



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

National Parks: Stakeholder Event at the
Balmoral Show

17 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Environment

National Parks: Stakeholder Event at the Balmoral Show

17 May 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr John Dallat
Mr Tom Elliott
Mrs Dolores Kelly

Witnesses:

Mr Bill Harpur	Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust
Mr Maxime Sizaret	Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust
Mr Peter Archdale	Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside
Mr Patrick Casement	Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside
Mrs Valerie Hanna	Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Residents' Action Group
Mr Harold McKee	Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Residents' Action Group
Mr Martin Carey	Mourne Heritage Trust
Dr Arthur Mitchell	Mourne Heritage Trust
Mr Richard Clarke	National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Ms Sue Christie	Northern Ireland Environment Link
Ms Diane Ruddock	Northern Ireland Environment Link
Mr Wesley Aston	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Barclay Bell	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr David Flinn	Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs
Mr Patrick McAteer	Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside

Also in attendance:

Mr Mark Allen	Research and Information Service
Miss Suzie Cave	Research and Information Service

The Chairperson: Members, we agreed some time ago to hold this event at the Balmoral show to look at some potential impacts of the introduction of national parks in Northern Ireland. The Committee requested a research paper that listed some of the positive and negative impacts of a national park designation on transport; the environment; leisure, tourism and the economy; and agriculture.

On receipt of the research paper, we agreed to look more closely at those four areas by inviting a small representative sample of stakeholders to provide feedback on the potential impacts. Members also agreed to invite two members from each of the stakeholder organisations listed in members' packs, and the research paper was forwarded to those organisations in advance of today's evidence session. A list of attendees from each organisation is also included in members' packs.

Good afternoon to all of our stakeholders, and thank you very much for coming to Balmoral to help us to gather evidence. As you are aware, the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for the Environment is in the process of gathering evidence on the potential impacts of a national park designation in Northern Ireland. The process started last November in Newcastle and will continue until the Committee is content that it is sufficiently informed to comment on and scrutinise effectively any relevant policies and legislation brought forward by the Department.

Today's event will look at certain key aspects that are likely to be affected by a national park designation; namely, transport; the environment; leisure, tourism and the economy; and agriculture.

In response to a request from the Committee, the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISE) provided a paper that flags some of the perceived positives and negatives of the possible introduction of national parks in Northern Ireland, as put forward by stakeholders. The Committee is particularly interested in receiving your feedback today, whether positive or negative. Members recognise that the four areas are unlikely to encompass all your concerns but believe that they should provide enough scope for you to get your main points across at this stage.

The Committee has been advised that the Minister is in the process of considering the way forward on national parks, and the evidence that you provide today will be recorded and will help inform our position in due course. However, I must stress that this event is only part of an ongoing process. I can assure you that the Committee will hold further events to gather more evidence from you and any other interested stakeholders. The venue places certain constraints on us doing that today. I should also note that we are not looking at any one particular region of Northern Ireland when discussing a national park designation. We expect that you will want to use examples from your region to demonstrate a point where applicable, but today the Committee is interested in hearing about issues that might impact on any area of Northern Ireland that may be designated as a national park.

Before I outline the format for the evidence session, I will quickly provide some housekeeping arrangements for witnesses and those in the public gallery. If anyone feels unwell or needs assistance, please let a member of the Committee staff know immediately. I also ask everyone in the public gallery to adhere to the gallery rules, copies of which have been left on your seats. Please note that anyone failing to comply will be asked to leave. If you need to contact a member of your organisation who is giving evidence, please do so through the Committee Clerk. Similarly, if you are changing the person giving evidence on behalf of your organisation during this afternoon's evidence session, please arrange to do so through the Committee staff.

Committee staff have microphones that must be used when you are speaking; otherwise, Committee members will not be able to hear your point, and, as such, it will not be recorded by Hansard. If you wish to speak, please signal to me or the two Committee staff seated with me. Please ensure that all mobile phones, electronic devices, and so on, are switched off — not just turned to silent mode — as they interfere with the recording equipment.

I will now outline the format for the evidence session. There are four areas for discussion, and I will be quite strict in keeping you within the confines of the discussion area if I feel that you are straying from it. As frustrating as that may be, we simply do not have enough time to go through every aspect of national parks.

First, I will outline the area for discussion. I will then ask a member of RaISE to provide a summary of the research done on the positives and negatives in that area. That will be based on the research paper that you have been provided with. The points discussed are not meant to be definitive, given the complex nature of many of the issues, and will be presented in recognition of the fact that the positions are likely to require further detailed investigation and analysis. The aim of today's presentations is simply to provide an introduction to each of the four topics for discussion.

I will then invite witnesses to provide their comments on what has been said or on any other aspect relating to that topic that they wish to bring to members' attention. Witnesses who wish to make a comment should indicate to me or the staff and start by stating their name and organisation for the record. Please be as brief as you can, and I will stop you if necessary in order to let everyone have a chance to present views.

When all witnesses who wish to contribute on a topic have spoken, I will give Committee members an opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification. I will allow approximately half an hour for each of the four areas, after which I will draw the meeting to a close.

The first discussion will be on transport. Some of the potential impacts raised in the research paper include an increased number of public transport routes; the introduction of dedicated walking and cycling lanes; the promotion of sustainable transport; increased traffic and congestion; and a reduction in funding for other forms of local rural transport.

I invite Assembly research officer Mark Allen to speak on the potential impacts of the creation of a national park on transport.

Mr Mark Allen (Research and Information Service): Thank you, Chairperson. Before I speak on that, I want to emphasise that, when preparing the research paper, we recognised that many of the issues are complex and many are contested. To try to do justice to those in such a short paper was ambitious. Therefore, as Anna said, there will undoubtedly be more work required on the issues. The purpose of us speaking to you today is to set out where the issues lie and try to stimulate the debate around them. Without further ado, I will give an overview of some of the transport issues.

First, I will talk about the positives, or, rather, the potential positives — the emphasis here is always on potential — of a national park designation. One of the potential positives is the opportunity to develop and support a sustainable transport model. Looking at the experience in other areas, sustainable transport alternatives are an important part of the work of national park authorities (NPAs) in England; for example, in areas where public transport is a significant issue.

You can look at examples of NPAs that provide services, such as New Forest National Park Authority, Northumberland National Park Authority or Exmoor National Park Authority. An example of that is the Moorsbus provided by North York Moors National Park Authority. An extensive network of transport has been estimated to bring in roughly an additional £300,000 annually to the local economy of the North York Moors.

In Northern Ireland, our rural public transport provision is quite limited. Even Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) visitor research has identified that as a potential shortcoming in attracting people to Northern Ireland and to our rural areas. Translink operates, as many of you will know, the four seasonal ramblers routes in areas such as the Sperrins, the Mourne and the Causeway Coast. Other areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs), such as Slieve Gullion, however, do not have any dedicated routes for visitors. How are people meant to visit those places? That provides some context for the discussion.

The other thing to say is that a national park may require significant investment to increase the number of public transport routes to ensure that people can access it. That goes for visitors and residents alike. That is a positive, but it has to be set in the following context: funding to do could detract from support currently being given to other rural transport providers. Therefore, that provision could have an impact, most likely on the community transport sector.

The first potential transport negative is, as Anna alluded to, increased car usage and traffic. The Tourist Board recognises that the majority of people who come to Northern Ireland for tourism — over 60% — drive their own car or rent one. Visitors are often engaged in self-driving tours of the country. We promote those. People will come to the region and go from A to B or stop off somewhere. However, generally, a car journey is involved.

It is also reasonable to suggest that, given the profile of visitors, any significant increase in visitor numbers will probably lead to increased car use. The experience of NPAs in GB predominantly suggests that that has the potential to create traffic management problems, which can detract from the overall visitor experience.

It also has to be said that there are environmental dimensions involved. There may be problems for local communities and human health owing to excessive road traffic. That must be managed in order to protect the local environment, which is the main reason that visitors give for visiting those areas and for visiting Northern Ireland in general.

There is another potential negative, and this is the last one. Building on the previous point, to enable people to access a national park, there would need to be improved or additional transport infrastructure. There are examples that many of you will be aware of, but I am talking about works to accommodate increased traffic volumes. For example, you could have safe opportunities for walking and cycling, but how do you ensure that people can cycle and walk safely? You could have dedicated

lanes between tourism sites and bike-hire facilities. Many of those might be provided by the private sector, but a level of public investment could be required as well.

Other things that you may need include, for example, improved car-parking facilities, tourism signage and the creation of viewing points. Moreover, you would require a fair degree of investment to enable people who are driving a car to access and avail themselves of the facilities.

Those are the main points that touch on what was in our paper. Without further ado, I will hand back to you, Chairperson. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mark. We will have a quick look at the issues relating to transport. I will open the meeting to stakeholders who wish to make comments, specifically on transport.

Mr Patrick McAteer (Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside): On the number of cars that tourists use per annum when they visit Northern Ireland, I wonder whether, given the current cost of fuel, it is possible that there might not be so many car owners and drivers touring around Northern Ireland in future. People might wish to use public transport instead.

The Chairperson: Does anybody else wish to comment?

Mr David Flinn (Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs): I represent the umbrella organisation for all the walking clubs in Northern Ireland. One point occurred to me about transport. That might drive one towards having a rather broad boundary for any national park. Obviously, the bigger the boundary, the less impact traffic will have. In a very concentrated area, such as the Mourne, there would be more problems. If the initial designation were a larger area somewhere else, the transport effect might not be as great. That is just a thought that occurred to me.

The Chairperson: I just want to check that the people at the back can hear OK, because the sound of the rain is very loud. You can hear OK? Good.

Dr Arthur Mitchell (Mourne Heritage Trust): One of the problems is that public transport providers look at whether routes are economically viable rather than at whether they provide a social service. They are driven by budgets, the same as anybody else. To initiate something, we need, as well as private sector involvement, an organisation in the area that will bring community services and buses into play. However, there is no method by which you can actually bring both together and get them organised.

Mr Martin Carey (Mourne Heritage Trust): I want to pick up on the point about the possible impact of investment in new transport infrastructure on existing services. From the White Paper, my understanding is that the Department proposes that any national park be funded through new money. I endorse that. I think that it is very important that existing services do not suffer. Where that money would come from is a different matter.

I just want to emphasise the point made about the Moorsbus. I happen to know that the Moorsbus started to make a profit only two or three years ago. It has been running for around 20 years and had been making a loss on what it took in against the cost of providing the service. However, that loss was justified because of the economic benefit to the wider area. Moreover, local people were the biggest users of the service over that period. Therefore, the local community was benefiting from a service that would not have been there but for the subsidy from the national park authority.

Finally, a lot of the negatives that were touched on — congestion, inadequate car parking and inadequate infrastructure for walking and cycling — all need to be improved. However, many of the negatives are being experienced at the moment in rural areas. Regardless of whether we have a national park, investment in such things would be good for the quality of life of people in those areas.

Mr Barclay Bell (Ulster Farmers' Union): From a farming perspective, one of our main concerns on the transport front is congestion and how that would affect the daily work of farmers in the area. I think that they already feel that there is a problem there. I certainly think that having increased numbers coming to the area would create a bigger problem. We in the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) take the national parks issue very seriously. I have been elected only three weeks, but any of the phone calls that I have received so far have been about that problem.

I have to leave for a short time, but I will leave my colleagues here. I hope to return shortly. Please excuse me, but I will be back.

The Chairperson: No problem.

There are no further comments on transport. I will open the discussion to members to comment or ask questions of the contributors.

Mr Hamilton: I may take this up with Sammy Wilson later, but the concept of new money is an interesting one. We will perhaps have to get the printing presses running. Martin, I understand your point about new money. It would be separate money, but that money would have to be taken from some other part of a Department's budget, for instance, that of the Department of the Environment (DOE), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) or the Department for Social Development (DSD). It is not new money that comes from somewhere in space; it is new money that has to come from within the existing Northern Ireland Budget.

The Chairperson: The money for transport would come from the Department for Regional Development (DRD).

Mr Hamilton: We have all been here long enough to realise that it comes from somewhere else within, generally.

Mr Peter Archdale (Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside): I want to pick up on that particular point. A strong thread running through the consultation on the tourism strategy was on the need to improve transport between areas and destinations to which visitors want to go. I acknowledge that there is no new money, but there is tacit acknowledgement that we need to address visitor needs. The point is well made in that strategy. It obviously needs to be focused on with respect to any national park.

The Chairperson: This is also a balancing act. It is about whether you put money into improving transport or into building or improving roads.

Mr Boylan: We are talking about using money to upgrade roads. Regardless of whether you go down the national parks route, it seems that that work needs to be done anyway. That is the key element. If you are saying that the advantages of upgrading are that it will bring in potential income, it would certainly go some way towards making it happen. Getting the new money would be an issue. Is that what you are alluding to?

It seems to me that the areas being used now should be upgraded anyway. It should be NI tourism's responsibility to promote that, regardless of whether we are looking at a national park.

The Chairperson: It is about improving the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for your presentation and your comments. Simon Hamilton may be looking at transport from a different perspective in a few months' time, possibly as Finance Minister.

Mr Hamilton: That is what I am always worried about.

Mr Elliott: Is there any indication from people here today that Translink's monopoly on public transport in Northern Ireland should cease? Would that open up opportunities in the area, irrespective of whether there were a national park?

The second issue is the infrastructure itself. I assume that, if there were a national park, infrastructure improvements may be quite limited because of additional planning and environmental regulations that may come about with a national park. It may be a catch-22 situation in which we may not be able to improve the infrastructure if we had a national park.

Mr Harold McKee (Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Residents' Action Group): I am a Newry and Mourne District Council member and the chairman of the Mourne mineral processors'

group. I am heavily involved in the anti-national park campaign. On transport; if no new money is coming and we are dependent on the existing money, then last year in Mourne alone it took £4.5 million to repair the roads. This year's budget is £500,000. It is steadily going down, and if there is no new money, we will not be able to do what needs to be done already. We are in diffis.

The Chairperson: That is a good point.

Mr Flinn: Could EU money be targeted, especially for sustainable transport? I would have thought that extra European money could be obtained in that area. As I understand it, we are having to give back a substantial amount of potential EU money in agriculture that we have not been able to use. One would have hoped that that could be used for the benefit of farmers to alleviate transport problems.

The Chairperson: I do not think it is that easy to do.

Mr Elliott: I am not aware of any EU agricultural money being handed back at the moment. I know that the rural development programme is ongoing, and maybe as time goes on it will happen. You have to be a region that qualifies for EU structural funds to help transport infrastructure, and, currently, Northern Ireland is not. We have fallen outside that in the recent figures. However, as far as the new round of funding is concerned, I understand that there may be new figures coming out that may put Northern Ireland into that category. There are possibilities, but, obviously, every other area will be bidding for that funding as well, not just national park areas.

Mr Dallat: I want to pose a question about infrastructure. Do members believe that it is important that we study the kind of infrastructure involved more carefully? We can straighten roads, cut the corners and just invite more cruisers around, or we can give thought to what the infrastructure is for. Is it to encourage more cyclists, walkers, hill climbers and people who might come to the area and bring some kind of prosperity to it? I think it is important that we consider that. I am just reflecting on my limited experience of travelling in Wales, where they clearly have done that, and there is no feuding at all between the different groups. Everybody is at peace and harmony.

The Chairperson: We do want to encourage a range of transport means, not just cars, whether it is in national parks or the current regional parks.

Mr Archdale: To pick up the point of European funding: on Mr Dallat's point, there is money. The Mournes, for example, are funded through INTERREG, so, although the point about road transport is true, the alternative methods are eligible under the current schemes. Indeed, Northern Ireland has successfully drawn down money. Particularly in the future, in the light of Europe 2020, which is putting more emphasis on sustainability, alternatives to vehicular transport will be quite a successful way of drawing in funding.

Mr Carey: I want to emphasise the point on planning and transport infrastructure. Given that, if there were a national park, one of the prime purposes would be to enable people to enjoy the special qualities of the area along with facilitating a living, working economy, it would be very important to ensure that any planning regime did not militate against that. It would be a very serious design flaw if the planning regime conflicted with the aims. That is something that I urge the Committee to think carefully about if this goes forward.

Mr McAteer: I suggest that roads, public transport and public travel is a Northern Ireland issue currently, and will be in the future. It is not only relevant to national parks. We need more rural transport for people who live in the countryside. That has to be considered by the Stormont Assembly. The matter of financing that is a larger issue again, in that, if the Assembly decides that there is a requirement for more public transport in rural areas and feels that it should be provided, it will have to find the money, or it can forget about it.

Dr Mitchell: With regard to finance —

The Chairperson: In relation to transport?

Dr Mitchell: In relation to transport. First of all, it is an investment. It may have an initial cost, but one would hope that it would actually turn a profit. Then, the profit can be invested into the system so that the costs come down, and it should end up a zero-cost situation.

The Chairperson: It is almost a chicken and egg situation: when you have enough tourists, you then pay for the public transport services. It looks like we have exhausted the issues on the topic.

The next discussion is on the environment. I remind members that some potential impacts raised in the research paper include the better protection of natural buildings and cultural heritage; possible disturbance and destruction of heritage; sound environmental management; responsible countryside use; and pressure for development. I invite Suzie Cave from the Assembly's Research and Information Service to speak on the potential impact of the creation of a national park on the environment.

Miss Suzie Cave (Research and Information Service): This section will be similar to the previous topic, and the purpose is to flag up some potential positive and negative environmental impacts. I will keep this brief.

Some perceived positives include better protection of natural and cultural heritage. It is anticipated that additional funding resources to each national park may bring benefits to habitat and species conservation that could be prioritised towards the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy and EU commitments. There is also the idea of better protection of built heritage. As it stands, built heritage is under pressure from development and potentially insensitive renovation or removal. According to the UK national parks, national parks are particularly good places for historical remains because the close management of building and agriculture over many years on those types of sites means that remains are still visible. Protection of the built heritage in Northern Ireland is mainly done through listing and scheduling by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and through vigilance in planning control. Should either of those become a role of the national park authority, the authority may increase protection through providing local advice, presenting information on cultural heritage and providing grant schemes and funding restoration projects.

There is also the idea of sound environmental management. That may provide better protection of the landscape and built heritage and slow or stem the loss in biodiversity and habitats through the possible development of a proactive management plan. The Department's White Paper for enabling legislation suggests the possibility that the national park management authority will be responsible for the development of such a plan.

Building in the countryside is controlled under existing planning policies such as planning policy statement (PPS) 21 and may impact on replacement dwellings, the integration and design of all new buildings, and farm diversification. A major development in national parks may be subject to assessments set out in PPS 2, which is entitled 'Planning and Nature Conservation'. That considers the need for development in the context of the potential impact on the economy and the environment. However, following the Department's consultation in 2011, a decision has not yet been confirmed on whether a national park management body will be responsible for the planning and development of a national park management plan or whether planning powers will remain with the Department, or the councils post-RPA, using the management body as a statutory consultee.

Conversely, I will outline some of the potential negative impacts of national park designation. One of the objectives of national park status is to attract visitors to a given area. Although that may bring many benefits, increased tourism poses a number of challenges to any rural area. Those may take the form of disturbance of the natural built environment and cultural heritage, which may, potentially, be caused by increased littering, graffiti and fires. For example, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park has had problems with litter and fire sites that were left behind by irresponsible visitors, and the park authority dealt with that by developing a campaign. Trampling and erosion of landscapes through increased recreational use has been a problem in a number of national parks in England, Scotland and Wales. The Lake District National Park, for example, launched the Fix the Fells project to repair and maintain the damage caused to pathways that were leaving open scars on the landscape.

Irresponsible countryside use may create conflict and tension with local landowners and farmers due to visitors' lack of understanding of land ownership patterns and the environment. That may, in turn, lead to unfettered and unauthorised access to land and damage to property, relationships and farming patterns due to possible disturbance of both wild and farmed plants, crops and animals. For example, the Peak District National Park has experienced problems with off-road 4x4s, trail bikes and quad bikes. Friends of the Peak District have launched a campaign called Take Back the Tracks, which is aimed at the park authority to take action to address the problem.

Some major planning issues may include maintaining adequate social housing, resisting increases in vacant second and holiday homes and issues related to renewable energy developments within, and on the fringes of, the national parks. I hope that this introduction to the topic will assist in generating a more detailed discussion.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Suzie. As Suzie has indicated, if we were to have a national park or a number of national parks, there would be pros and cons for the environment. I will open it to stakeholders.

Mr Richard Clarke (National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty): Good afternoon. My name is Richard Clarke, and I am representing the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The association applauds the Assembly's consideration of national parks. We think that it is great. It is timely and well overdue. However, we feel that it is essential that, at the same time as considering national parks, you also consider your eight areas of outstanding natural beauty.

We fear that, if you develop new approaches and new national parks without bringing your AONBs along with the new legislation, you will be missing an opportunity. Your areas of outstanding natural beauty in Northern Ireland are your jewels. We share many of the thoughts about national parks in respect of looking at management, management plans, and the opportunities to take a proactive approach to managing these important landscapes. Please do it for your national parks and AONBs together.

The Chairperson: That was a very good point.

Mr Patrick Casement (Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside): I will echo some of Richard's points and make a bigger point about protected areas. The paper talks about protected areas and our AONBs as if they were equivalent to those in England and Wales. Unfortunately, they are not. They do not share the same level of protection and have no statutory management plans. The national parks proposed in the White Paper similarly lack the protected status that would require them to be defined as protected areas by the International Union for Conservation and Nature.

As a result, we are looking at failing to meet the Nagoya target of 17% of our land area being protected by 2020. At the moment we will muster a mere 7% of our land area, with ASSIs and a few nature reserves run by non-governmental organisations; so, we are a very long way short. Without properly protected AONBs and properly protected and designated national parks, we will fail miserably to meet that target. That is a real concern for us. I should say that the UK as a whole may well meet the target simply because it has done what is needed to protect the landscapes of Great Britain. However, we, as part of the UK, will fail to make our contribution to that. All eyes will be on us and we will be asked how and why we failed.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Patrick.

Mrs Valerie Hanna (Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Residents' Action Group): Your research paper states that AONBs are:

"a precious landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them."

AONBs have been designated because the areas are outstandingly beautiful. The reason for that is because of the work of generations of farming families and landowners over many years. If they had not cared for the landscape in that way, they would not be areas of outstanding natural beauty. I think that needs to be borne in mind. There is talk about management, but those areas are being managed very capably by many farming families.

We also need to remember that land in Northern Ireland is totally different to that in the UK. In the Mourne area, in particular, we have many small farms, which are privately owned, unlike most of the UK national parks, which, for the most part, have tenant farmers and/or contain lots of common land. That is not the case in Northern Ireland. We have bought out our land from previous landlords. The farming community does not want to go back to another so-called landlord in the form of a national park authority. We already work under very severe cross-compliance regulations, and lots of DARD and NIEA controls. We have done that willingly for years and will continue to do so. We are the ones who know the land and who can work it and maintain its current lovely condition.

Mr Bill Harpur (Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust): I want to pick up on the point that the previous contributor made, and put another slant on it. The White Paper on proposed enabling legislation for national parks causes a bit of confusion. It states, in paragraph 26:

"Farming and fishing communities can be assured that ... designation would not result in the imposition of additional restrictions on agricultural and fishing practices."

It also states that planning controls would not be tighter. However, your research paper states:

"whilst top up agri environment schemes could be beneficial to farm incomes there is a potential that such schemes may come with increased cross compliance requirements".

It also states that there may be tighter planning controls. So, the White paper is saying one thing and the Committee paper seems to be saying another. The Northern Ireland landscape is a living one, so if you designate a national park, farmers and landowners have to be central to the actual management and organisation. The Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust is a working organisation at a local level: we deal with farmers and landowners and we know how important it is to take their views into account.

The Chairperson: I think the research paper was really gathering views from various people who have spoken to us or submitted written papers. We were just taking in a range of views from various corners.

Mr Carey: At the moment, we provide visitor and environmental management services in the Mourne AONB, so our experience is quite relevant. In particular, I want to touch on the issue of increased visits causing negative impacts such as erosion, litter, disturbance to farming and livestock, fires, etc. I want to emphasise the point that a lot of those factors are already impacting on the most visited areas of Northern Ireland. You have only to go back to May 2011, when much of the land owned by Northern Ireland Water in the high Mournes, and some shared grazing land, was devastated by fire. I feel that that was preventable, with a proper management effort.

Loch Lomond, for instance, suffered badly from litter and fires because of its proximity to Glasgow long before it was a national park. There is now an authority in place that can address that, as is the case with Fix the Fells in the Lake District. Problems would have emerged anyway. For me, the issue is whether we allow those things to grow organically, keeping our current relatively light-touch management services, or whether we try to expand our management services so that the growth that will happen can be absorbed without causing damage. We have seen, through recent path work and other projects that we have undertaken, that that is practical and possible.

I want to quickly mention another point on planning, which is close to our members. Just to clarify; my understanding since the consultation in 2011 is that a national park management body would produce and be responsible for a national park plan. The issue is what status that would have and what role the authority would have in it; whether it would simply be a statutory consultee or be involved in development control. As I understand, the current recommendation is that it would not be the development control authority. Our position throughout has been that a national park authority would produce a plan and be a statutory consultee, but that development control would stay where it is at the moment, or where it would be if it were to go out to local authorities.

The Chairperson: We still do not know. We have asked the Department about this issue, and we are waiting for an answer.

Mr McAteer: I just wanted to remind people that the purposes for which a national park is designed are to conserve the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area and provide for the enjoyment and understanding of its special qualities by the public. In saying that, we fully accept that farmers and landowners in any area where national parks may be would require management of that area, particularly to protect what the farmers and landowners have provided us with, and perhaps even enhance that if possible.

Mr Archdale: The one point that has not really come out in the discussions, and which is having a big influence on people's thinking, is the extent to which a national park is a landscape set in aspic or is evolving. I think the points made about farming and agriculture and its influences, and I would include

forestry as well, have a heavy influence on that. The idea is seen from different viewpoints, and planning is therefore the central issue.

Ultimately, the question is what the Bill for national parks is going to say? I think that the researcher outlined very well that there are a number of options with the Department, the councils and the national park authority. Ultimately, the direction of travel within Northern Ireland and the Assembly's view is that we are moving to more local planning. Surely, that is what national park planning is about? It is about local people having their views, but within the framework, as Paddy has just said, of a special place. The trick is to set the legislation up so that it allows them to do that. I am not answering any questions on that, but I do not think that we have looked at this in that light, and I think that, as a result, it is very polarised.

Mr Wesley Aston (Ulster Farmers' Union): I think the point has been very well made by Valerie and Bill about where we, as farmers, see that we have created the landscapes that we are trying to protect. We have concerns about additional restrictions, and talks of management plans are the very things of which we are very fearful. Certainly, there may be some sort of incentivisation, but again that goes back to issues around funding. So, we still go back to the point that farmers are the ones who have created the landscapes that we are trying to protect and are talking about here today.

To pick up on Martin's point about planning; our understanding is that PPS 21 is likely to remain with local councils and be outside the national park authority. That said, there is an issue about dwelling houses, which PPS 21 covers, and all of the other things that farmers do, whether it is putting up sheds or erecting gates to fields. Our fear is that those sorts of things would become part of a management plan that the national park authority would control. It could then start specifying what types of gates we erect, etc, so it would be much broader than PPS 21. This highlights the whole issue about the additional restrictions that we see could be imposed on farmers, the very ones creating these areas that people want to come and visit, if that is what we are trying to achieve. That echoes what has been said already by Valerie and Bill.

The Chairperson: I think that the White Paper states that there should not be any restrictions on planning. We will wait and see.

Mr Maxime Sizaret (Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust): The report states that there will be additional funding resources for the protection of national and cultural heritage. However, as was said earlier, there will be no new money. Therefore, there is a risk that that will be to the detriment of other valuable areas of Northern Ireland.

Dr Mitchell: I want to clarify two issues. Nowhere in the white paper does it state that there will be any interference with land ownership anywhere in a proposed national park. Someone also mentioned cross-compliance in relation to the extra moneys that might be available through national park status. However, there is no cross-compliance because those schemes are entirely voluntary, and they do not come from EU money or through DARD. They would be administered by the national park authority and would be designed to remain within the existing regulations.

The Chairperson: The Committee wrote to the Department about how it will relate the current proposals in the White Paper to the consultation that was carried out way back in 2004. We are still waiting for its response.

Mr Casement: On the issue of litter, graffiti and disturbance, I would draw your attention to the world heritage site at the Giant's Causeway, which receives somewhere between 500,000 and 650,000 visitors a year. There is virtually no litter or graffiti there. You might argue that that is because there are so many people there, and increased numbers of responsible visitors will inevitably act as a deterrent to antisocial activities. That really needs to be taken into account. That fear is being blown out of proportion. The issue of litter, graffiti and disturbance will certainly be no worse than it is at present, and the chances are, with the creation of national parks, that all that activity will be reduced and the landscape will look better as a result.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mr Flinn: The Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs has a walkers' code with very strict adherence guidelines on how one should treat visitors on land and the land itself; in particular, closing gates, not

leaving any litter and leaving no trace. In addition, we and many of the rambling clubs carry out litter-gathering exercises, whereby we spend a day gathering litter.

I think that it would be very much in farmers' interests to manage things. Farmers have to get something out of it, and if there is a right of way on their land they should be paid for looking after it. They have to have ownership, and it is very important that that is recognised.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mr Carey: I want to pick up on the last point from our experience, and particularly the issue of unfettered access to private land. That is already happening in our area. Part of the reason for that is because the access is unfettered and relatively few people try to ensure that people stay where they should. We have two rangers in the Mourne and they have very successfully addressed conflict between landowners' interests and recreational use through the use of clear fencing, signage, drainage, etc. Those solutions can be agreed and implemented. At the moment, we are doing that with a very light touch and, whether or not there is a national park, we would very strongly argue that those services need to be provided. The risk of unfettered access can be mitigated and at least be no worse than it currently is.

Mr R Clarke: I would like to echo the point that Martin made. I started my working career on the South Downs. Last year, the South Downs became a national park. When I started, we had problems with access, trespass, litter, burned-out cars, etc. That was 20 to 30 years before it became a national park. People visited that area not because of its designation, but because of what it was. That is true of your potential national parks in Northern Ireland and your areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Mrs Hanna: A previous contributor said that there would be no interference with farmers. You have a research paper. We have also done lots of research on national parks on the mainland, and we found that farmers experienced a lot of interference. We are talking particularly about the natural and cultural heritage and the built heritage. We found that farmers were not allowed to extend barns and, if they wanted to build a new barn, they had to do it on exactly the same footprint and were not allowed to extend it. In many of the national parks, they had to face their buildings with natural stone from the area, which cost the farmer about 40% more than his neighbour across the field who was not in the national park. In these stringent economic times, farmers cannot afford to do that.

A couple of winters ago when there was heavy snow in the Cairngorms, farmers both inside and outside the national park had the experience of roofs falling down. The farmer outside the park was able to put up a new barn and extend it, but the farmer inside the park was not able to do so and had to build a barn on exactly the same footprint and, again, face it with natural stone. There are restrictions on farmers' freedom to be able to expand their business.

Mr McKee: With regard to planning, if you increase legislation or whatever on planning issues to make them more stringent, farmers will find it harder to get plans passed. Already, we are trying to get wind farms passed, particularly single-use turbines on farms. Figures show that electricity could be 40% cheaper on some farms and, in one case, it was £40,000 cheaper to run the electricity. On the one hand, we are asked to have green energy, and on the other, we cannot get planning restrictions relaxed enough to allow those wind turbines to be erected. I believe that, on a national park, things would be even tighter.

With regard to the built heritage, I attended several meetings at which the new bridge at Narrow Water was talked about. In order to get that new bridge, one of the leading light towers, which is stone built and has been there for hundreds of years, would have to be removed. There is also the danger that the piling for the new bridge could cause subsidence at Narrow Water Castle. People have to get their act together. Are we going to destroy the environment for the sake of pulling in additional tourists? There definitely has to be a balancing act.

The Chairperson: I have allowed a bit more time because the environment has been of most interest to the stakeholders. I have a question for Wesley from the UFU. You have heard a number of people say that there is litter, trespassing and antisocial behaviour at the moment without national parks. However, a national park might improve the situation with better management. What is your response to that?

Mr Aston: On that specific issue, better management would certainly help. However, you have to remember that national parks are not solely about that issue; it is much wider than that. There are all

of the other issues around liability, planning, and all of the sorts of things that we have discussed. If you deal with that particular issue in isolation, it would be better if it were better managed and there were clear signed routes to access rather than unfettered access, but you are depending on individual private landowners getting involved in that. You do not want anything imposed on those landowners; it is important that they see the merit in doing it themselves. If that is the case, they have to receive some sort of reward, but, again, that is down to individual circumstances. If we are dealing with that specific issue in its own right, I can see merit in that. Broadly speaking, however, it is much wider than that; it is not solely about unfettered access.

Mr Elliott: Thanks for the presentations and your participation. There has been a very poor relationship between farmers and some of those whom I might term "environmental purists". Sometimes, there is a lack of recognition that the farming community has been at the core of protecting the environment for generations. There needs to be a better relationship between the organisations, the lobby groups, the NGOs — call them whatever you want — and the farming community. That has not been established as yet. That said, there are some very good relationships in individual instances. One of the reasons for that is because of the way that government has handled some of the environmental issues. There is also the farming community's suspicion of other people's reasons for wanting a national park, an AONB or an ASSI.

I refer to Patrick's point — I am not sure whether it is a directive or a regulation — that 17% of the land area must be designated. That is folly. Some areas may be able to have 30% or 40% designated, whereas, in others, it may not be possible to designate any land. Setting a figure that has no basis is unrealistic and unhelpful. Representation should be made from government about that. If we can reach those targets, so be it, but, from personal experience, I know about the huge difficulty that there is in dealing with an area once it is designated, whether as an ASSI, a special area of conservation (SAC) or any other European directive that comes into operation. It is hugely difficult and very restrictive.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Patrick, you said 20%. At the moment, it is 17%.

Mr Casement: The target is 17%. That is under the EU strategy to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity, which the UK is a signatory to. That is an international agreement.

The Chairperson: And you say that we have only 7%.

Mr Casement: Currently, we have just under 7% designated as ASSI.

Mr Elliott: You cannot designate a conservation area or an ASSI if it is not relative. If it meets the criteria and it is relative, then certainly designate it, but I am afraid that you are going to have areas designated that should not be. That is the difficulty with setting a subjective target like that.

Mr McAteer: I am a little disturbed by Tom's comments about friction between farmers or landowners and, I presume, walkers or people travelling across the countryside. In my long experience of walking around the countryside — Northern Ireland has some beautiful countryside — people in my company and I have always met the farmers and have respected what they might say, and they enjoyed our company. In no way can I say that there are any real disputes between walkers and farmers or the farming community. I have always found that we all get on very well.

Mr Elliott: I am pleased to hear that from a personal point of view. However, there are areas —

Mr McAteer: It is not so much a personal view; I am speaking generally.

Mr Elliott: I am quite happy to bring you to meet some farmers if you wish, Paddy, who have had different experiences. That is all that I will say. I am pleased that there are good experiences, and I said that in some individual aspects they do get on well. I hope that that improves.

Mr McAteer: There is always a side issue to disputes and a point at argument between individuals. We are talking about the overall situation, which is at it always was: a happy one.

Mr Flinn: May I follow that up by saying that we in the Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs have good relations with farmers and most of our clubs have a very good relationship with them. The issues that arise probably do not involve walkers who are in clubs; they may involve the person who comes down now and again from Belfast. Our members have a very responsible attitude and we rely on farmers. They are very important to us and we have farmers among our members.

The Chairperson: Walkers from clubs are always sensible and responsible because they are used to the countryside and respect it, but the occasional day tripper — sometimes from the city — may leave litter.

Mr Elliott: Chair, I recognise that there are good relationships, but I hope that people also recognise that that does not apply throughout and that there are poor relationships. If people do not accept that, how can we move forward? All that I am saying is that there needs to be an acceptance of that fact.

The Chairperson: OK. I think that we need to let go of that issue.

Ms Sue Christie (Northern Ireland Environment Link): I really hope that Tom was not saying that Northern Ireland does not have countryside that is as beautiful in as high a proportion as the rest of the world when it comes to areas that are valuable from the natural, historical and heritage perspectives. I am sure that we —

Mr Elliott: How would you take it, from what I said, that I was indicating anything like that?

Ms Christie: I was hoping that you would say that. Northern Ireland has as many valuable sites as elsewhere. We need to have them designated. It is not that such areas are not worthy of designation; it is just that they have not yet been designated. We are concerned that the legislation will not be strong enough to afford the level of protection to the wider countryside and to those specific high-value sites that we need to meet those international targets. This is about finding a way to manage the land to ensure that we deliver on the positives in the research paper and creating a mechanism to address and ensure that we do not deliver negatives. We have to address, in an integrated and positive fashion, all of the problems of litter, access and management so that we have a countryside that everyone wants to visit or live in and that will attract visitors from across the world.

The Chairperson: It is sometimes is not just about attracting tourists; it is for local people as well.

Mr Dallat: At the risk of getting involved, it is good to see peace breaking out between the different interest groups. Am I right in saying that it cannot be taken for granted that good relations just happen, that they must be built up and without some kind of plan, they are not likely to happen? Am I also right in saying that — and I address this to the Ulster Farmers' Union — it cannot be assumed that all farmers in every part of Northern Ireland are as responsible as the ones that you know? Is there a role for other groups, such as those who organise litter pick-ups, who take a real interest in the environment and cultivate a more caring approach to it than we who visit it? Is that not the sort of thing that you would find in a national park plan?

Mr Sizaret: To link both those points: organisations such as the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust bring together people and groups with different interests from the farming community, tourism sector, the environmental sector and community groups to try to work together. So there are organisations that are already doing some work on trying to work together on our relationships.

The Chairperson: Cathal wants to come in, there. I am sorry for keeping him waiting.

Mr Boylan: It is a lot quieter over this side, so you will be safe. I came down here today to get better informed, and it has been a good exercise. Obviously, there is a lot of good practice already and there are a lot of good farming practices. That has to be recognised. I have to go back to the research team's presentation, because there is a piece of work to be done on publicly owned land and common land that has been designated in other areas and whether we are using them as examples. That is important, because if it is privately owned land, it is a slightly different matter. If we look at some area that has been designated, be it in England, Scotland or Wales, I want to find out how much of the land is privately owned. That is a very easy thing to do.

Turning to the planning side of things, we all know that in parts of the Mournes there is only so far up you can go before you are zoned out and cannot build on the land. Let us be realistic about that. We

are talking about whether we are going to bring forward a piece of legislation to protect certain areas. It seems to me, from reading between the lines and hearing some of the things that have been said, that the issue is actually about management practices, not about bringing a piece of legislation forward. It is about how we manage the areas themselves. In doing that, we have to look at the people who are involved in that process and get them together. They have as much right to give their opinion. Any solution needs to be evidenced based.

I have an issue about the European targets, because it is not a case of one size fits all. I will just talk about the north end of the island — some people might call it something different — which is a relatively small place. We are talking about a relatively small area. The one thing I will bring away from today is the issue of management practices. We will look at target setting and whether we need to protect an area. Going back to the previous point, are we saying that, to bring visitors in, we will have to build up the road infrastructure and then charge people so that we can maintain it? That is not what it is about; it is about sharing the land, enjoying it and protecting people's rights. If there is something wrong and we need to look at policy, we will do that, but surely it is a tourism issue as well and how a tourism package is being developed in all of this?

The Chairperson: We will talk about that in the next discussion.

Mr Boylan: Maybe it is a good time to move on to that, Chair. I just wanted to make those points. The key element for me is the management practices.

Mr Carey: I will just make a quick reflection on both Cathal and Tom's points. I empathise with a lot of what was said about designations and percentages being blunt instruments. Ultimately, if we have areas designated but do not have services for protection and enhancement and management of issues and conflict, the designation is relatively meaningless. We need to focus on that.

In response to Tom's point, unfortunately, we see that there is a minority of countryside users who do not respect the countryside. Part of our function, with our countryside team, is to deal with that and clean up after campsites that are left behind and the damage caused by quads, etc. That is not just visitors, it is locals as well. There is a real need to educate people better about who owns the land they are using so they know they are a guest and know how to treat the land. I stress that that applies to a minority, but it is a growing minority. In the meantime, we have a very responsible user cohort who unfortunately get tarred with some of the bad reputation that that small minority of users bring.

The Chairperson: I will let Mrs Hanna talk on this, after which we will close this discussion and move on to the next topic.

Mrs Hanna: I just have a very quick point to make about litter. There is a lot of talk about needing management to manage litter, but litter is not just a problem for the countryside; it is a problem for the towns as well. We have it in Kilkeel, and I am sure that every town in Northern Ireland has it. There are young lads who throw their chip packets out of their car windows and drive on. The whole of Northern Ireland needs to be educated; it is not just a problem for the countryside.

Mr Archdale: Because the issue of protection and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) targets that were mentioned earlier has been kicked around by a couple of people, I just wanted to make two points. First, it is not a European target; it is an international target. All nations, bar some places such as North Korea and the "Stans" and places like that, have signed up to it. They have signed up to it because it is necessary to protect areas. That is the key thing.

When it comes to the 17%, the definition of protection is key. As Patrick said, our AONBs do not qualify. If we produce a national park that does not have the management in place, it will not qualify either. Whether the 17% is relevant in Northern Ireland is a matter of judgement, but I put it to everyone that over half of Northern Ireland is improved grassland, and you would find more biodiversity on this floor than you would in improved grassland. That lack of resilience means that we are very vulnerable. We have lost a lot of biodiversity already and we need to protect it. That is why the UK Government have signed up to a 17% target and a 10% marine target as well.

The Chairperson: Thank you. We will move on to the next topic, which is leisure, tourism and the economy. I remind members that some of the potential impacts raised in the research paper included an internationally recognised brand, a positive impact on the economy, increased tourism, infrastructure improvements, negative environmental impacts, conflicts between tourism and landowners, and new jobs being only seasonal. I will ask Susie to outline her paper.

Miss Cave: I am conscious of the time, so I will try to keep this brief.

I will look at some of the potential positive impacts. The "National Park" name is an internationally recognised brand. This brand identity may serve as a powerful promotional tool in the international tourism market, by helping to embed park values, specifically high standards of quality and environmental management, and providing greater marketing advantage for those businesses, groups or organisations associated with it.

National parks may have a positive impact on the regional economy. For instance, it is estimated that the three national parks in Wales support 1,200 jobs, producing £177 million in income to business and generating £205 million in GDP. Local economies are likely to benefit, with local shops, tourist accommodation, services and food and craft outlets potentially experiencing greater demand and income.

For example, the New Forest tour is a seasonal, open bus attraction that serves the New Forest National Park. It has experienced year-on-year growth for each of the past four years in passenger journey numbers and revenue from ticket sales, boosting the economy and reducing the number of car journeys. The tour makes an important contribution to the local economy, estimated to be in the region of £250,000 each year. Infrastructural improvements associated with the development of a national park may have a positive overall effect on the rural economy through increased access and improved services.

I will now turn to some of the potential negatives. Increased tourism may lead to negative environmental impacts, which we have already discussed. There may be potential conflicts between tourism, recreation and landowners, especially if access points are not adequate. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 applied only to England and Wales, and the provisions for a coastal path under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 applies only to England. Unauthorised access can also lead to confusion around liability; for example when there is a dispute as to whether the landowner or the national park falls responsible. There may be negative impacts on the local economy: local goods may become more expensive; local shops may stock products targeted at the perceived needs and wants of tourists rather than the needs of residents; and the demand for holiday homes may have an inflationary impact on the local housing market. In 2011, Halifax conducted a national parks review, tracking house price movements in 12 of the 13 national parks across England and Wales, based on data from the Land Registry. According to the survey, the average price of a home in a national park in England or Wales is 48% higher than the average home in the respective county.

Designating an area as a national park might necessitate investment in the area's infrastructure and amenities to ensure customer expectations are met. That might require the mobilisation of public and private investment in a constrained economic environment.

In conclusion, there is a need for the potential impacts to be considered so as to reduce any resulting negative impacts. There is also a need for more clarity on the process in order to reduce existing fears. Again, I hope that those points have served a purpose in facilitating your discussion. On that, I will hand over to the Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Suzie. I remind everyone that this section is on the potential impacts on leisure, tourism and the economy.

Mr Boylan: We have not got the weather for it today.

Mr Hamilton: I wonder how successful an open-top bus tour of the Mourne would be on an afternoon like this.

Mr Boylan: We picked a lovely tent. There is a racetrack at the side.

Mr Hamilton: Do you fancy running one, Dessy?

The Chairperson: It will be the same in Scotland, Wales and England. When it rains, it does so all over the UK.

Mr R Clarke: I also lead on tourism for the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There is some interesting work going on in England at the moment to demonstrate that AONBs attract visitors. AONBs have proportionally higher numbers of tourism-related employment. Again, it is not necessarily the designation that drives tourism but the place. It is your heritage coast — the Causeway Coast — and the Mourne hills that make people want to visit, not the fact that a certain place is designated as a national park or an area of outstanding national beauty.

Mr Casement: My concern is the use of the brand. The national park brand is internationally recognised, there is no question about that. However, it is a brand only if the designated area is a proper national park and meets the international criteria for a national park. If we were to designate somewhere that did not meet those criteria and were to call it a national park, we would be guilty of brand theft. We would be found out very quickly and would be the laughing stock of the world. Therefore, I warn against a substandard national park being slipped in and attached to the national park brand. The national park brand demands certain requirements for management. Nature conservation and landscape conservation should be at the top of the list, not at the bottom. Economic development is an add-on, not the prime reason for designation. We must be absolutely clear about that. If we are going to use the brand, we have to do so honestly.

The Chairperson: Well said.

Mrs Hanna: National parks are not really drivers for the economy. They are more a conservation scheme than anything else. Northern Ireland needs to be promoted as a tourist destination, and we have very beautiful places to promote. It just needs a little bit of innovative thought to get that promotion off the ground properly. The Province as a whole needs promoted as a package.

Some of the reports quoted in your research paper state that tour operators said that national park designation would not necessarily make any difference to them because people knew where they wanted to go to and the nice places to visit. The places were known, and that is where people wanted to go to. One of the reports also stated that only 2% of visitors to Loch Lomond and 7% of visitors to the Cairngorms said that designation was very important to them. Therefore, only a small number of visitors to those places were influenced by the designation. That is a very small percentage.

A couple of weeks ago, the 'Belfast Telegraph' quoted a representative from Superbreak as saying that that company was now promoting —

The Chairperson: What is Superbreak?

Mrs Hanna: It is a tour operator. It was promoting the Province as a destination in its own right, not just as an add-on to the rest of Ireland. That article also stated that Americans are still reluctant to come north of the border because of the threat of bombs, and so on, and, of course, the large bomb in Newry does not help reverse that impression. All of us, including MLAs, need to look to more long-term sustainable jobs, not just a few short-term seasonal jobs in national parks or in tourism. For example, in Kilkeel, we have a new factory, which will hopefully be up and running by July, that will manufacture the largest wind turbines in the UK. The factory will hopefully employ 40 people initially. Those are the sorts of jobs that our young people want. On breakfast news yesterday morning, there was an interview with young people on the Isle of Wight, who said that the only jobs there are seasonal jobs in tourism, and they wanted more long-term jobs. Our MLAs and all of us should look to a more sustainable future for the Province.

The Chairperson: We need all kinds of jobs.

Mr Boylan: If we do not get this right, we could be looking for a job.

Dr Mitchell: I will address some things that have come up during the discussion. Access under the access legislation is the remit of local councils, and there is no indication that the legislation will be amended to move that remit over to a national park management authority. That is possibly a difficult situation.

The issue of housing costs was raised. Before the crash, if you wanted a site in Mourne, you would have paid between £145,000 and £160,000 for it before you had put a block on it. The local people know only too well that people in the Province are keen to buy property in the Mournes. A national park will not make very much difference to the housing situation. We need social housing or starter

units in the area for young families. I do not know how people heat and pay the rates on the types of sites that are sold for that amount of money.

In Northern Ireland, we are world champions, but we are not very proud of it. We must be the only piece of land on the planet that does not have a national park. I was on Caribbean islands that are the size of Mourne, and I visited perhaps two or three national parks. I take on board what Patrick said, because I did not rate them as national parks. We have to make sure that, if we go down that route, they are what they say on the tin. That is my message.

Ms Diane Ruddock (Northern Ireland Environment Link): I am here in my capacity as vice chair of Northern Ireland Environment Link. A point was made, and you, Chairman, then commented that we need jobs of all sorts. It is important to bear in mind that, to achieve the overall aims of a national park, you start with the conservation of the landscape and the natural environment. From that, the promotion of the sustainable use of the area's natural resources will flow. That will take many forms, and much of it will be about how the land is farmed and looked after by local people. However, it will also be about promotion of sustainable tourism in the area, and experience dictates that, as they get bedded in, sustainable tourism products become much more than seasonal jobs, becoming an all-year-round offer.

To build on that point, some of the issues that have been flagged as potential negatives are certainly challenges, but those challenges would be very adequately addressed within the appropriate management plan. The framework of a national park management plan would be a very good vehicle through which to allow the appropriate development of a whole range of sustainable jobs so that your starting point, of protecting a very special place, delivers benefits. Those are primarily local benefits, because ultimately the local economy and the local people benefit largely from the tourist economy that is created. However, if we do not start from a position of protecting that environment, the next generation will not have that beautiful environment to use sustainably and to attract people into for any opportunity.

Mr McAteer: I was pleased to hear Patrick Casement's remarks about national park brand image, and I completely support what he said. If we are going to have national parks, we want them to be proper national parks in every way.

Mr Sizaret: We are hearing about sustainability. That has to be at the core. We are talking about tourism, and a sustainable form of tourism is important when looking at tourism in a national park or in an AONB. We must look at tourism that benefits the local economy and the local communities while conserving and enhancing the landscape. The reason that visitors come to the area is very important.

Recently, I saw a survey carried out by Fáilte Ireland two years ago. The main reason that visitors come to Ireland is the scenery and the culture. To keep the economy going, we need to keep in mind that those are the reasons that people come.

The Chairperson: I would add hospitality and friendliness, as many of my relatives have told me.

Mr Flinn: Walking tourism is a very big growth area on the Continent and in Ireland and Britain generally. I refer you to the reports from Coillte, the forestry service in the Republic of Ireland, which contain a lot of figures on the benefits to the economy from walking tourism. The reports refer to something like €260 million a year being spent on food and drink alone by local walking tourists, and over €100 million being spent by visiting tourists.

As a walker myself, when I go to other countries, I go to their national parks. I am attracted to upland areas, and there are lots of Alpine national parks and long-distance trails in Europe. There is a whole network — the Grande Randonnée (GR) trails — right throughout Europe. Those trails are big draws. In England, there is the Coast to Coast Walk and the South Downs Way, which has been referred to. Walking is a big, big business, and it attracts lots of money to the rural economy. From the farmers' point of view, it is an opportunity for diversification and the creation of local jobs in the local area, as has been said. OK, some of the jobs are not highly paid, but they are jobs for people who are not necessarily highly qualified. It goes right across the spectrum, which is a good point to make as well.

On a separate point, liability was mentioned. We, in the Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs (UFRC), have been campaigning for a change to the access legislation on occupiers' liability, such that there is no liability to recreational users. That would benefit farmers and take away any worries that they might have about someone tripping on their land and their being liable. That is a win-win situation for

farmers and for walkers. Having said that, I should say that there have been very few cases, if any, in which money has been awarded where walkers on farmland have been involved. We want to get rid of any ambiguity and change the law so that, in recreational use, you do not have a claim. That would be of benefit to farmers.

Mr Carey: I am aware of people on fairly deprived estates in Newry, Newcastle, Warrenpoint and elsewhere who would be very glad of any job, part-time, seasonal or otherwise. The key thing is that that job does not displace another job that would otherwise be there, and there is no reason that that should be the case.

Lots of research has been done. The Campaign for National Parks (CNP) report 'Prosperity and Protection – the economic impact of National Parks in the Yorkshire and Humber region' looked at national parks in the north-east of England and did a business survey. The survey showed that a range of sectors, not just tourism, felt benefit from being in a national park. That included manufacturing. That report is a piece of accredited research.

I have another point to make about economic benefits. Farming should not benefit from diversification alone. Plenty of farmers want to get on with what they are good at, which is farming and land management. In some of our areas, they need to be supported to continue to do so. For example, hill-sheep farming is becoming marginal in some areas economically. However, the biggest single factor in keeping, for instance, the Mourne healthy is proper ongoing grazing. There should be a range of ways for farming and other sectors to benefit economically, because it is important that they do.

Mrs Hanna: We talk about branding, but "national park" means different things to different people. For an American, "national park" means a vast wilderness with very few people living in it, whereas a UK national park is different. In the South of Ireland, national parks are all on publicly owned government land, not privately owned land.

The phrase "promoting an area of outstanding natural beauty" means exactly what it says on the tin. There has been a lot of talk today about promotion, but you can promote Northern Ireland as it is. One contributor talked about the beautiful country that is Northern Ireland, with many people coming over. You do not need a national park to promote Northern Ireland, but get out there with your camera and video and promote it by all means.

Someone else talked about the need to make sure that it is a proper national park. There are four principles for national parks in the members' briefing document. The first is:

"to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area."

The fourth is:

"to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities."

However, the other main point to consider is the Sandford principle for national parks. If you are to have a proper national park, that principle will be involved. It means that if the economic and social development clashes in some way with the natural and cultural heritage, the first principle takes precedence, and the economic aspect comes behind that or is lost.

Mr Aston: I wish to pick up on Valerie's point. We talked about what national park designation would bring, over and above what we have with AONBs and what we already deliver. Are we just not marketing properly what we already have?

We in the farming community do not see any direct benefits coming to us. Yes, there is diversification potential, but that is already there. What would a national park bring, over and above that? Infrastructure, development and services would indirectly benefit farmers, but we cannot see that there is anything to benefit farmers directly, over and above what is already there and cannot be developed further.

Liability is a key concern for us, certainly over access because of the issue of privately owned land. A Department of the Environment paper outlined a potential solution around liability, but it did not go far enough, as far as we are concerned. We need something in black and white that clearly states that

farmers and landowners are not liable if there is a problem around access on their land. That paper did not go far enough, but that is separate from the issue of national parks in their own right.

The Chairperson: OK, we will stop there and members may want to start asking questions. To return to a point made by the Ulster Farmers' Union, I have relatives in the Lake District who would go there most Easters. In August, the place is absolutely filled with people. Would farmers not see that as potential for opening up farm shops or offering bed and breakfast? Even if you were to open up your land for use as a car park, would that not offer huge potential for diversification and development?

Mr Aston: It is up to individuals to decide, and if that potential market is there, that is fine, but from where do you get the funding to develop those types of things? At the moment, in theory, that could happen anyhow, but people are not doing it. Why are they not doing it? They are not doing it because there is no funding to the extent that would be needed.

The Chairperson: You need a number. It would attract more tourists.

Mr Aston: It goes back to the issue of whether a national park would bring in more tourists than are coming already or if we were to market our AONBs properly.

Mr Hamilton: By way of observation, I note that Mr Clarke made the point, which others picked up on, that folk are not necessarily attracted by the status. That is a fair point. Others have talked about various places, particularly in Great Britain. If you had given me a list of places, I do not think that I could have said whether they are national parks or not. I just know, by reputation, or by having been there myself, that they are beautiful places in Britain. We keep talking about the Mourne, and everybody knows why we are talking about the Mourne. I do not think that national park status would particularly increase local visitor numbers, because everybody in Northern Ireland who has not been living in a cave knows that the Mourne is a beautiful area. It is about whether national park status would attract people from outside of Northern Ireland or not.

There are two sides to the argument. If we are attracting people from outside who are not familiar with the area, do we have the opportunity, with national park status, to direct them to particular places and ensure that their experience does not impact negatively on people living and working in the area? There is another view that we will not attract huge additional numbers. If that were to be the case, I think that that would make it even more difficult to persuade those who are sceptical about national park status. We may be able to work around some of the environmental problems that we talked about earlier and some of the agricultural problems that we will talk about next, but, if there is no additional benefit, it is going to be hard to persuade people who are sceptical of the benefits to them.

Mr Dallat: I do not mind you talking about the Mourne all day, but there is also the Causeway Coast, the Sperrins and other beautiful areas. That is just a plug. The jobs element interests me, whether you want to diminish it or not. The only growth industry, as I understand it, is tourism.

Mr Hamilton: Agrifoods.

Mr Dallat: Yes, and agriculture generally. Simon, you are just practising for your new ministerial post.

Mr Boylan: Get him to sign this cheque for you here, John. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: That was a pitch for the truth.

Mr Dallat: I live in an agricultural area, and I know that agriculture is in decline. I know that less than 9% of people are working full-time, while the rest are working part-time. We do not dismiss the part-time jobs in agriculture any more than you should dismiss the seasonal jobs that arise out of tourism. If somebody had asked me 10 years ago whether we would be talking about international tourism, I would have said no. Is it not brilliant that we are in a new situation now in which we can do that? We have got all the networks in air travel. We have all the specialist groups of tourists, who are not coming to Portrush for two weeks with a bucket and spade. They are walkers, rambles, hill climbers, and so on. I do not believe for a moment that the agricultural community would be the first to shut the door on them, but I am getting that impression. I think that it is the wrong impression, and it would be better to put the record right. You really do want Northern Ireland to succeed, create jobs and be prosperous, do you not?

Mr Boylan: How do I follow that?

Mr Dallat: Do not talk about the Mournes.

Mr Boylan: OK, I will discuss Newry and Armagh again. *[Laughter.]* Today's discussion has led me to ask myself why tourism is not doing many of the things raised. We are talking about creating jobs. Patrick, you outlined the case for branding it all. I think I will have to go back to the research team to find out the pre-designations and check the statistics. I think that we have a unique opportunity to promote this island, right across the island. There have been significant changes. There are two elements involved. One is tourism and job creation, which you should be looking at, but the other, designation, is slightly different. If areas need to be protected, that is a different matter, and we should look at doing so. However, we do not need a big stick in the form of legislation that forces us to put a designation in. The question is whether we need legislation, and that is why I am here today.

My former Assembly colleague Willie Clarke dealt with this issue. He has now gone to pastures new. Mind you, those pastures are not too far away. That issue has been highlighted for me. I mean no disrespect to anyone, and we will get something from the Tourist Board on how exactly those areas are being promoted. We have some beautiful landscapes, which I want to consider. We want to create jobs. Can we not create those opportunities now before we designate an area as a national park with national park brand and status? Can we not allow two or three hotels to be built, allow more people to open bed and breakfasts, and so on, without the designation? Questions need to be asked about all of that.

Mr Archdale: I want to return to the issue of job creation. Axis 3 of the rural development programme (RDP) has funded a significant amount of tourism development. Looking forward, there are certainly great opportunities in that area through the diversification route.

I was going to raise my next point when we moved on to discussing agriculture, but I think that it also fits very well into this discussion. I do not see any reason that the rural development programme should not pay farmers for every metre of path on which they allow public access, and I would be interested to hear the views of farmers on that. I accept the liability issues, and those would have to be worked out separately. However, that is a positive way in which farmers could be rewarded. Other elements could be considered on the back of that, and the environmental side of axis 2 of the RDP could be tailored to suit that.

Mr Sizaret: My point follows on from Simon Hamilton's comment. Whether or not we have a national park, there is a need for better legislation on national parks, AONBs, and so on, to make sure that our unique landscape is well managed, conserved and enhanced for the benefit of all. We do not have legislation that allows for that. We need better legislation and resources.

Mrs Hanna: I want to return to John Dallat's point. We did not dismiss part-time jobs: they are brilliant, and many people are involved in part-time occupations. We want tourism to be promoted and job opportunities to be created across the whole of Northern Ireland, not just in the Mournes. Our whole economy depends on that. We will come on to the agrifoods sector later, so we will not talk about it now.

We were at a recent debate in the Assembly, during which one MLA commented that you can stay here for one week — I cannot remember whether it was in Northern Ireland or just in Fermanagh. We believe that Northern Ireland as a whole, or Ireland as a whole, needs to be promoted as an entity, not just as one little corner that happens to be designated as a national park. Northern Ireland is very small. My husband and I went to America, toured six national parks, covering thousands of miles, in two weeks. You could travel around the whole of Ireland in much less time. We need to look at the bigger picture and think outside of the box. An awful lot of emphasis has been put on tourism to bring jobs to Northern Ireland. We need to widen the picture and look further afield at other opportunities, rather than just at those that are presented by tourism.

The Chairperson: I think John's point is that there is big potential for tourism in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Hanna: Absolutely. However, what we are saying, and we will be saying it again with agriculture, is not to do something that would hinder and hamper the businesses that already exist.

Dr Mitchell: I suffer from PPC — the power of my personal computer. Occasionally, I like to waste time and I go to Google, one of the largest search engines in the world. I type in, as an exercise, "national parks in Northern Ireland". Nothing comes up. The first time that "national" is actually mentioned is on the second page of results, in National Car Parks, of which there is a whole list you can visit. The point is that we are not getting out to the world in a language that people understand. They understand, just as my colleague from rambling understands, that, if you go to a national park, it will usually have the facilities and infrastructure you require, and will usually be the country's best areas for landscape. Not having that particular designation in this country is, from an international perspective, like fighting a battle with one hand tied behind your back.

The other situation is that, if national parks are so bad and if they are not economic generators or engines, you would expect some to close. I went back to Google, and I asked, "Can you tell me of any national parks that have closed?" Google was packed full of complaints from people about threats to close national parks, particularly in America, when the currency was in trouble and it was decided to close the banks. The first thing to suffer was going to be national parks. America went critical. So, there are messages for us when we are thinking of what we should really be doing in the future with our special areas. I know that half a loaf is better than no loaf at all, but we must get it right, and we must conserve the brand or image of national parks at the same time.

The Chairperson: You have reminded me that there is a mountain in Yosemite National Park called half loaf mountain.

Mr Boylan: Do we take from that last point that you are going to have a word with Google on that matter?

The Chairperson: I know with satnav you can just type in "national parks" and it will come up.

Mr McKee: Rather than ask Google, I would ask the residents their feelings on a national park. In the Brecon Beacons, 10 years ago, 20,000 people signed a petition to get out of a national park. Why? It was not only farmers who had difficulties; it was the residents. We refer in our research to the painting of doors and types of roofs. Those things were a reality. Those were the things that they had to do. Even double glazing was not allowed, because it was getting away from what was original.

Another gentleman mentioned rural development funding; so much per metre for paths. I can assure him that there are reasons to avoid that. I got my answer from Minister Sammy Wilson, after he had gone to the Cairngorms. He stood there, 4,000 feet up, and said that a national park like this would be a brilliant place. I would have bother finding anywhere in Ireland that is 4,000 feet up. I managed to get speaking to a man who sits on the National Park Authority, who was not invited to that particular meeting. He was a vet and a farmer, and he spoke for 1,800 farmers. I asked him what he saw as the problem, and he said that his main problem was insurance and liability. I said that I understood that it had been taken care of, but he said that it had not. He said that the minute that you alter what was original and natural, say, for example, a path, a bridge or a stile, and someone gets hurt, because you have altered that, you are liable. He said that, foolishly enough, he took £3,000 and made a pathway on his own land, and now fears every day because if someone trips on that, that is his responsibility.

The Chairperson: Alright; one response from —

Mr Flinn: May I say —

Mr Boylan: We need to move on, Chair.

The Chairperson: Yes, we have to move on.

Mr Flinn: I was just going to respond on that liability point. I am from a legal background and I know that if councils, which enforce the rights, agree a right of way with a farmer, they will insure that farmer so that he is covered for any injuries. So, if you agree a right of way with the council, the council will insure you. That is the present policy.

The Chairperson: OK. We need to move on to our last discussion point, which is agriculture. I invite Mark Allen to give a presentation.

Mr Allen: Thank you, Chair. By way of context, I think there was some debate about the role of the agrifood sector. That is a growing part of the economy, so there is a contradiction there. Any of you who were here earlier this morning with the Agriculture Committee would have heard about the impact of the current malaise affecting the euro and exchange rates.

Farming as a profession is coming under pressure. The price for milk and for lamb has taken a dive in recent weeks, so incomes are marginal. It is still a successful part of our economy, but that leads me on to one of my first potential positives in relation to national park designation: it could generate additional income for farmers. The reality is that a lot of our farmers at the minute rely on their single farm payment to provide an income. You can debate that all day, but if there is anything that would free up or attract additional income, it would undoubtedly be of benefit to them. Now, 70% of land in Northern Ireland is categorised as less-favoured area (LFA), so the reality is that any national park, whether that is the Mourne, west Tyrone, the Sperrins or whatever, is probably going to contain a fair proportion of LFA. That means that farmers already in that area would be able to avail themselves of LFA compensatory allowance payments. There could also be additional agrienvironment schemes, and those could top up income.

People have talked about branding, and the second potential benefit could come from branding products that come from a national park and building on the value that the designation would bring. In the previous work that I did, I looked south of the border, at west Cork. I know it is not a national park, but that area has a fuchsia brand, which it uses to promote food, seafood, dairy products and even accommodation. That is a very successful way of their succinctly marketing that area to an international audience. That is one potential that could be replicated in Northern Ireland; produce could have a Mourne or a Sperrins sticker on it, which could make an impact. That could be a potential money-spinner.

Another potential benefit or positive that has been touched on extensively already is the idea of the management of visitor access. A national park authority or the creation of a national park could provide an opportunity for people to resolve issues around access. The current situation around liability is a minefield, as people have said. However, through a national park designation, you could effectively see a situation where groups of landowners could develop a common framework for access in conjunction with authorities. That is a potential benefit.

Moving on to potential negatives, I will draw on my previous point, but from the opposite view: if you designate a national park, you will have potentially increased pressure for access and increased costs for landowners. I am not going to repeat what people have said, but there are issues around liability. Another issue that has not been touched on is the impact on farming practice. Say, for example, at particular times of year such as lambing time, there may be an impact through people coming on to land, or the times of harvesting crops or conducting particular activities could be affected. There could be a conflict with how people want to use the countryside.

The other potential negative is the concept of increased regulation for farmers. Farmers in Northern Ireland have experience of agrienvironment schemes. Many are involved on a voluntary basis and many benefit from them. However, there is fear among many stakeholders, and a number of people have alluded to it, that a national park designation might bring an additional burden, whether in relation to additional moneys that they could apply for or in relation to planning. Those are some of the things that people are concerned about as potential negatives. At this point, I will hand back to you, Chair.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mark. I invite the stakeholders to express their views. There is silence — I do not believe it. Have you talked yourselves out?

Dr Mitchell: Madam Chairman, we already have severe problems in the Mourne due to sheep worrying and disturbance of animals. That is because there is no supervision. Farmers cannot be expected to provide supervision, because they have jobs to do and are usually away on part-time jobs.

We also have just around 9% full-time farming in the Mourne, with small landowners. Sometimes, the whole family is away working, which means that the countryside is unsupervised at times when a lot of people are moving around it. We put electronic counters on pathways in the Mourne, and the number of people who were up there during the summer months scared us silly. The only way to combat that is to have promotional education and rangers on the ground who, if they see situations arising, can step in and rectify them.

Mrs Hanna: I do not know where to start. The new buzz phrases are "a shared future" and "shared space". All the people of Northern Ireland want an equal opportunity to do well, no matter what part they are living in. It has to be remembered that for the farmer, his fields are his shop floor, with all of the health and safety and biosecurity issues that arise from that. We cannot have people walking wherever they wish to. Unfortunately, that is what happens when you put a national park name on an area. People perceive the area as belonging to the nation, and then the word "park" means play area.

If you go to the Brecon Beacons, do not talk to the National Park Authority; get out into the countryside and talk to the farmers. They will tell you about being challenged because they were on their own fields with their quads and with their own dogs doing their own work and looking after their sheep. That is reality.

Dr Mitchell talked about sheep not being looked after and so on. I am sorry, John, but we are back to the Mourne. The high Mourne are in trustee management. If there are problems, they should be addressed to the trustees who have management authority for the high Mourne. The lowland farmer manages his own land.

In the area where I live, there are a lot of large, full-time dairy farms working, and those men work hard, from morning to night, on their privately owned land.

As regards the counters, we would not challenge the figures for tourists, but if you have an electronic counter and you have children running in and out, they would just enjoy doing so to see the counter going up.

The Chairperson: They would get fed up after a while, I am sure.

Mrs Hanna: After a little while, yes; but it does happen. So, figures can be thrown out anywhere.

Rangers cannot cover all of the area. The high Mourne are in ownership for the graziers, and the mountain trustees do a tremendous job.

The Chairperson: People need access to get up to the high Mourne, and that is a problem.

Mrs Hanna: That, again, needs to be discussed with the mountain trustees who manage the area on behalf of the lowland graziers.

Mr Carey: I have a quick point of information; it is not a huge issue. The visitor counters are invisible. A wee beam across a stile is broken by someone's leg, and that is recorded in a data box. So, there is not much fun to be had.

To be honest, the issue that we have had with counters is lack of reliability, in that they get inundated with water and freeze at low temperatures and high altitudes. So, they probably underestimate the number of visitor up there. That is just a point of information.

The Chairperson: What are the numbers per year?

Mr Carey: Due to the unreliability of the counters, we do not have an accurate annual figure for the whole of the Mourne. We get snapshots. For example, for the Trassey track, you are looking at about 40,000 people going through the stile at the top of the Hare's Gap in an average summer. That is only one of a number of entry points. We need to get a more reliable figure. Again, there is a lack of manpower; we only have two rangers to get around and check the counters, etc, which makes things difficult. So, unfortunately, our record of numbers is poor.

Mr Aston: Going back to the earlier point about the economy and where we have identified the potential positives for agriculture from a national park designation, we would go back to the argument that we can see those potential positives being delivered without a national park designation in its own right. You could have additional linking from farmers to promote AONBs, or you could have branding and marketing, as I already outlined, where you have protected geographical indication (PGI) status for something if it is relevant, rather than the national parks brand.

Management of visitor access, as Valerie has pointed out, will be limited no matter what you do. Certainly, if there is the potential for more tourists to get access to land, it would be a real concern,

because it could cause more problems. We go back to the issue about potential negatives. Tom Elliott alluded to the distrust from landowners about what everybody else is trying to achieve. The issue is that we, as landowners, feel that everybody else thinks this a great idea and they are trying to impose it on us. If it is something that we, as landowners, want in those specific areas, that is fine and we will come forward with ideas as to how we market our area. If we see opportunities for increasing tourism numbers, that is fine; come and talk to us and we will talk to you, rather than imposing things on us. That is the broad issue.

Certainly, the issue of whether there is going to be any funding associated with national parks and the issue of governance of national parks and additional regulation mean that there are more unknowns than knowns as far as we are concerned.

The Chairperson: I will bring the members in now.

Mr Elliott: I am in danger of putting my head in my hands again.

I go back to the point I made earlier about regulation and the concerns and suspicion. I go back to the point made by Patrick Casement and Sue Christie about the designation of areas. I want to be clear: the designation of areas does not just mean the regulation burden falls in those areas. I know of a particular area of about 20 hectares in a special area of conservation. For around 300 hectares around that area, there are serious restrictions on what you can do. That is the difficulty. So, it would not just be the 17% that is designated that would be affected, vast areas around it would also be affected. I want to make that point clear.

I am not opposed to designating the areas that need to be designated. All I am saying is that it is not helpful to take a subjective figure of 17%; it could be 30%, as I said earlier, or it could be 10%. We need to be careful with areas around those designated areas as well, because it is the people in those areas who will suffer from any extra regulation.

I am pleased to hear that there are proposals to deal with liability, because that is a massive issue for landowners and farmers, particularly individual farmers.

I will pose one question on the whole national parks issue, and it is something that I have tried to get clear in my head: is the main reason for the designation of a national park the protection of the environment or is it to promote tourism?

Mr Casement: It is clearly laid out in the research paper. Purpose A is:

"to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area".

As Valerie Hanna pointed out, the Sandford principle ensures that that is the overriding and primary function of a national park in Great Britain. Under the IUCN rules on protected areas, which is the definition that I am using, the same would have to apply.

Mr Elliott: I appreciate that clarification. I know that the research paper said that. However, I am pleased that you clarified your view, because so much emphasis is put on claims that this would be great for the farming community, which can diversify and make money out of it, so it will be great for the economy. However, the real principle behind it is to protect the countryside. We need to be clear on that and not dress a lamb in sheep's clothing or the opposite way about. I just wanted that clarification, because the national park proposal is obviously being dressed up as being of huge economic benefit. I am quite happy to look at issues and I am happy that people talk to each other and try to progress the difficulties that there are.

Mr Casement: Experience shows that economic development, tourism opportunities and so on are the inevitable consequences of designation. That has been uniformly seen all over the world, and the figures are there. The figures in the research paper for the economic development in Wales are but one indication of that. Those are repeated everywhere that one looks.

The Chairperson: It is almost a consequence of creating the park.

Mr Casement: They are among the purposes but not the primary one. However, they are, inevitably, a consequence of the designation.

Mr McAteer: I am pleased that Tom got the answer that he wanted, but I am concerned by his talk about areas that surround those designated areas. I cannot understand that. If an area is designated, how come he has a criticism of what is beyond the boundary, or what is the problem?

Mr Elliott: I am only stating fact, and I am quite happy to bring you to some areas, Paddy, if you wish, that are next to areas designated as ASSIs or SACs and have come under huge restriction because of that. The designated area will, of course, be restricted and you expect that, but I am talking about the wider area around it, which comes under significant restriction and bureaucratic burdens because of the designated area to which it is adjacent. That is just a fact, and I am sure that the people in those areas would endorse that.

Mr McAteer: It would be interesting to find out what those are. Thank you.

Mr Elliott: I am happy to bring you to meet some farmers, if you wish, Paddy.

The Chairperson: We have to leave that issue there. Simon has a question.

Mr Hamilton: I just want to echo a lot of what Tom said. Agriculture is the most important section of this discussion on the impact of national park status. As Mrs Hanna pointed out and as everyone would recognise, if we go down this line, the areas that we would be talking about designating are largely held by people who are farming the land, so that is where the biggest impact will be felt. The answer to Tom's question was that to get recognised international status, this must primarily be about the environment, and that will inevitably impact on the farming community. The farming community is not going to be happy about that impact. That is the conundrum that the Committee will have to juggle and that the Minister of the Environment and the Executive will have to deal with. If this is all about the environment and you want to hold that internationally recognised environmental status, you will have to put restrictions on the farming community and, indeed, all communities in a national park area. For me, because of the nature of land ownership, this is the area where there is the greatest impact.

The Chairperson: Does someone want to respond to that?

Mr Aston: Great minds obviously think alike, because I was just going to make the very point that Simon did. If this is about maintaining something from an environmental perspective, it first suggests that what we are currently doing is not up to a certain standard. It also suggests that something needs to be done to rectify that and the only way to do that is through imposing additional restrictions, which goes back to the whole issue of privately owned land.

Ms Christie: I fully agree with Mr Hamilton. It seems a little at odds with what other people have said, which is that the reason why our land is in such good shape and worthy of designation is because of the way it has been farmed. So, we really need to not look on this as a conflict.

We have what we have because of the history of the land and the history of the management of the land by the landowners, and we need to maintain that. We can get added benefits through a more integrated approach to the management of land. That does not necessarily mean that there are going to be unpalatable restrictions. What it means is that we will be able to address many of the issues — access, littering and management — on a wider scale. Scenery, landscape and tourism may be addressed in a more integrated fashion. I see that as the nub of the issue. Will the name "national park" bring additional benefits? It is not necessarily that there will be unacceptable restrictions on farming, because farming has got us to where we are now. We just want to maintain the good land and maybe improve it and expand it.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that someone from a farming background could probably speak better on this topic than I can. If a guarantee could be given today that no more restrictions will be put on farmers in a national park than is currently the case, most farmers would probably be happy enough to go along with this. However, I think that the fear is of over-burdensome regulation coming from government, as Tom described earlier. The fear is that there will be more restrictions, not to achieve, but to retain that internationally recognised national park status. That is the concern.

Mr McKee: Designation is a serious issue. Let us go back and look at the Cairngorms National Park. There are three wind farms in the Cairngorms, but where are they? They lie outside the designated area. Again, in our local area, we have had an area designated — this ASSI business. Unfortunately,

the boundary of the ASSI is not permanent. It can move and it has done. The other problem is that it affects the practical agricultural issue of spreading slurry. You are not allowed to go near that boundary for certain reasons. As the boundary keeps moving, the farmers' ground becomes less and less.

Here is another issue. I fear and honestly believe, though you will probably say that I am wrong, that conservationists enjoy the idea of farming being on the decline. This is another means of getting that. People say that a national park will back up the funding for these farmers. That is not the case. If you go back to the beginning of the recession, the governor of the Bank of England said that agriculture will take this country out of recession. I know from my own business that the only people who are spending money are the farmers. They might not be making a lot of money, but they are spending it and they have kept this place afloat.

Mr Boylan: Harold, I take that point on board. It was strongly put.

I see three elements here. There is the issue of whether we need to look at designation to protect areas. Then there is the issue of tourism. Tom put one against the other. We have to look at an overall package for tourism throughout the whole of the island. Some people say throughout the North, but I say throughout the whole of the island. The third element is management practices. We may say that they are right or not right, or that we need to look at them again. I do not necessarily agree that we have to introduce new regulations or stipulations, but we need to find out exactly what is going on. To be fair, Chair, I am better informed about this issue as a result of today's event. As I said, one of my colleagues was dealing with it, but I am definitely better informed as a result of all today's contributions. I welcome those contributions, and look forward to taking a look at exactly what has come up today.

The Chairperson: OK. I am very conscious of the time. One last question.

Mr Dallat: I would like to make an observation, if you will allow it, Chair. I found the whole discussion very useful and there are things that we need to pick up. The branding thing is one. It absolutely shocked me that anyone would think that a national park belonged to the nation and is for playing about in. I understand the meaning of the international term "national park"; we need to educate local people on what it is and what it is not. That brand is very strong. With these other things — ASSI and AONB — the first reaction is, "Is that another paramilitary group?"

The other thing is that it is clear that we cannot ignore the issue. We will have to do something about it, however we do it. At the end of the day, not one of those who has spoken in favour of a national park has been anti-farming. That is very positive, and we need to work on that. The term "action group" makes me nervous, because it is just against something, and we want to try to resolve that and get away from it and do it together. Everyone will win and we will all rise on the tide together.

The Chairperson: That is a very optimistic note on which to end. I am sure that the members of the Committee will agree that this has been a very informative and productive session. Thank you all very much for spending your time and sharing your expertise with us.

This session has been recorded and will be transcribed. A draft will be circulated among all the stakeholders, who will be able to comment on it. The final version will appear on the Assembly website, and, together with other evidence, it will feed into our overall scrutiny when the Department introduces the legislation and the policy.

I thank everyone for coming. I thank the Research and Information Service staff for their presentation, the Official Report staff for transcribing the event and Assembly broadcasting for recording it. Last, but not least, I thank the Committee secretariat for helping us today. I hope to see you all again in the future.