



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Proposed Relocation to Maze/Long Kesh
Site: Royal Ulster Agricultural Society

16 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitriona Ruane

Witnesses:

Mr Colin McDonald Royal Ulster Agricultural Society

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Colin McDonald, who is the chief executive of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS). You are very welcome, and I hope that we are too.

Mr Colin McDonald (Royal Ulster Agricultural Society): You are indeed, Chairman. Thank you for inviting me and for arranging this meeting at the Balmoral show. It emphasises the status of the show as a vehicle for promoting agriculture and thus the local economy.

The RUAS's charitable activity is undertaken with the benefit of enabling finance provided by the business at the King's Hall complex. That business is carried out by the King's Hall Exhibition and Conference Centre Limited, which is a not-for-profit company that donates its profit to the RUAS under covenant.

Although much focus is being placed on our proposed move to the Maze and on the likelihood that it will become the new site for the Balmoral show, less attention is being paid to the factors and the realities that lie behind the proposal being brought forward by the council of the society for consideration by the members and a vote in June.

The key factor is that the King's Hall has taken the full brunt of competition from the Odyssey, the Waterfront Hall and now the Titanic signature building, not to mention the Dublin venues that are now within easy reach by motorway and the Dublin Port Tunnel. It cannot generate the enabling finance that it once did, and, without change, we will not be able to reverse the process.

The council considers that the only way forward is to unlock capital through the development of the Balmoral site for residential use and through finding a profitable and sustainable use for the King's

Hall. That scheme is called 'the Legacy Project'. That approach will see the Balmoral show not just continue as we know it but flourish and grow in purpose-built surroundings at the Maze. It will enable the society to continue to own a vibrant and historic King's Hall that can generate profits and contribute to the society's future.

The RUAS's charitable activity includes its flagship events, such as the Balmoral show and the winter fair, but its scope is much wider and encompasses everything that it does to promote agriculture. We are very conscious of our public-benefit role, which includes the part that we have to play in the local economy. It is for that reason that the council is promoting the need for a new location as an opportunity to pump-prime a centre of rural excellence and international exhibition facility. The preferred location is the Maze. There is a genuine belief that that site has the potential to become an economic driver for Northern Ireland. There is a groundswell of positive support for that position.

What will the RUAS do at the Maze? Most importantly, it will provide footfall at a range of events, which will bring the site to life. Subject to the members' vote, it will enter into a development agreement to build out the site in three phases.

Phase one will see the Balmoral show open its doors at the Maze in May 2013. At that stage, investment will be modest, and we will be expensed mostly on the design of the 10-year plan. Not just professional fees from the best and input from existing stakeholders, it will include groundworks and structures on the perimeter, including the entrance canopy marketplace and a start on the energy park.

Phase two will see a mixed-use scheme of headquarter buildings and facilities for likeminded bodies, potentially including the likes of the Countryside Access and Activities Network, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the South Eastern Regional College, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster. Each of those bodies has expressed an interest in being part of the vision.

Phase three will be the proposed international exhibition facility. That will come when the site has gained a foothold and the transport infrastructure, particularly the link to the motorway, has been established. Hopefully, by that stage, work will be in train on a light rail or shuttle link with the proposed rail interchange at west Lisburn. That will need investment from government. Ireland does not have an international exhibition facility, but it needs one and the market share is there. With the sporting and tourism synergies that we have, such a facility could be a player on the world stage.

The Chairperson: Colin, thank you very much.

Mr McDonald: Can I help you with some questions?

The Chairperson: Absolutely, yes. I am basing a lot of my thoughts on the information in 'Balmoral Update May 2012', which we were given in our packs. I will ask you first about the future of the King's Hall rather than the development at the Maze. In the update, you state:

"Core to this development will be the King's Hall itself which will house blue chip companies of global renown."

That is an admirably confident expression. Is it based on evidence, research, nods, handshakes or heads of agreement?

Mr McDonald: It is based on a heads of terms, which the president has signed. However, they are subject to a confidentiality agreement. That is because, if there is no will from members for the proposed development to go forward, the offer will go to a market that consists of every European city that you could care to name. When you have an international investment, it can go anywhere. International investment likes Ireland. It likes Belfast because there are two airports. It likes here because there are motorway and rail links and the residential element is high. It also likes the IT infrastructure and access to the web here. The businesses will be web-based.

The Chairperson: According to the briefing:

"The Legacy Project and the move to the Maze is the culmination of 20 years of research, consultation, and analysis".

Mr McDonald: It is actually longer than that. In 1963, the council of the RUAS wrote to the then Department of Finance and Personnel asking if it could buy lands at RAF Long Kesh or RAF Aldergrove, but that did not come to anything. In 1996, the society bid to become part of the millennium project, which suddenly became the Odyssey. In 1999, there was an idea to do a turnkey project at Sprucefield Park, which is now the site opposite Toys R Us and B&Q. The planning permission was applied for in 2003 but was not granted until 2009. It is only now, when we have both parts of the equation put in place, that we can say, "OK guys, here you are".

The Chairperson: Obviously, planning is not necessarily a function of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). However, do you have any criticisms of the speed with which those things were processed?

Mr McDonald: It appears to have taken a long time for all this to come together. However, each and every element of it has been very difficult. When you put a lot of difficulties together, the time extends, does it not?

The Chairperson: It has not been a single process over a 20-year period. As you indicate, you have been looking at —

Mr McDonald: It has been elements of it. I know that OFMDFM is not responsible for planning. However, if international investment comes, it would not do to hold it up because of the planning. Really, the RUAS sees the job-creation potential for here and at the Maze as the key element. These days, if we can get international investment that will bring jobs, we all have to do our level best to make sure of that on the ground.

The Chairperson: How many jobs are we talking about, and can you split them between the two sites?

Mr McDonald: I cannot. That is a matter for the next time I come to talk to you, which will be after the members vote, I hope.

The Chairperson: I am conscious that you are talking to us ahead of the members giving the endorsement.

With regard to what you hope to do with the legacy project at the Maze site, I note that you propose a purpose-built healthcare facility.

Mr McDonald: That would be here.

The Chairperson: Oh, that would be here. Would that be a private facility?

Mr McDonald: No, it would not. But how do you define what is private and what is not these days? There would certainly be public and private involvement, but, again, that is more for talking about after we get an agreement.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Francie and I were going round some of the stalls, and it was lovely to see the energy about the place today. In fact, in one stall, we got Catalan food, and we ordered it through Spanish, and, at another stall, we ordered organic food through Irish. It was lovely to see the dynamic that was going on. It was also lovely to see the young children. Well done, it is a fantastic event.

Mr McDonald: Thank you both, personally, for the effort that you put in with the work in bringing half this equation to the table.

Ms Ruane: I am very excited by this. I have two questions. I heard you on the radio this morning. How do you believe that the vote will go? I would love to see this project going ahead. I think that it is a very important project. I wonder whether you could give us an analysis of how you think the vote will go, although I accept that you will probably be slightly constrained.

Mr McDonald: I feel genuinely sorry for politicians who have to go through elections and have to get elected on a mandate, while people vote on a different mandate. I am finding that. As you say, Ms Ruane, the decision for this is a no-brainer if you look at it logically. However, the other issues that are being voted on are not about this. We have to make sure that a big majority of members turn up on the night, put an x on a piece of paper and put it in a slot in a box and that those who maybe have other issues that they want to vote on do not have their way.

Ms Ruane: I am not speaking for the Committee but for my party. If there is anything that Sinn Féin members of the Committee can do to support the development of the project, we will be happy to do that.

Mr McDonald: Thank you.

Ms Ruane: I have a second question. I went to the National Ploughing Championships in Cork a couple of years ago — I am sure that you have been at those championships — and I was struck by the energy there. I am not blaming the media, but there is a stereotypical image of rural Ireland or of what rural communities are like in the North of Ireland. For me, the image does not fit the stereotype, and I think that events like this really show how it does not. What links do you have with the National Ploughing Championships? You talked about links with Dublin and said that you are looking at things on an all-island basis. I think that that is a clever way to do business. Do you have any comment to make on that?

Mr McDonald: Anna Marie McHugh from the National Ploughing Association will be here tomorrow to find out if we are doing anything that she can copy at the National Ploughing Championships. So, yes, we have a link with that organisation. We also have links with the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) and the other big shows in England and Scotland. We are not supposed to be in competition, so we do our best to copy the best ideas.

I love the National Ploughing Championships. It is the same as the Balmoral show in that, when they leave that event and are asked what they did there, people say that they did not do very much but they were there. Being there is what is important.

Mr Molloy: Congratulations on the show. I welcome your proposal and hope that it goes ahead. We were talking earlier and said that one of the biggest draws of the Balmoral show was the country coming to the town. Could that be reversed? Could we get the cities and the towns to go to the country at the Maze/Long Kesh site?

Mr McDonald: I think that you will get both. We have tried to build up the numbers of city folk who come to the Balmoral show. I am a city boy. I came to the Balmoral show because I like diggers, but everybody comes for different reasons. We have tried to make sure that we had that market, because the rural people were coming anyway. We worked hard at it, and, over the past five years, we have really built up the urban presence. Last year, we carried out a survey that asked whether people would come to the show if we were at the Maze, and an overwhelming majority said that they would. There are things here that they want to see, and it does not matter where you put them. The brand, the activity and the interest are strong, and people will go.

The idea that people will be able to park at the Maze site is crucial. People are sick, sore and tired of having to park two miles away from here, so that will be a big selling point. You will not only get the city folk going; you will get more country folk. You will certainly have more people from further afield. For example, in the Limousin classes this morning, there were exhibitors from Limerick and Cork. They have to come up to Belfast, and it will make life much easier for them if they can get in and out easily.

Mr Molloy: I am sure that the local residents will be delighted if the show moves to the Maze/Long Kesh site. It is only for a few days, but the congestion must be difficult for them. That congestion also puts some people off. I saw the congestion and heard about it on the radio. I think that the other site, with the possibility of developing it for other things, is the future. Hopefully, the organisation will decide to make that move. As Caitríona said, if there is anything that we, as a Committee, can do, hopefully, we will do it.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Francie. You have lost your microphone.

Mr Molloy: It was the power of the voice.

The Chairperson: It was the power of the thought, surely.

Mr G Robinson: If the vote is favourable — I hope that it is — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr McDonald: Some road improvement works need to be done. I take comfort from the Festival of Speed event that happened at the site recently, which proved that the roads can work. Our demand will be greater. It will be difficult, but it will be done.

The traffic management plan that is put in place for the National Ploughing Championships, on roads that are no bigger than those in the Lisburn area — in fact, they are smaller — is planned well. Our authorities here will do the same thing. We can plan for it, if we start far enough in advance and put a good plan in place. It will mean some inconvenience. It will mean one-way systems, but it is doable. We have to find a solution to that.

Mr G Robinson: Are you confident that it will be in place in time?

Mr McDonald: It will be difficult, but all the authorities involved, at whatever level — councils, police and Roads Service — have to work to make this thing happen.

Mr G Robinson: It is a big challenge.

Mr McDonald: Yes, but it is doable.

Mr Clarke: Thank you, Colin. I apologise for being late. I had to walk two miles. I found it difficult to get parked, but I am here now. Hopefully, if the right decision is made, it will not be so difficult to park. We may even find the tent more easily the next time. The map that was supplied made it very difficult to find. That aside, I am sorry that I missed your presentation.

Mr McDonald: I think that you have heard most of it before when I have been bending your ear, Trevor.

Mr Clarke: As regards the vote, I am a wee bit challenged by all this. From the side of the fence that I sit on, I was always of the impression that a lot of the drive behind the Maze/Long Kesh site was the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society. I am a wee bit concerned, then, that there is to be a vote. If you do not mind me asking, will you tell me what question is being asked to be voted on? I do not think that that will be a secret.

Mr McDonald: No. In our scheme, as it is called, the council has to have members' approval to sell land and to borrow or raise money to fund the project. The first part will involve the residential development that we are doing by joint venture here. We will have to sell the ground that the houses are sitting on, so that requires approval. Secondly, there is the bridging finance that will be required because of the time it will take to move to the Maze and spend money there before we get it back later when this part is built out. The time delay causes that. Furthermore, the whole of the proposal means the Maze too, because it is the preferred location. The council's view is that it is the only one that we can work for all the reasons that I outlined. So, the whole package needs the council to do it, but the council requires the members' approval to sign on the dotted line.

Mr Clarke: I am going to tease out slightly more on that particular aspect. Is it down to finance? Is there nervousness about the location and the investment that your organisation has to put in? Or — I am trying to help you here — are the Government doing enough in terms of finance to encourage you to go to that site?

Mr McDonald: The need for government investment will come at phase three for the international exhibition facility. Lots of people sitting round this table have said that they will be willing to support that when we come forward.

Mr Clarke: That is good.

Mr McDonald: Including you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Clarke: Yes, and that is why I said that is good.

I have a criticism, and it is a criticism in Northern Ireland as a whole. This is a big event, and I like to get to it. But there is another large event on this weekend, and we always seem to clash the two events together — two big calendar events in Northern Ireland. When can yourselves and the organisers of another very large event this week get together and decide that you should not have the North West 200, which brings thousands of people up to the north coast, and this event down here in Belfast — hopefully, outside Lisburn in a couple of years' time — at the same time? Whether here or at the Lisburn site, the potential is there to separate the two events and get people to go to one and then the other. People are having to make a choice today about whether they are up getting ready to watch the North West 200 tomorrow and the trials or coming here. You could say that if they are interested in farming, they will just come here, but that is not necessarily the case because they obviously have a passion for both. There is a difficult balance. I think that, although your show has been very successful, it could be even better if there was a separation of the two large calendar dates.

Mr McDonald: And, of course, the RDS business breakfast was going to be here on Friday morning, but for some reason they decided to go to Twickenham on Saturday night and are not coming here for breakfast. I think that they are wasting their time entirely going to Twickenham.

The Chairperson: Do not push it, Colin.

Mr McDonald: They should come here and have their breakfast and not bother going over to London. I will be over in London, too, but for the right reason.

Mr Clarke: With regard to the question that I put to you, there are two very big events in the one week: a sporting event and this one. They clash.

Mr McDonald: There has been a clash every time. The North West 200 is always either the weekend before us or the weekend after us. This time, it is the weekend after us. People can do both.

Mr Clarke: It is tomorrow.

Mr McDonald: The actual racing is on Saturday.

Mr Clarke: The roads are closed tomorrow. There are two races tomorrow.

Mr McDonald: So it is not on on Saturday?

Mr Clarke: It is on on Saturday as well.

The Chairperson: They have expanded it, Colin.

Mr Clarke: I think that it has an impact. I think that there are people on the north coast today who make a week of it. They would love to be here as well, but they have as much of a passion for motorbikes as for this. There is probably a balance to be struck. That conversation should be had, I think.

Mr McDonald: Yes. We speak to Billy Nutt, and he exhibits here for two motorbike shows. The other issue that we have is that we are only one of 16 agricultural shows in Ulster. The next one will be in Ballymena. It would not do if we moved to a week later and the Ballymena show had to compete with the Balmoral show. Each of the small county shows has an economic and community impact in each of those regions. It is very important that that community activity is kept up.

The Chairperson: Could you, for example, swap with the Ballymena show?

Mr McDonald: Not easily. The big shows all tie in together as well. It is certainly a thing that we could talk about, but I do not know whether we could get a solution. The difficulty is that there is a huge demand for us to have it on a Saturday.

The Chairperson: How important is the exhibition facility to the overall scheme?

Mr McDonald: You would not need it to start, but you would need it for the overall Maze project. It would be a driver for economic activity at the Maze. For the 360 acre site, you would need it.

The Chairperson: So, for the big scheme and sustainable success, it is absolutely key?

Mr McDonald: I think so. There is a market, and it is a great opportunity for us to do it. Not for the RUAS to do it, but for Northern Ireland to do it.

The Chairperson: It would be an exhibition facility without a conference facility. Do you not think that having to go elsewhere for a conference if you wanted both would be a drawback?

Mr McDonald: It is a different market. Exhibitions and conferences are not the same market.

The Chairperson: I assume that you have done a lot of research into that, and the potential is there?

Mr McDonald: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: It is a pleasure to be here. I am bringing the city to the country today, but my father-in-law is a farmer in south Armagh and my colleague is a community farmer in the Castlereagh hills, so they will be proud of me today.

I must say, public transport is criticised quite a lot, but it got me here today extremely conveniently. Hats off to the train network for my journey, anyway.

From the scale and scope of the different issues that you have on show here, it is clear that the agrifood sector is of regional and international significance. How will the Maze/Long Kesh site benefit the regional agrifood sector? You also mentioned that there is scope for making a contribution to the emerging green economy as well. I see mention of an energy park. It would be good to hear about some of the specific benefits that you envisage for the agrifood and the green economies.

Mr McDonald: The difficulty with a lot of the green energy projects is the uncertainty of the market. How can people involved in it be sure of a return in view of the size of the investment that is needed? It is a risky business. At the minute, the only thing that you can be sure of is wind, and that is small wind. However, there are so many other technologies. You certainly cannot be sure of solar or photovoltaic (PV), yet we will do that. You cannot be sure of biomass, yet we will do that, because, in a co-operative nature, we can offer farmers, say, the chance to supply biomass to a biomass plant. We can enter into a contract because we are a not-for-profit organisation and demonstrate that the system works on a co-op basis. We can show in the business plan that it works, but, to get confidence in things, you have to demonstrate them. Demonstration on all the green things will work.

With regard to the scheme overall, the thing that constrains us most is scale. Everything that we do here is too small, too tight and too difficult to organise, whether that is getting in or getting out or the facilitates for the trade stands, the exhibitors and the public. Size is the key driver. That will change it most.

Mr Lyttle: So, the Maze/Long Kesh site could be an incubation site for the trialing of green economies, and it will also offer room for expansion. We have spoken about the need for public finance to make things possible at the Maze/Long Kesh site. What level of public finance is needed?

Mr McDonald: The way to do that is to come forward with a business plan. Government are no different from any other funder — they need to see that their investment will have a satisfactory return. When we get to phase three, it will be a matter of telling government what we think we can do together and asking them whether they are willing to join us.

The Chairperson: Colin, there has been a lot of speculation about not just the RUAS moving to the Maze site. At one point, you were potentially going to have a national sports stadium as a neighbour, and, I think, there was also speculation about a national motor sports centre. There will be other developments at the Maze. Do you have any ideas about what would complement your work or what would not be so welcome? Do you have any views on the overall Maze site?

Mr McDonald: I think that what is presently called the peace-building and conflict resolution centre — I know that it is about to be rebranded — is a good complement to us. I also think that the aircraft

hangars present a wonderful opportunity to work together. At the Festival of Speed, a large number of people called there. The real answer to your question will come in the next presentation. We are working with the Maze/Long Kesh programme delivery unit (MLK PDU) to make sure that everything fits together. I have not come across anybody who does not think that the opportunity that the site presents is huge. It needs to be grasped.

The Chairperson: Why do you think that the conflict transformation centre would be good for the RUAS?

Mr McDonald: We can work together. You need a certain infrastructure to run both things. I do not think that the infrastructure would support one or the other, but it would support both. Personally, I think that the work that could be done in that centre and the bodies that have expressed an interest in being involved in it will make it work. We are better together than we would be as two separates.

The Chairperson: OK. I will miss watching Barry McGuigan in the King's Hall, but, I suppose, he is not coming back.

Mr McDonald: Maybe that goes back to my very first point, Chairman. Although it is the best venue for it, it has been a long time since world championship boxing has been in the King's Hall. The reason for that is that the venue does not necessarily suit Sky TV.

The Chairperson: That is not the first time that Sky has been criticised in a public hearing in the past few weeks.

Mr McDonald: I did not criticise Sky; I just said that the King's Hall does not suit it. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: That is a very nice point. Colin, thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr McDonald: Thank you, Chairman.