



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy:  
Connswater Community Greenway

14 May 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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### Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy: Connswater Community Greenway

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)  
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr John Dallat  
Mr Alex Easton  
Mr Ross Hussey  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Mr Samuel Douglas MBE, MCA	Connswater Community Greenway
Ms Wendy Langham	Connswater Community Greenway
Mr Gerry Millar	Connswater Community Greenway

**The Chairperson:** I welcome the witnesses from Connswater Community Greenway. At least one of you is no stranger to this place.

**Mr Sammy Douglas (Connswater Community Greenway):** Thank you, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** I have been reliably informed that he is not here as an MLA. He is here as a —

**Mr Douglas:** An ordinary civilian.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, an ordinary civilian member of the greenway. Sammy, you are very welcome. Gerry, you are very welcome, and Wendy, you are very welcome. I look forward to your presentation. If you could make a short presentation and, more importantly, leave yourselves open for questions about the event. All three items of business today are being reported by Hansard, so whatever you say will be in Hansard and will form part of the Committee inquiry.

The presentation is in the tabled papers, and you have a video to play. Without anything further to do, I ask you to carry on.

**Ms Wendy Langham (Connswater Community Greenway):** Thank you for inviting us here today to give an update on the Connswater Community Greenway project.

The first thing to say is that the project, when we developed it, was based on an area of need, as we are trying to tackle some of the multiple deprivation in the most deprived areas of east Belfast, especially in relation to health and physical environment.

If you look at the first slide, the greenway is to the right in the green, which shows it alongside the River Lagan and gives you some idea of the size of the project that we are delivering. Within the project, we have 16 km of cycleways and walkways, and there is effectively a 9 km linear park from the hills down to Belfast lough, following the courses of the Knock, Loop and Connswater rivers.

The outcomes we are trying to achieve include the promotion of community safety and cohesion and the creation of a stronger, safer community and a welcoming place in east Belfast. It has been a community-led project since I started working on it in 2005. Apparently, it had been talked about for over 50 years before we took it on. We are working with the community to create opportunities and tackle the problems that affect their quality of life.

It is very important to us to try to promote health and well-being, create spaces and places for recreation, and get healthier and more active people and communities.

We have also incorporated the flood alleviation scheme, because when we developed the concept of the project we had not had the serious floods of 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012. It has been really important to the local people for us to incorporate a flood alleviation scheme, and we have worked with DARD and Rivers Agency to do so.

Work has already commenced on phase 1, which is the Victoria Park and Orangefield Park sections. I will talk about those briefly. In Victoria Park, we have upgraded the network of paths. We are putting an observation area into one corner of the park and we have built the new Sam Thompson Bridge. We have also put in an outdoor gym facility, so we are really creating a park that people can use for cycling, walking and recreation. The bridge has been very important in linking it to the Harbour Estate and the cycle network that links to the Titanic Quarter and the River Lagan.

[A video was shown at this point.]Also, in phase 1 of the scheme — this is the Orangefield Park section — you can see, in the slide, the black line at the back of the people's houses. That is where the river was. That is the Knock river. We have moved it to the centre of the park, and it provides a much better amenity for people to cycle and walk along. We have three new bridges in this section, creating links between Clarawood and Orangefield and down to Grand Parade. You can see the line of the new river in this section. There are some photographs showing the construction of an outdoor education area for schools to use as part of that section. We are about to award the contract for phase 2 of the project, which is all the bits in between in both sections I showed you. It includes a new civic square at Holywood Arches, which is the intersection between the Comber greenway and the Connswater greenway. A new centre will go in there, and we are looking to put a cycle cafe adjacent to the civic square.

Importantly, in what we are doing, we have worked with Queen's University, and it has developed the PARC study. It is doing an evaluation of our greenway and is spending up to £1 million to look at the impact that the Connswater community greenway will have on physical activity and health. The funders are very keen for us to try to demonstrate the health benefits from the greenway, and without Queen's we would have found that very difficult to do. We are all aware of the problems with physical inactivity, and Queen's has been able to show us that there is quite a lot of physical inactivity among the people along the greenway. It has also showed us that, if we can get 2% of the people who are currently inactive to become active along the greenway, the project will more than pay for itself and its management and maintenance over a 40-year period. We think that is fairly significant. That work is really important and has baselined all the communities along the route before we put the scheme in place.

For us, it is very much about connecting people and places through a community-led regeneration scheme that we think will totally transform this part of the city. We hope to develop a greenway that many people will come and visit. You said that you have visited many projects, but we think that this has huge potential for the whole city and for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Gerry Millar (Connswater Community Greenway):** Members, you will probably hear about the benefits of cycling over the next day or so. This slide sets out what it means to the individual. The thinking behind a lot of the actions in Belfast City Council is about health inequalities in the city, and we are supporting the Connswater greenway for a number of reasons, including cycling. That is one of the underlying issues, and the PARC study will help bring that further to the fore. Our whole leisure

transformation is based on the health inequality issue, but we think that cycling is a fairly cheap and cheerful way to address some of those big issues in the city. At city level, there are all sorts of benefits if we can get more and more people involved. It is about building momentum, and, if you go to places in Holland, Denmark and so on, you will see the difference it makes. You can tell by the reaction to the Giro d'Italia that this is the time to really push and build the momentum of cycling.

I will give you some ideas of a couple of things that we are doing. We worked with Sustrans, the partnership board, the DRD, and the Harbour Commissioners and coordinated and delivered the connection into the Titanic link. We are talking to Sustrans, and the other councils — and this has probably gone into abeyance while the dust settles around the local government reform — about the management of the Comber greenway and, obviously, it will cross the Connswater greenway. So, we will need to think that through. We have mentioned the Connswater, but the big thing for us is trying to connect this across the city. We are working quite closely with the DRD on a new pedestrian/cycle bridge across the Lagan at the Gasworks, which will make the Ormeau Park basically a 15-minute walk or 10-minute cycle from the City Hall and will create a new city park. The bigger issue for me is how I, the DRD, or anyone else, will connect with that, once you are in the Ormeau Park, to, for example, Ladas Drive and the Connswater greenway? At the minute, you will have to come into the city centre and go back out. So, there is another east-south link that we could do.

The last one I want to mention, to make sure you are aware of it, is the public bike hire scheme. The DRD has provided us with the capital funding to acquire a lot of bikes. We are about to go on site with that, and there will be 300 hire bikes and 30 different venues around the city centre. Our politicians are very excited about this; the only thing is that they want to expand it to the other parts of the city. We have done a sensitivity analysis on the cost of that and we think that it will begin to make money after about two years. We have some private sector sponsorship but we are looking at the model in Dublin, which started in the city centre and has gone citywide. That is about to start. We think that there will be a big benefit if we can expand that and get support from wherever. The urban villages were recently announced, and cycling will be a big way to help interconnectivity in those new areas. That is a quick run-through to tie in with the work that we are doing on the Connswater greenway.

**The Chairperson:** I will start with a couple of areas. In the presentation, you mentioned upgrading a number of crossing points on the greenway, and I travel across some of those on a regular basis. What is the extent and estimated cost of those crossings? You mentioned working with the DRD on some of the issues. Perhaps you could give us a breakdown of the Department's role and where the funding is coming from. Coupled with that, you could maybe tell us how the DRD, which we have to oversee, has supported the design and development of the Connswater community greenway. It is important that we know that because there is a new cycling unit in the Department now. Could somebody tackle those questions first?

**Ms Langham:** You asked about the crossings. The whole ethos behind the scheme is about connecting people and places. We have a lot of interfaces with roads along the way, and we are trying to change the priority so that pedestrians and cyclists will have a safe journey along the greenway. We have a major traffic upgrade at the A55 to link to the Cregagh glen, where there is currently no green man crossing to get people safely across. It is quite dangerous to try to get across the road with a bike or a buggy. We have five puffin crossings, four toucan crossings, two pelican crossings and 34 uncontrolled crossings plus we are putting in street lights, kerbs and pavements along the way. A lot of investment from our grant-given money is going towards those crossings. That is the first point.

You asked about our partners and funders. The Big Lottery has invested £23.5 million. Belfast City Council has invested £4 million, DSD has invested £3 million, and DARD is putting in at least £11 million towards the flood alleviation scheme. That is the breakdown for our main partners. It is worth mentioning that the council has agreed to manage and maintain the greenway for 40 years, which is really important for us because building it is one thing, but managing and maintaining it is a huge responsibility, and we are working very closely with the communities to work with the council in looking at how we do that.

You asked how we have worked with the DRD. We have gone to the DRD with the various design iterations, because it is a huge scheme to design. We recently met the cycling unit to discuss a couple of areas where the crossings in place are either in the wrong place and we want to move them, or where we want to change the crossings. The cycling unit has been really useful to us in that it is now established and can hopefully help us to try and tackle some of those issues. We also have a meeting with the Minister on 4 June to talk to him about contributing towards upgrading the pavements that we will have to do to make the greenway look pretty special. We are funded to deliver a living

landmark. We want the quality of the materials, the lighting, benches, pavements and crossings to be much higher than maybe Roads Service would normally use. We will talk to the Minister about whether they will contribute towards the bill for the crossings. The estimated cost of the crossings alone, and this is before we construct them, is £1.3 million.

**The Chairperson:** Do I take from what you just told me that the DRD has not been forthcoming with money. You told us that DARD gave over £11 million and that DSD gave £3 million. So, central government has already provided, but the very Department that is promoting cycling in a big way or is wanting to promote cycling in a big way has not ponied up any money at all?

**Ms Langham:** In its defence, it has not done so yet, but we are very hopeful.

**The Chairperson:** I hope that it will. You cannot speak out of each side of your mouth or with a forked tongue in relation to this. There is no point in promoting cycling, having a cycle unit, and then not coming up with the lolly at the end of the day. This is an exciting scheme and joins up with many other schemes, such as the Comber greenway, which has been an absolute success in south-east Belfast.

**Mr Douglas:** The Minister has been very supportive, and I spoke to him a number of times, as we have. I wrote to him and asked him for some support. To be quite honest, some of the work that we are doing is departmental work, and we should be working together. Up to this point, we have not had any support, speaking to some of the officials. So, we hope that the Minister will be open when we meet him on 4 June. We should be getting a bit of encouragement from the Department for the very fact that we have brought in £23.5 million from outside Northern Ireland.

**The Chairperson:** I understand that the Department has not ruled out anything to the Committee. I suspect that the Committee will be encouraging, because we want to encourage cycling and cycling routes, so we would be wanting to encourage the Department as well. I would be shocked if it did not offer support at the end of the day, but, hopefully, fingers crossed, you will have success there and I am sure it will not be for the want of trying.

**Mr Millar:** I want to be more specific with regard to the overall Department and not just the cycling unit. Part of the route is going along the Cregagh Road. We are going up and down over the front of people's houses and access points. It is going to cost a lot of money to change levels because of the work that is going on. We would like to see the DRD coming in for that sort of thing to make it look serious rather than just putting down a green strip.

The rest of the design stuff that Wendy showed went through parkland, so it will be to a fairly high standard. However, the part of the route on the main street is really a DRD issue and we would like to see the Department taking a bit more responsibility for that.

**Mr Douglas:** Chair, you know that George Best was born and bred in the Cregagh estate. Part of the scheme will link to his house, which we have acquired. You will be aware of the number of tourists and Manchester United supporters who come from all over the world for matches here and go to the house. This is also about tourism and encouraging people to come into the area.

**The Chairperson:** The Minister reiterated in past days that he was committed to the cycling revolution, as he called it. That, of course, could be demonstrated clearly with some financial support for cycling routes, no matter where they are. The Committee is keen on that, too.

Has there been any funding commitment from the Department of Health? This is a cross-cutting matter with respect to health as well. Can you tell us about any discussions regarding health issues, which obviously come into your project?

**Ms Langham:** We have not had any direct funding from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but we are working very closely with Active Belfast and other bodies to ensure that we tie in with the health benefits. It was hard for us to describe what the actual health impacts of this would be, and I think that the studies that Queen's has been doing, and the information it has been giving us, will really help us in future.

We are working with local GPs and the health practice at Hollywood Arches, looking at social prescribing. That includes looking at prescribing exercise as opposed to medication in many cases

and looking at programmes that we can start introducing to get people more physically active. Queen's has come back to us with the barriers that people find to engaging in physical activity, so we are working with the council and with Active Belfast around programming along the greenway to try ensure that we can support physical activity, which I think is in everyone's benefit. Maybe with the programming, we can look at getting some additional funding from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

**Mr Millar:** Queen's drew down the guts of a million pounds in research grants to undertake the PARC study, which Wendy mentioned. The outcome of that study will, hopefully, really articulate the health benefits and, in the future, make it much easier to make arguments to the Health Department and so on to put money into preventative measures as opposed to trying to solve things after the problems have occurred.

**Mr Lynch:** Thanks for the presentation. I did not know much about this because it is in Belfast. We saw a greenway on our travels in Mayo, and it is different because it goes through the countryside and does not have the same expense as yours, which goes through the city, with traffic lights and so on, making it much more expensive. Maybe Kieran and I would like to go and get a spin on it as well some time.

**Mr McCarthy:** No problem.

**Mr Hussey:** Thank God you did not volunteer me.

**Mr Lynch:** I did not see you coming in, Ross.

**Mr McCarthy:** Not even the electric one?

**Mr Lynch:** Wendy, you talked about promoting it on a wider scale than just in Belfast, and that was one of the successes of the scheme in Mayo. It was promoted Ireland-wide, then to the islands and worldwide, and that is where its success came from. How do you propose to do that? I think that it is a good idea and a great scheme. I know that the one in Mayo is mostly for leisure tourism and does not bring anyone to work. You can see that, along the coast, it is bringing no one to work. Does yours have a mixture of leisure tourism and possibly bringing people to work or to school and, therefore, tying in with the Education Department?

**Ms Langham:** Very much so. Thank you for your questions. We have six tourism heritage trails along the way, three of which we have already developed. Those are George Best, C S Lewis, and one that we are currently working on, plus a general one around east Belfast. Tourism is really important for us in the east of the city, and I think that we have a very strong product based on the people from this part of the city and what they have been able to achieve.

We think that the civic square is a really important place for us to start encouraging visitors and tourists to come to, and we have funding for a new centre on the edge of the square. That will facilitate visitors and tourists and the story. Through the product, we can start promoting externally and get people to come and visit. It is kind of important that they have a place to start their trails and tours from. The centre will be built by next summer, and the civic square should be finished by late next year. That is really good for us, and we are developing that product.

I think we have 25 — it was 26 — schools and colleges linked by the route. That is huge. I think that you saw in the video that the schools are already making use of the areas that we have developed. We worked with the Field Studies Council in moving the Knock river, and we have turned that into an educational project that Key Stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 can use as a live project. So, instead of studying flooding in Tewkesbury, which is what is on the current curriculum, they can use a local project on their doorstep — moving the Knock river, a green and sustainable solution to flooding. Education is very important for us, and we have two education areas already established under phase 1 in Orangefield Park and Victoria Park, where school groups can start and stop their tours. We have also built an eco-trail into Victoria Park which kids can use for orienteering. Having as many uses as possible and having as many people as possible using the greenway for different reasons makes the project much more sustainable for us. We are investing heavily in the tourism product and the educational benefits, which we think are really important for the project and for this part of the city.

**Mr Lynch:** Thanks.

**Mr Douglas:** Seán, I was delighted that you and Kieran were out on your 26 kilometres. I took up cycling about 18 months ago because of trauma in my family and other situations. My blood pressure was sky-high — at a dangerous level — but it is now down to normal. So it was purely out of wanting to do something about my own health that I got involved. So I am out cycling quite a bit. It is interesting; part of this inquiry must be about changing people's perceptions and raising awareness about education, dare I say it, particularly among MLAs.

I will give you an example: on Monday I was with one of my constituents from the Dee Street area who was looking to get his young daughter into a school. He talked about going over to south Belfast and the difficulties in getting across in the car. I asked him whether he ever thought of getting his daughter a bike, because where he lives, in Newcastle Street, she could get onto the greenway and go to a school two miles away. You cut across two crossings, and that is it. A couple of years ago I would never have thought in those terms, so we need to start rethinking the whole thing.

I was out this morning at the Sam Thompson bridge, which has opened up a new world to many people. You talked about people walking around there. I was there this morning at 6.30 am and I met people who were walking in the park and getting across to Shorts Bombardier. Obviously, some of them were shipyard workers and contractors; people who would otherwise have had to get a taxi. I met a woman a few weeks ago at 6.45 am, and I asked her whether she was going to work. She told me that she used to get a taxi every morning but now she could walk to work. So it is also about opening up the whole area around the greenway and the cycle tracks; it is about cyclists and walkers, but it is also a great opportunity for tourism.

I will finish by saying that a few weeks ago my wife suggested that I go somewhere for a long weekend for my birthday. I decided to go to Utrecht in the Netherlands. I know that the Committee may be looking at that.

**Mr Dallat:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Douglas:** John, I would say to you: go to Utrecht. It was one of the best experiences of my life. I saw a mother on a bicycle with three children; one in the front and two on the back. I saw an elderly woman looking after kids, and she had them in what looked like one of those ice-cream boxes on her bike with three wee children in it. You talked about a revolution, Chairperson, but cycling has revolutionised my life. To be honest, my biggest regret is that I did not take up cycling many years ago.

**Mr Lynch:** I agree with you. I started cycling recently myself, but the roads are the danger. It is about safety, and down where I am, it is the roads. I want to ask Gerry about the bike rental scheme. Can you elaborate on that a bit more? We got a really good presentation in Mayo. There is a proliferation of cycle shops and there is a turf war on, we were told, because cycling has become so popular.

**Mr Millar:** Various people have put ideas forward at council over the years, saying that we should have a bike hire scheme because London, Dublin and — *[Inaudible.]* — have them. DRD, to be fair, had grant moneys available, and we made a case: if it gave us the capital we would enquire into a bike scheme and we would try to look after the revenue consequences of paying for these things. While people will pay to use the bikes, it is about the take-up. You need to get a critical mass built up to begin to make any money on it.

DRD made the grant award, and we went through the tendering processes. It went over our capital, but we got a further award from DRD to cover that. We have been talking to a number of commercial companies to sponsor the scheme and we have done an analysis over a six-year period. We think that it will break even and begin to go into profit after about three years. The council has supported that and will subsidise it for the first couple of years in terms of revenue. At the moment, we have all the sites identified and we have a contractor appointed to supply the bikes. Of the 30 sites in the city centre, about 28 are in council ownership or about to come into council ownership with the reform of local government. Two are in private ownership, and I am involved in negotiations to acquire those over the next couple of months.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Thanks, folks, for the presentation. Like others, after about 20 years, I purchased a bike about a month ago. I will admit that it has fairly low mileage to date —

**Mr Douglas:** It is as new.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Well, not quite, Sammy, but the mileage it has done has confirmed to me that cycling has changed dramatically since I was younger. You take your life in your hands when you go out, particularly on rural roads. I was down at the conference that led to the Mulranny visit about a month previous to that, which examined the establishment of cycle routes right across Europe, and that was an eye-opener. Seán and I were at a cycling conference last year in Derry which was also an eye-opener. The examples of the Connswater and Comber greenways are there — you were there at 6.30 am, Sammy, but my colleague Daithí McKay is normally there at 5.00 am, whatever he does — and it would be good for the Committee to make a practical visit just to see what is best practice here. We obviously want to roll this out elsewhere, not just in Belfast but everywhere.

My only concern, Wendy, is that in your presentation you mentioned a pay-back time or an economic lifespan of some 40 years. That seemed quite long; do you want to tell me a bit more about that?

**Ms Langham:** To secure the £23.5 million funding from the Big Lottery Fund, we had to get a commitment from the council to manage and maintain it for 40 years. That is the figure that we have worked with, and it is the figure that Queen's University has looked at for payback. Obviously, if we got 5% of the people active, then we would recover those costs — from inactive people becoming active — a lot quicker, but that does not look at other investment that is going to come into the area. The economic returns are something else, but that is just about getting people active and the return from doing that over a 40-year period. That is just one quote, but they have many other figures in their study which, hopefully, we will be able to publish in the next few months.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** You mentioned a cycle cafe and cycle hire and all that type of thing.

**Ms Langham:** Those are not included in that figure at all. That was just looking at physical inactivity.

**Mr Millar:** Just to add to that answer, it is not all about payback. You understand the situation: the Lottery required the backstop of the council to look after this. There are six parks along that greenway which need to be maintained anyway, so it is not necessarily as bad as you might think.

**Ms Langham:** Things such as the tidal surge that we experienced in January through the project, and resolving the flood threat, for example, causes a huge saving. Some of the properties that you saw along Orangefield were previously uninsurable because of the recent flooding in the past decade. Those properties are now protected and those people can now get insurance. There are lots of monetary returns and, through the study, we will be able to bring those out.

**Mr Dallat:** Sammy, I have heard you talk in the Assembly with great passion about C S Lewis, and I am sure that he would be extremely happy with this project and with what is happening. I have memories of an uncle who was a Hibernian speaking about sneaking up to east Belfast on a Saturday morning to buy musical instruments for their band. Clearly you are getting beyond that stereotyping. How important is that in breaking down images of the past and integrating east Belfast into the city as a whole?

**Mr Douglas:** A very good question, John. In fact, when the assessors from the Lottery came over to look at our bid, a major question was how, if east Belfast was predominantly Protestant, we would make this accessible not just to east Belfast but to other parts of Belfast. One thing we did right from day one was to engage the whole community.

The reason we beat Belfast City Council and the Titanic Quarter and won the bid was because we had community involvement. When the assessors came, we had lunch on the Short Strand with a range of others. We have built a cross-community network with people from across east Belfast but beyond as well. It is important that these assets are accessible to all communities. We have been conscious of that from day one, but it is an area that we need to keep concentrating on.

**Mr Dallat:** Certainly, that reaching out captured my imagination. Wendy, you honestly said that maintenance and upkeep were important. All of us know of good projects that were inspired by good people at a particular time, but then comes another generation and no identified source. Is that an issue that needs support and needs to be addressed?

**Mr Millar:** Well, the way this works is that the council acquired all the land, so, in effect, we own it when it is finished. We have given an undertaking to do maintenance and management for 40 years. We are not turning it into the old-style "The council will manage the park and open and close the



gates". We work closely with the community. We created the Connswater Community Trust, which will do a lot of the management and animation of it. However, the council has committed to cut the grass, pick up litter, keep the lights working and resurface roads. We have adjusted our parks budget to reflect that.

**Ms Langham:** We are looking at the Comber greenway as well, because we have a huge following of volunteers, as does the Comber greenway. Rather than having Comber greenway and Connswater greenway volunteers for events, trails or animation — you saw quite a few of them at the Sam Thompson bridge opening — we want a coordinated response so that local people can get involved in helping us to manage and maintain and have some local ownership of the facility, which is there for everybody to enjoy.

We also have youth groups and community gardens established, and eco-schools using it as a practical way to learn, teach and get involved. All those layers are important. By maximising the social, economic and environmental benefits, we create something that is special and sustainable.

**Mr Millar:** It is like rebuilding civic society. You will get people interested, and the council is just the backstop for the hard-end stuff.

**Mr Dallat:** I am inspired by the amount of community effort involved in that. I have no doubt that the whole city of Belfast — everybody rises on the tide, so this project is a critical part of that jigsaw. I support it fully.

**Mr Douglas:** Because we have been successful to date, we are not there yet. We have not finished, John, but other groups from across Belfast, particularly from west Belfast, have a natural hinterland there they can link in to. We also want to link in with north Belfast and the new bridge over the gasworks will link us in. It is about bringing Belfast people together.

**Mr Dallat:** The more bridges, the better.

**The Chairperson:** Can I just clarify a point that came up, Gerry, in terms of the 40 years and the maintenance? I think you mentioned ongoing discussions with the other councils, which obviously will be Ards, North Down, Castlereagh, Lisburn etc. It is important to maintain a high quality on the Comber greenway leading into the whole thing. What stage are those discussions at?

**Mr Millar:** There were a few earlier discussions with Sustrans, the DRD and the councils about the future of the Comber greenway. It was very much at a political level. However, it has gone into abeyance a bit because of the changeover of councils. Specifically, our main concern relates to a place called Walkway in east Belfast, where they wanted to use parts of the greenway for football pitches and stuff like that. We were involved at that level, and the management came up out of those conversations. However, it has just stalled at present. I think that people are waiting to see who is who on the new councils before it is started up again.

**The Chairperson:** I think that it is important for some sort of dialogue to keep going. Perhaps you could be the umbrella body. Certainly, Belfast City Council will be the lead council for most of it.

**Mr McCarthy:** Thank you for your presentation, and congratulations on where you are at the moment. Sammy said that you are not finished yet, and I have no doubt that there is a lot of work to be done. Gerry, you said that the council has acquired all the land, and somebody referred to crossing over people's driveways. Is there no problem there?

**Mr Millar:** Just to clarify, we have acquired as much land as we can acquire. Where we cannot acquire land or we do not want to acquire land, we can use a public path creation order, which gives us a right of way, and we have done that on a number of points. With regard to the driveways, the greenway itself goes through the parkland. We put in new trails, and we are in control of all that. However, there is a strip on the Cregagh Road which is actually on the footpath. We can get the right of way along that, but the entrances into people's houses are all there. We do not want to get into a big civil engineering job and have Roads Service come in and make us change standards. However, we think that it could come in, and that is where the DRD question with the Minister is going to come up in June.

**Mr McCarthy:** Going back to our visit to Mulranny, it was amazing to find that they eventually got the consent of all the landowners. We went over the place, and we saw where the different gates were. Getting agreement was fantastic, and I hope that that applies in this case. The hotel at Mulranny was on the track. It had been a hotel when the railway was running, and it had been lying derelict for about 10 years. Suddenly, because of the greenway, it is a flourishing establishment; it is fantastic. Is there anything like that that you can see in your work? It brings people in to use the greenway and all the rest of it, and it creates business through the cycle provision, etc.

**Ms Langham:** An example is the Park Avenue Hotel, which hosted the Sky cycling team as part of the Giro. A lot of the people who stayed there as part of the Giro used the Victoria Park section of the greenway, went over the Sam Thompson bridge and linked into Belfast that way. We have also been contacted by a number of investors who want to move into the civic square area because they know that that will be the intersection of the two greenways, and they see the potential for a real sustainable eco-hub there. We think that a lot of development opportunities will come. Hopefully, it will also sustain some of the businesses along the route that are struggling. People have done quite well out of it, even during the construction period. However, we are definitely looking for investment on the back of this.

**Mr McCarthy:** That was another question — the private investment.

Finally, when you are ordering the bicycles, make sure that a percentage of them have an electric mechanism. One or two customers will need a wee extra push. Thank you very much. Well done, and keep up the good work.

**The Chairperson:** I have ordered cardiac machines. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Hussey:** First, Chair, I apologise to you and to our guests for being late. Technology was not working for me, and I had to get reconnected. If anyone believes that I cycled the 26 kilometres, I have to remove that myth immediately. In fact, the photograph that shows me with a bicycle is of a stuntman, because I was not able to do it. From what we saw in County Mayo, you automatically assume that a greenway will be in a rural area — back to the perception. I have to say that, from what I see here, you are very fortunate that you have an environment that can be adapted. Although it is in the city, you also have all of the little bits and pieces that make it that little bit more. I want to ask you a bit more about how you got the community involved in this. Clearly, in Mayo, they all bought in. Farmers bought in. Going along the track in Mayo, you will find sheep and lambs. I do not think that you will have that problem here. How did you get the community to buy in here?

**Ms Langham:** We have been working on it since 2005, and construction has only really got off the ground in the past year. We have had a stakeholder forum, a community engagement officer and community activity grants, and we have worked with schools and groups throughout that period. We also have someone working on our social media, so half of our resources on this project have gone towards community engagement and social media, which is an ongoing project. It has been the easiest project ever to sell to people because everyone can see some benefit in it for either themselves, their families or their organisations. There has been very little negative reaction to any of what we are doing here, because people see it as an investment in the future and a legacy for the families and their children. It is an area where some of the river, parks, pavement and roads are in poor repair. Who would turn down an investment of £43 million in their local environment? Everyone just sees this as an opportunity and cannot wait for it to actually reach their particular community. Investing heavily and having different activities and programmes throughout the past nearly 10 years has been a way that we have kept people engaged throughout.

**Mr Hussey:** To have thrown out the line and caught them and kept them involved for so long is a credit. There is no doubt that you see people getting fed up after a year. In the second year, they will certainly fall off, but you certainly seem to have buy-in.

**Mr Douglas:** Ross, that is a very good question. One of the things that we did was about community engagement in the early days, and that certainly helped when we got the £23.5 million from the Big Lottery. Since then, we have had stakeholder forums, as Wendy said. We had them in Short Strand, in the Cregagh estate and on the Newtownards Road. You tend to get people coming to those because they want to know what is happening. It is a good way of keeping them on board and keeping them informed. Probably more importantly, it elicits their views, and we have adapted and changed as we have gone along.

**Mr Hussey:** Prior to my accident, believe it or not, I walked about 12 miles a day and thoroughly enjoyed it. I come from Omagh, which is not a city environment. As you said, if you can encourage children to cycle two miles to school and you are still in a city environment and are able to do it, that is positive, without a doubt. What is the size of this site altogether, roughly?

**Ms Langham:** I think that it is 9 kilometres in length as a linear park. There are 16 kilometres of cycle and walkways throughout. I think that there are 124 hectares of green and open space, or something like that. I am not very good at hectares. There are 26 either new or improved bridges or main crossings. It is a huge green lung through this part of the city. We have seen how the River Lagan has regenerated the city centre and made such an impact there. Not many people know that there are three rivers in east Belfast, which are part of the Connswater system. So, it is huge.

**Mr Hussey:** You are using the rivers as part of this.

**Ms Langham:** Absolutely. The greenway has been built around the three rivers, and there are paths on both sides where possible. The rivers have acted as a bit of an interface and divided communities in the past, and that is where it is very important for us to put the bridges in place and open the gates. Queen's did a very important piece of work for us called a walkability index, which is now being used in places such as Derry to look at a park or an area and work out where the connections need to be, where the bridges need to be, where the gates need to be and where the lights need to be to connect people and places. That is really at the heart of what we are doing.

**Mr Hussey:** There is a good example in Londonderry where you will see people suddenly walking across the old barracks, across the bridge and into the city centre. That opened up, without a doubt. I will not ask whether there is access for cars so that I can go and see this, because it would ruin the whole image. However, from what we have seen and what you have said, it is very positive. A greenway in Belfast is the last thing that you would think of. Congratulations and well done.

**The Chairperson:** No other members want to ask a question. I want to clarify two interesting points that came up during our conversations. The re-routing of the river has hopefully alleviated the flood problems in Orangefield Park. I know about the tremendous devastation that was created twice or maybe three times by that river. Those benefits have to be added into the scenario. The other interesting thing, Sammy, was when you talked about the amount of people who are using the Sam Thompson bridge to go to the other side of river to get to work early in the morning. That has health benefits, apart from anything else. Are there any indications of the numbers that are using the bridge on a daily basis since it opened? Is there a possibility of a survey at some stage to find out how many people are using it, and stuff like that? That is an important point to make to Departments and to government, and if you have those figures before the inquiry closes or even now, you may let us have them.

**Ms Langham:** The first point, around the flooding in Orangefield Park — we have literally changed people's lives there. People were suffering a huge amount of stress caused by the flooding of their properties, which became nearly an annual event. We have definitely resolved that flooding problem and are currently extending the culvert at Grand Parade. I do not know if you ever go down there.

**The Chairperson:** I know all about it; it is in my constituency.

**Ms Langham:** There will be a bit of disruption while we do further culverts and river work along the way. There is an interesting point about the Sam Thompson bridge. We did not know exactly how many people would use it, but we thought that it was a really important connection through to the harbour estate, linking through to Titanic and then the city. In the first month of opening, we had over 28,000 crossings, and the counter is at a place that you were not able to access before. It is where the bridge lands in Victoria Park. So it is not people who had been using Victoria Park anyway through the main car park. It is really useful for us to have that information. On average, there are 1,000 crossings a day, and that is a mixture of cyclists and walkers. That is throughout the day, and we can get that information to you. That is really encouraging for us because, at the harbour estate end, not a huge amount has been developed yet, but we know that it will come over time. It is worth mentioning that Belfast harbour has been really supportive and has put a small car park in there.

**Mr Hussey:** I can watch.

**Ms Langham:** So, you can park your car there, get over the Sam Thompson bridge and access Victoria Park from that side. The access is particularly poor at the moment.

**Mr Douglas:** Chair, can I say a couple of things? I talked earlier about the number of people I have met coming from east Belfast into the harbour estate and Shorts. The other important aspect is that, overnight, thousands and thousands of people who work in Shorts Bombardier and other companies were able to access Victoria Park for the first time ever. They could go over at lunchtime or maybe get up early in the morning. It has huge health benefits. If you open it, people will use it.

I will finish with this point. I mentioned earlier that, when I cycle down the Airport Road in the morning, I cycle on the footpath. It must be 10 feet wide, and I do that because it is a scary place, even at 6.30 am, with the number of cars and articulated lorries there. However, there is nobody on the footpath. I have spoken to Roy Adair of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, who have been very helpful. They are looking at redesigning that area. It does not take that much money to implement measures that will provide access and confidence for cyclists, along with security. I remember writing to the Minister about the Dee Street bridge, just at the roundabout. That is a horrendous place; I am sure that you appreciate that when you are driving past it. We are looking to do something there. It will take very little to make that accessible to cyclists. In fact, the week after I wrote to the Minister, I fell off at that roundabout, but I was not too badly hurt.

**Mr Hussey:** You strengthened your case.

**Mr Douglas:** Yes. I was in Victoria Park on Saturday with the First Minister. Unfortunately, he got a puncture when going around the park. He said to me that, now, when you cycle around Victoria Park, the quality of the surface is first class. So, in this inquiry, I encourage the Committee to do our best. This is not just for cyclists but for tourists and walkers. Let us do the best we can when we are implementing these measures. As I said earlier, some of these measures will not cost much money and will make places much safer and will build confidence for people.

**The Chairperson:** Thanks, Sammy, Wendy and Gerry. It has been a very worthwhile presentation. Perhaps before the inquiry closes, we might be able to get to close proximity to that place. We might be able to get a quick run down and have a look at it. I think that would be worthwhile for members, and we could probably arrange that with you, I am sure, at reasonably short notice. It will not be before the summer recess, but possibly shortly after that.

I wish you well and, given the comments that you have heard from the Committee, you know that every member wishes you well. It is important that we get these things right across the whole Province.