



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and
Investment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Future of Exploris Aquarium: Portaferry
Regeneration Ltd

23 October 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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:

Mr Doug Edmondson	Portaferry Regeneration Ltd
Mr John Herlihy	Portaferry Regeneration Ltd
Mr David Russell	Portaferry Regeneration Ltd

In attendance:

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

The Chairperson: We already have a written submission from Portaferry Regeneration Ltd. Briefing the Committee today are Mr Doug Edmondson, its chairperson; Mr John Herlihy, director; and Mr David Russell, director. The three of you are very welcome indeed. Thank you for giving of your time to be with us today. We are not too formal about these things, but the format is that you will have up to 10 minutes to present your case to the Committee, and then we will have a question and answer session with members. If you would start, please.

Mr Doug Edmondson (Portaferry Regeneration Ltd): Thank you, Chair. I thank all Committee members for coming to Portaferry today to see Exploris and hear us on our home territory.

I will briefly introduce the two directors with me. On my left is John Herlihy, who was previously an owner of Portaferry Hotel. He was a member of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board at one point and, in the past, president of the Hotels Federation. To my right is David Russell, who was, in the past, chief executive of Hampton plc, a member of one of the health boards and on the board of the Harbour Commissioners. They are two serving directors of Portaferry Regeneration. There are 12 other directors.

Members of the Committee, we want to make four fundamental points today, which are highlighted in the briefing paper that we set before you. The first is that Exploris is a lynchpin in the tourism strategy for this part of the country. Secondly, Exploris is vital to the economy of Portaferry and the southern

half of the Ards peninsula. Thirdly, it has a unique educational and conservation role to play. Fourthly, we offer a solution. I will take those four points, referring as I go to the briefing paper.

Your Department's tourism strategy for 2020 says that it wants to increase visitor numbers to Northern Ireland and increase the visitor spend. As part of that strategy, it set up and suggested nine destinations for tourism in Northern Ireland. Strangford lough is one of those. If you look at the geography, from memory and what you know of it, you will see that Portaferry sits at the southern end of the lough, at the crossroads between Down District Council and Ards Borough Council. It sits at the crossroads of two key tourist trails: the Mourne coastal trail and the Christian heritage and St Patrick's Trail. Look at 'Destination Strangford Lough Tourism Management Plan 2013-18'. The facility that you sit in today — originally called the Northern Ireland aquarium, a point to which I will return — is a significant tourism asset in those plans. It is listed specifically in appendix 1. That plan also indicates that 73% of the visitors to Strangford lough are day trippers. If you look closely at the facility today, you will see that it is ideally designed for the day trip, so it fits beautifully into that strategy. Within the branding of Strangford lough, it is suggested that Strangford lough should be seen as an all-weather destination. Exploris has a roof. We have covered facilities. So, we are ideally placed to satisfy that branding. The facility provides an opportunity to develop further tourism activity at the lower end of the Ards peninsula, being here, as it is, as a magnet. Again, that is recognised at appendix 3 of the destination development plan.

As I said, this facility sits at the southern end of the Ards peninsula. It sits in an area of outstanding natural beauty, an area of special scientific interest and a marine conservation area. There are six other important designations that give it tourism emphasis. We say that it falls squarely within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's published tourism strategies. It is also acknowledged as a significant asset in the letter and the papers that you have received from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Department, the Tourist Board and the Minister, who has written to us, acknowledge it as a significant asset.

The second point is that it is vital — there is no other word for it — to the economy of Portaferry and the southern half of the Ards peninsula. The area that we sit in at the minute, while attractive, is in the top 10 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics. If you draw a line between Kircubbin and Portavogie and look at Ards Borough Council's NISRA-allocated statistics, you will find that all the wards south of that line fall into a more deprived category than those north of the line.

The fact that Exploris brings 100,000 visitors into the area every year is crucial. It is now a Northern Ireland Tourist Board statistic — although it was published in an Ards Borough Council-generated report — that those visitors spend up to £3 million in the local economy. The facility also employs people, of course. There is a suggestion in that Ards Borough Council report that 42 direct and indirect jobs will be lost if the facility is closed.

Some 100,000 visitors coming to Portaferry must have an impact on the hotels, coffee shops, restaurants, gift shops, arts-and-crafts shops and other such facilities in Portaferry and on the other side of the lough, at Strangford. The next nearest major tourist facility on the Ards peninsula is Mount Stewart. If Exploris is closed, there is nothing south of Mount Stewart to encourage people to come further. So, this is not just about Portaferry. It is about Kircubbin, Ballyhalbert, Ballywalter, Portavogie and all those other villages on either the Saint Patrick or Mourne tourist trails.

In Portaferry, we also have a number of activities starting, the sustainability of which will be seriously affected by Exploris's closure. Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church, which has received a large lottery grant to do up the church, hopes to put in an exhibition centre there. Its sustainability is in danger if there is a loss of 100,000 visitors to the village. Likewise, there are discussions to have a maritime centre; that would be also impacted by the loss of visitors. Portaferry Regeneration Ltd has a townscape heritage initiative, with £1.28 million sitting waiting to develop facilities in the village, including B&B offerings. The sustainability of those facilities will be greatly impaired. The other thing that will be affected is the ferry itself, because a lot of the visitors come from the other side of the lough.

My third point is that Exploris is a unique educational and conservation awareness tool. It is a window onto Strangford lough. Strangford lough has all the designations that I mentioned. It is a window onto the marine life in the lough. It has the seal sanctuary, and there is a statutory obligation to look after the seals.

My final point concerns the solution. We believe that Exploris is a national asset. We believe that it is unfair that Ards Borough Council should carry the full funding cost. It should not be funding it solely. It has done that over the years, and that has to be acknowledged. Closing it is not a solution. That undermines tourism plans, damages the local economy, compounds the deprivation and sets back other development plans in the area. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment states in the foreword of 'A Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland for 2020':

"Tourism is a key driver of our economy."

At paragraph 3.3 on page 8 of that document, she states:

"The Northern Ireland government is the champion of tourism and can support the industry through ... spending decisions".

We believe, therefore, that Ards Borough Council has, at least, to be supported in that role, if central government is not prepared to — if I may use this expression — pick up the ball of the aquarium and run with it. It was originally called the Northern Ireland Aquarium, and it is a Northern Ireland facility. It is not just a Portaferry facility or an Ards borough facility. It is a national asset. I ask you to see it as such, and I ask you to fund it as such. Thank you for your attention.

The Chairperson: Thank you. That was spot on time wise; absolute precision. As I look through the evidence presented to ourselves from the Tourist Board, I see quite formidable figures. Since it opened in 2001, there have been 1.2 million visitors, which is big; that is good.

I listened very carefully as you mentioned the other proposed projects that could potentially be affected. Will you expand a bit on the proposed maritime centre? What is it? I do not know, as I am coming to this with a blank sheet. You mentioned £1.2 million for —

Mr Edmondson: Portaferry Regeneration has that money for townscape heritage initiative funding.

The Chairperson: You mentioned a number of B&Bs.

Mr Edmondson: Those are possible ideas that are coming forward.

I will take the maritime centre first. It is an early-stage idea. In the 1800s, Portaferry was founded around the shipbuilding industry. If you go around the village, you will see a remarkable number of large houses with fine double fronts. You might ask: how does a village like this have so many houses? All that wealth came from the shipbuilding industry in the 1800s. In the mid-1800s, it was possible to go to some of those houses and buy a ticket to sail from Portaferry to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or Quebec. That is the history.

A building preservation trust has been set up to take advantage of part of the townscape heritage initiative to try to set up a maritime centre to show off that aspect of Portaferry history. The townscape heritage initiative is £1.28 million that has been allocated by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Heritage Lottery Fund has identified and approved 23 designated buildings as being in need of serious renovation within the conservation area of the town, which is the main roads into the square and part of the seafront.

That project requires match funding, but one possible project has already come forward. One of the building owners wishes to have a B&B in the property, and we will assist in the conservation aspects of that development. Along the seafront towards what is known as the Demesne, there is also a cottage that is owned by Ards Borough Council. We are in initial conversations with the council as to what might and might not be done with that. Having a specialised B&B there is a possibility. That is what we are looking at and talking about.

Chair, if I may, I will tell you a little bit more about Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church.

The Chairperson: Yes; please do.

Mr Edmondson: Portaferry Presbyterian Church is an A1 listed building. In similar vein to Portaferry Regeneration Ltd, it has received just over £1 million for renovation. Part of the renovation will be to build an exhibition centre along the side of the church. The friends committee was working on the

basis that its sustainability would be underpinned, in part, by the visitor flow to Exploris, with some of them going across the square to see that exhibition centre. That will be the impact; those things are seriously in question.

The Chairperson: Could I just explore that a little bit further? You mentioned three very important projects for Portaferry and its environs. As part of the applications for funding of those various projects to the Heritage Lottery Fund and the projected application to the townscape heritage initiative, was the footfall and the business case built, in part, using this facility and the magnet that it was for footfall to the village?

Mr Edmondson: I cannot answer for the Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church. I can answer for Portaferry Regeneration, because, obviously, we prepared the document in its two stages. Yes, there was an economic plan and an economic examination of what we have in Portaferry and what is likely to be generated. One of the key parts for provision of Heritage Lottery Funding is that each project must be sustainable. So, putting it very simply, there is no point in doing up a house or an old shopfront to fine conservation standards and it remaining empty and rotting again. The whole purpose is to find sustainable projects. Frankly, the removal of about 100,000 visitors a year simply torpedoes it, in our view, and I do not think that I am being emotional in the words that I use.

The Chairperson: Do you know anything about the maritime centre as well? Did it factor in those considerations?

Mr Edmondson: I cannot answer for that. I have indicated that it is an embryonic idea. It is at the very early stages. It is an exciting project, from what I know of it. They have already established a building preservation trust. As I understand it, they hope to identify one of the buildings within the townscape heritage initiative plan, and then we could work together to develop it.

The Chairperson: So a proposal has not yet been submitted for funding for the maritime centre to any significant —

Mr Edmondson: Not to my knowledge.

The Chairperson: It is being worked up?

Mr Edmondson: That is why I used the expression "early stages".

The Chairperson: That is grand.

Mr Edmondson: However, if you look at the history of the shipbuilding industry, there is a good core project there.

The Chairperson: I am just thinking of the consequences of this facility being sucked out of the economy. It has a domino effect on a number of projects, potentially, and not a good one.

A number of members have indicated that they want to speak.

Mr Flanagan: Thank you for your presentation, and thank you for agreeing to give evidence. Apart from the £3 million that would be lost to the local economy and the 42 direct and indirect jobs, what would be the impact on the community if this facility closes?

Mr Edmondson: I hope that my colleagues will come in later if the Chair allows them. Simply, if you take 100,000 people out of an environment over a year, that is 2,000 people a week, just to do a simple sum. There will not be the same buzz about the place or the same spend in shops, coffee shops and the hotel. There will be issues like that. This place is a magnet for visitors.

Mr Flanagan: Do any of your colleagues want to add to that?

Mr John Herlihy (Portaferry Regeneration Ltd): Apart from the impact on the local economy, the closure of Exploris would be a very severe blow to the development of the tourism infrastructure throughout the Province. As the Tourist Board has identified Strangford lough as one of the nine destinations that it wants to market, the removal of Exploris will be a terrible loss to them, particularly

in wet weather conditions, as a place for a people to visit. I do not think that people will come to Northern Ireland simply to visit Exploris per se, but it is a part of the tourism asset of the whole of the Province.

Going back to my time on the board, I remember that an application came before us from Portrush to develop an aquarium, and it was turned down on the basis that it was far better to have unique attractions at each individual place throughout the Province. That is where Portaferry aquarium has a very serious part to play in the regional and national picture.

The Chairperson: I am sorry. Someone has a mobile phone switched on. I advise members and the public that that interferes with the recording of proceedings. Please switch it off to allow Hansard to get a proper and accurate record of our meeting. I beg your pardon, Mr Herlihy.

Mr Herlihy: The point that I was making was about the importance of the facility to not just the local economy.

Mr Flanagan: Do you think that the facility has received adequate support from Ards Borough Council and central government?

Mr Herlihy: It is not really fair to expect Ards Borough Council to maintain a facility such as this or even to expand it. It probably needs to be expanded. When I operated a hotel here in Portaferry, I found the council and anybody associated with Exploris to be very helpful in working together to try to promote the area. I am not critical of Ards Borough Council on that score. Central government should take it on.

Mr Flanagan: If the reason for closure is that it is running at a deficit, surely that is the reason that things are run by the public service. If they are running at a profit, somebody in the private sector would want to take it on. I cannot imagine that there is a leisure centre in this council area that is running at a profit. Most leisure centres operate at a deficit; councils provide them because they are an integral part of council services. Should the council not take a similar position with Exploris?

Mr Edmondson: To date, the council has taken that position on Exploris. This is an entirely personal analysis: at the moment, it has found itself between a rock and a hard place. It was delivering a solution, which was Livingstone Leisure, but it has floundered. That does not mean that this place should close. This place is too valuable to close. In my written conclusions, I very carefully said:

"Exploris is a invaluable national asset and should not be funded solely by the local ratepayer."

There ought to be at least a partnership between Ards Borough Council and central government. Almost immediately, there are two or three eligible parts of central government. We have emphasised tourism this morning. There is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. There is the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which has responsibility for rural tourism. There is the Department of the Environment, which has an obligation towards the seal sanctuary. There is an opportunity for people to work together and share the burden of management and finance.

Mr David Russell (Portaferry Regeneration Ltd): One aspect that both my colleagues mentioned is the investment. I think that it would be recognised by Ards council, and certainly by people in Portaferry, that there has been very little investment over the past decade. A facility such as this needs constant investment to keep it up as an attraction to the public. As well as the deficit, which is a separate issue, it requires significant investment. We have tried to emphasise that it is not about just Portaferry, although we are from Portaferry and, therefore, it is our passion; the broader Northern Ireland tourism trade needs to have the aquarium.

Mr McKinney: Thank you for your presentation. As I drove down the road today to Portaferry, I was struck once again by the majesty and magic of Strangford lough. I thought of the context of Exploris as being a window on that world. If it did not exist today, would you be campaigning for just such a facility?

Mr Russell: That thought occurred to me yesterday. It is a way of approaching the issue. If it were not here, would we be saying that it should be here? I feel that the answer to that is yes. It is such a perfect fit with the lough and all other aspects of tourism. We have not mentioned — I think that you

may hear about it later this morning — the fact that it fits in with the Queen's marine biology station here.

Mr McKinney: I will move on to something that you touched on earlier. You may or may not be aware that the Finance Minister announced in the House in Monday that there would be future investment in the Strangford ferry. Has any work been done on the numbers game? If you were to subtract the footfall to Exploris that accesses the ferry, would that jeopardise the future of the ferry?

Mr Edmondson: Portaferry Regeneration has not done any work on that. One could do a simple sum, but it is speculative. If you have 100,000 visitors and four in a car, that is 25,000 cars. Half come from the other side of the lough and half come down the peninsula. That is the impact. That is an entirely speculative sum. There may be no basis for it or there may be a sound basis for it. It is almost inevitable that it will affect the footfall on the ferry, yes. On the last night of the gala, both ferries run continuously and are completely full of people. They stop taking cars because they want as many people as possible on. That is an example of the gala float display.

Mr McKinney: We need some kind of joined-up government. If we are having investment in the ferry, we need to expand on that.

Mr Russell: It is not just the cars that start from the other side. For the people who come down this side and go to the aquarium, part of the tourist experience is taking the ferry across. There are only two opportunities in Northern Ireland to take a ferry, and this is probably the easiest one. There is no doubt in my mind that a day out for a lot of people is about going round the lough, including going on the ferry.

Mr McKinney: If one is investing in the community, one must stress-test that investment as it goes forward. However, when you make cuts, you have to work out the impact on the whole community. You referred to the other tourism product on the peninsula and everything south of here. Has any assessment been done on the number of people who make double or triple visits in the area in a given time? In other words, if they come here, do they also go to Mount Stewart? If they did not come here, would that impact on everything north as well to a greater or lesser degree?

Mr Edmondson: Again, I cannot categorically say, but any time I have been to Mount Stewart or Castle Ward, those have been half-day facilities, and this completes the day. So, whether you are coming from the Lecale side, going to Castle Ward, then going to Exploris and going up the peninsula, or coming the other way, it is a very obvious thing to do.

Mrs Overend: Thanks very much for your presentation. I took my children to Exploris some years ago, and I think that their grandparents took them back again recently and they enjoyed the experience. You said that the council had been looking at delivering a solution but that had floundered. Do you feel that, during that period of negotiation or of looking at the solution, some things could have been changed to lead to better management? Could things have been turned around to increase the fortunes of Exploris during that time, such as changes in the opening times to increase attendance? Did you feel that it was neglected during that time?

Mr Edmondson: Understandably, we were not privy to the negotiations, and, therefore, I cannot comment on the detail of what investment was put in during that period. Superficially, work was done around the entrance to Exploris as you come in from the main road, and things were done to improve the vista there. However, it would be unfair to comment, because I would be speculating on the detailed approach to this building and this technical facility while those discussions were ongoing. There may have been arrangements with the proposed purchaser on what could and should have been done in the circumstances. I believe that representatives from Ards Borough Council will be coming later and will probably be able to answer that question.

Mrs Overend: Could changes be made to enhance the tourism facility here or to get information out to tourists across Northern Ireland or further afield? How could that be improved?

Mr Edmondson: I think that Mr Herlihy is probably more skilled in dealing with publicising tourist aspects. However, what is clear now is that there will have to be a brand-new marketing campaign if the facility remains open, because all the emphasis of the current publicity is on closure. Really, there has got to be a new marketing programme around the concept, as it were, of the resurrection of

Exploris, or something like that. However, there will have to be investment in that, and I suspect that maintenance will have to be done.

Mr Herlihy: I agree with Doug. Certainly, a marketing strategy has to be developed. It is a fairly static exhibit, if you like. The aspects of it that people, particularly young people, seem to be attracted to are the touch tank and things like that, which are terrific. However, I think that there has to be a more commercial approach to the management of it. I was talking to someone last night who said, "Why do they not put a notice up on the ferry that it exists?" That type of thing is very simple to someone in business or on the commercial end of things but maybe is one thing that is lacking or, shall we say, could be greatly improved. Also, it needs to be expanded. Therefore, additional capital to expand it is another factor that comes in to it. It is particularly well done, but a more commercial approach is needed. That is my personal view.

The Chairperson: As we have discovered, Wi-Fi is not available here.

Mr Herlihy: I beg your pardon.

The Chairperson: Wi-Fi is not available for anybody who wants to use their smartphone or tablet.

Mr Herlihy: I am a bit of a dinosaur myself, Chairman, so it does not matter. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Edmondson: Those are actually low-cost, simple, effective things that would increase the visibility of it almost right away.

Ms Lo: Thank you very much for your presentation. I commend Portaferry Regeneration for doing so much in the area. I think that a social economy-type organisation such as yours is very good for the region in championing the development of the area.

Strangford lough is such a beautiful place. I really do not think that we have exploited it enough for tourism. It is the first area in Northern Ireland to be designated a marine conservation zone, and it is absolutely the right place to be designated. It used to be our only nature reserve. I certainly have taken relatives and friends to stay here. We did the loop that you described, and they were absolutely impressed by how beautiful the place is. We should not always be thinking just about the Antrim coast or the Mourne mountains. However beautiful those places are, we need to spread it out so that people stay for a bit longer, rather than two days. We should think about longer-term tourism.

This place needs to be made more sustainable. I support the idea of central funding. You mentioned marketing and making it more commercial. I have been to other countries and know that Hong Kong, for example, has an ocean park. You do not just go there for two hours. It is a massive place. You use cable car to go from one place to the next, it is that large. We need to invest in this place to make it more viable and able to support itself more. There certainly needs to be some central funding. We support the Ulster Museum and Belfast Zoo. A regional facility really does merit some central government funding. However, again, there needs to be a bigger plan to allow this place to sustain itself a bit more. Have you any views on that? Have you looked at other places in other parts of the world to see how we can expand this? As you said, there are commercial and entertainment issues. I think again of the ocean park in Hong Kong, where there is a play park, an educational side to it and a lot of very special species. It is educational and entertaining. I think that there may also be a hotel or a bed and breakfast on the site. Have you any ideas or vision for expansion?

Mr Russell: I will attempt to answer that, Anna. I am speaking for myself and also, to some extent, I think, for Portaferry Regeneration Ltd. Often, when people drive down, as Fearghal did today, they say that this is an amazing place. They ask why more is not done and why are there not more facilities. We would certainly say that there should be more in Portaferry adjacent to and as part of the aquarium to keep people here for longer, so that when they come down with their children or grandchildren, there is something else for them to do. In addition, more should, obviously, be done to market Strangford lough. Without getting into the specifics of that, because it is not in the remit of Portaferry Regeneration, against that backdrop of the need to invest and expand, closing the aquarium is almost unthinkable. It is directly the opposite to what you are suggesting. What we are saying today is, "Whatever we do, let us not go backwards; let us ensure that this facility is kept". There is a further issue of adding to the facility and the attractions of Strangford lough. However, today's task is to ensure that we do not lose what we have at present.

Ms Lo: Are you looking for short-term funding at present or are you thinking about longer-term funding from central government?

Mr Russell: We are thinking about longer-term funding in the sense that we want the aquarium to be here, full stop. That is longer term. We do not have a view about how it should be funded in detail or how it should be managed. That is not our area of expertise. What we are saying — and I am attempting to stick to this — is that the tourism of Portaferry, Strangford lough and Northern Ireland is enhanced by having an aquarium and that, therefore, it would be detrimental if the aquarium were to close.

Miss M McIlveen: I welcome everyone to this wonderful constituency of Strangford.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Miss M McIlveen: I am very privileged to represent the area. I welcome the comments that have been made by colleagues on what they saw as they came down the road, because there is a broader point, notwithstanding the issue that we are discussing today, of the lack of investment in the Ards peninsula. Certainly, there is a general feeling of isolation. Given the demise of the fishing industry in and around Portavogie and the impact that that has had in other villages, such as Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert, we have to be cognisant of that. I welcome the comments that have been made by Portaferry Regeneration Ltd. I congratulate you on the work that you continue to do and the investment that you attract to the area. I wish you well as you continue with that task.

I also sit on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I am aware that you have made representations to the Agriculture Minister. I am of the understanding that you will have made representations to other Ministers. Have you received any responses yet?

Mr Edmondson: We have had a response from the Department of the Environment, insofar as we had an early meeting with the Minister. When I wrote to this Committee, or copied it into the letter to the Minister, I also wrote to the Agriculture Minister because I believe that she has a responsibility for rural tourism. I am pretty certain that I am correct in saying that I have not had a reply either from the Minister or the Committee Chair, who was copied into the letter.

Miss M McIlveen: Can you outline the meeting that you had with the Environment Minister and whether you received a positive response?

Mr Edmondson: Yes. It was an early, information-giving meeting to highlight the issue to the Department of the Environment. A number of parties were present, including some councillors, council officials and Friends of Exploris. I was there and, obviously, so were the Minister's officials. The issue was discussed, not with the emphasis on tourism, as we have had this morning but on the impact of the facility in the area. As far as I am concerned — I do not have a great deal of experience of Ministers, and this is a personal comment — we believed that we received a favourable and attentive hearing from the Minister. We were encouraged by that. We were very encouraged by the fact that he even saw us.

Miss M McIlveen: With regard to the issues around Exploris specifically, this is not new: there have been discussions about the future of Exploris for many years. Some of those discussions have, perhaps, been held privately in council. I think that it would be fair to say, however, that everyone knew that there were issues about its future. When you were made aware of those issues, did you make any representation to the council?

Mr Edmondson: I hope that you remember that, five or six years ago, Portaferry Regeneration Ltd actually made representations to Ards Borough Council about the importance of Exploris. As I remember, you asked the most difficult questions, so I hope that you remember the presentation. Since then, we have kept a watching view of the situation. I think that, perhaps, like the council, we assumed that they were in a serious negotiation that was going to be successful. This issue has overtaken everybody with unfortunate speed.

Miss M McIlveen: Finally, where do you sit on the future of Exploris? Does it matter to you whether it is run by the council, central government or a private consortium?

Mr Edmondson: Look at what Ards Borough Council has decided and take that as the starting point. The council has decided to close Exploris. It has deferred execution for two months for the specific purpose of looking for central funding. I believe that that has to be the first port of call, be it longer- or shorter-term funding. The number of years is mildly academic in a sense. I also think that what is clear is that the facility will have to be repackaged and re-marketed because of current circumstances. So, some sort of creative effort will have to be put into that. Therefore, it does not matter, in a sense, whose hands it is in. We are where we are. We are starting from here. We are starting — I do not want to be over-emotive — from a circumstance in which a decision has been made to close it to repackaging, recreating and trying to make it more successful than it has been in the past. That is how I would put it.

Earlier, one of your colleagues made the point that very few council public facilities make money. That is, probably, a fair point. However, there is probably a lot of scope for improving the situation. If you look at the figures that the Tourist Board has provided, you will see that the numbers have dropped off in the past year, when speculation about the sale and the future of Exploris has been greatest. Really, there needs to be a measure of certainty and a message must go out very quickly, if it is the case, that the facility is saved and will change, and that people should come and enjoy the parts of it that they like.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you very much.

Mr Dunne: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your presentation. We are all impressed. We appreciate the efforts that you have put into your regeneration work in Portaferry. Obviously, your business background is very useful in that.

I have a couple of points. I think that most issues have been covered. Do the figures that were quoted for footfall include children who come here to use the facility?

Mr Edmondson: That is a question that you would have to put directly to Ards Borough Council. Those figures have been picked up from its reports, and they have also been published by the Tourist Board. I have not researched beyond that.

Mr Dunne: Right. Thank you.

Considering your business background, is there a risk that, if any funding comes forward from central government, it will just be a short-term fix and will not, in any way, give assurance for the future? I know that you have covered a lot of ground.

Mr Edmondson: No, that is fine. I will volunteer an answer and allow my colleagues to come in as well. That is a risk if people allow it to be one. The difficulty with this facility, judging by the figures for the past couple of years, is that there has been a question mark as to which route it would take, and that has probably been reflected in the visitor footfall of the past 12 months. That whole issue has to be taken out of the equation completely, and, therefore, there has to be assurance that, wherever the funding comes from, it is not just another puncture repair. That is essential.

Mr Dunne: That is the risk. To overcome that, you need to plan and you need a programme to work to, to develop for the future.

Mr Edmondson: Yes; and there may, therefore, be, within that, a short-term financial injection to allow that preparatory work to be done for the onward delivery of the project. However, all the time, the intention must be to keep it open, because it fits snugly as the linchpin of the tourism product in this area. I do not just mean Portaferry, I mean Strangford Lough.

Mr Herlihy: I agree with Doug. There are two issues to be looked at, the short term and the longer term. I would want to minimise the risk if I were the Government putting money into it. In order to do that, I would be looking for a more futuristic plan and, ideally, for a private partner. I really think it should be run in partnership. It could be owned by the nation but run by someone who has a commercial drive with attitude.

Mr Dunne: You would be sympathetic to that?

Mr Herlihy: Personally, yes; I would be.

Mr Russell: Just to add to that, the Minister of the Environment has asked his officials to speak to those of Ards council. Those two need to come together, not just to find finance but to meet the point that you are making, which is that there has to be a change in the way in which this aquarium is managed in the future. After what has happened, we cannot just continue doing the same. As you said, Michelle, we have known about this for years. Ards council had a plan which, until about a month ago, appeared to be successful, and it was to get a commercial interest involved. It may be that something along those lines is the right solution. We do not have a specific solution, other than to say that the aquarium must be saved; there has to be central funding; and there should be some discussion between the central funders and Ards council about the management going forward. To be a bit clever about the thing, if we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got.

Ms Lo: I have a brief question about the commercial venture. I know that there were discussions about privatising it. What were the barriers that led those to fail? I know that there were attempts to facilitate a commercial takeover.

The Chairperson: The witnesses may have an opinion on that, but they may not be best placed to answer it. That is perhaps something for the council.

Mr Edmondson: We have no factual grounds on which to answer that.

Ms Lo: Would you be in favour of privatising it?

Mr Edmondson: I can answer that. We were very enthused to read about the prospect of a commercial company taking over the aquarium and were disappointed when it did not happen.

Mr McCarthy: As I said before, you are all very welcome to this beautiful constituency. Thank you for coming. I should express an interest because I was a director of Portaferry Regeneration, but I am now a mere member of it.

The three gentlemen, particularly Doug, appreciated the effort that was put in over the years by Ards Borough Council, of which I was a member. That is good because, had it not been for Ards Borough Council going along with it all these years, this place may well not be here now. We are here, and I am grateful to hear Portaferry Regeneration acknowledge that.

We want to see Exploris being maintained and expanded. All the good questions have been asked, but I think that Doug talked about 42 jobs throughout the region, not just at Exploris. At the moment, our First Minister and deputy First Minister are in America trying to get investment for jobs. There are 50 jobs here that have to be retained and expanded, if at all possible. There has been a threat to Exploris for the past while. A community effort is now being made to see that Exploris is kept and is a successful operation. We now have Friends of Exploris, which has enormous potential. We saw that through the petition that has been organised. We are talking to the Department for jobs this morning. Are you convinced that those people will take back to their Minister your and Portaferry's determination that Exploris is worth keeping to promote jobs in the future?

Mr Edmondson: My answer is yes. It is grounded in two or three simple facts. The Committee has shown an interest by coming here. It has travelled 30 miles from Belfast to have its hearing and to hear evidence from the local community. It is very clear from the nature, accuracy and precision of the questions that the papers have been read. I certainly feel — my colleagues can speak in a moment — that we have had a very good hearing so far this morning. There has been attention, and the questions have been good. I have absolutely no doubt that the Committee is interested in this subject, grasps the potential and dangers, if I may use that expression, and will take a positive message back to the Minister. That is my interpretation of what has happened here this morning.

Mr McCarthy: Obviously, you are anxious for not only the Department of the Environment (DOE) to support the council but others, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The Department of Education surely has a role and Agriculture has been talked about. It has to be a Stormont-led regionally funded organisation to move forward.

Mr Edmondson: Yes; I think so. Obviously, the more parties that are involved, the cheaper the price for each. In my conclusions, the ones that I picked were the ones that were highlighted in the tourism

strategy 2020 as having a tourism or environment responsibility. It does not have to be just three Ministries at all. The more, the better, because the sum gets divided across the board more readily.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for your time. The Committee will reflect, probably tomorrow, although that will be decided later, on what precisely it will do about this by way of lobbying a Department or Departments. We want to hear the full range of evidence and issues here today before we come to that point. Thank you for your time. That was very useful and helpful to us.

Mr Edmondson: On behalf of the company, I thank everyone for coming this morning and for hearing from us.

The Chairperson: A few of us travelled more than 30 miles. Thank you.