.

Mr McCarthy: So you will contribute to that vision in the way that you see it.

Ms McMillan: Absolutely. We have to open it up. It is much bigger than all of us. We have to listen, and we have to open it up. I know that Friends of Exploris wants to play a constructive role in any solution.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much. That concludes our session with you. Thank you for giving of your time and being with us here today. This has proven very useful and helpful.