



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the
Economy: Department of the Environment

11 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Regional Development

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy: Department of the Environment

11 June 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr David McNarry
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Bob Bleakley	Department of the Environment
Mr Iain Greenway	Department of the Environment
Mr Angus Kerr	Department of the Environment
Mr Wesley Shannon	Department of the Environment

The Chairperson: I welcome Iain Greenway, director of road safety and vehicle regulation at the Department of the Environment (DOE); Angus Kerr, its director of planning policy; Wesley Shannon, director of environmental policy; and Bob Bleakley, assistant director for regional operations. I ask you to make a presentation of no more than 10 minutes and then be open to questions. When we get to the question stage, one person can answer.

Mr Iain Greenway (Department of the Environment): OK. Thank you very much, Chair, and I thank the Committee for your invitation to attend the meeting. You have done the introductions —

The Chairperson: I should have said that the session is being recorded by Hansard.

Mr Greenway: OK. You have done the introductions for me. The reason that a number of business areas in DOE are represented is that a number of aspects of cycling interact with the Department's work. It may therefore be helpful to take each of those aspects in turn.

First, there is the issue of road safety. Simply put, cyclists are vulnerable road users who are not surrounded by metal that can protect them in the event of a collision. Road safety staff in DOE therefore work closely with colleagues in the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and in other Departments to seek to ensure that a larger numbers of cyclists on our roads do not lead to a larger numbers of casualties, which, in turn, could dissuade people from cycling. This cross-working includes our membership of the active travel forum, which is led by DRD.

Our work to improve road safety for all road users, in particular those responsible for collisions, includes advertising campaigns to change attitudes and behaviours; the highway code setting out the

rules of the road; and education, including the cycling proficiency scheme that is taken up by most primary schools. A number of the advertising campaigns refer to cycling casualties, including the campaign specifically focused on cycling that was first aired on Good Friday this year. These activities are in line with action measure 124 of the Executive's 'Road Safety Strategy to 2020', which states:

"We will give consideration to measures that improve the safety of cyclists; including what cyclists can do to keep themselves safe and what other road users can do."

Turning to environmental issues, more people shifting from car and public transport to cycling will assist the Executive in achieving their Programme for Government commitment to:

"Continue to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025".

Cycling will help meet air quality targets by reducing emissions of certain pollutants, such as nitrous oxides and particulate matter, that impact significantly on health, particularly on those with coronary or respiratory disease. There is also a general health benefit from exercise.

A number of pieces of legislation cover rights to cycle and the Department of the Environment's role in the formulation, implementation and support for policies and projects that encourage the provision, improvement and promotion of enjoyment of the natural environment. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) uses and implements this legislation in a number of ways. This includes funding Outdoor Recreation NI to coordinate the development and promotion of facilities through the natural heritage grants programme. Other Environment Agency work includes funding through its grants programme the creation of other walking and cycling paths; participation in regional outdoor recreation forums; research, such as 'Assessing the Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland', a report commissioned in partnership with Sport NI and the Tourist Board; and development of the outdoor recreation plan for Northern Ireland, again with Sport Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); and the management of country parks.

The Environment Agency seeks to manage its country parks to provide visitors with an environment that is visually, physically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally stimulating. The Environment Agency recognises that outdoor recreation, such as cycling, has significant health benefits.

To develop the provision for recreational activity further, NIEA country parks staff recently met Outdoor Recreation NI to discuss the commissioning of a scoping study of recreational opportunities at a selection of country parks. The study, once completed, will assist in identifying opportunities for future recreation provision such as the provision of family cycling paths, subject to funding, and potential links to long-distance cycling trails. However, some country parks are considered to be unsuitable for safe cycling.

Cycling provision is an important consideration in the determination of planning applications for new developments and in the preparation of development plans. A number of policy statements include specific reference to cycling and advocate that accessibility by modes of transport other than the private car should be a key consideration in the allocation of land for development

The Department is bringing forward a strategic planning policy statement for Northern Ireland. The statement sets out the Department's regional planning policies for securing the orderly and consistent development of land under a reformed, two-tier local planning system. The statement reflects and updates in a strategic way existing provisions in relation to planning and cycling. It also includes a new core planning principle on improving health and well-being. This recognises that the planning system can play an active role in improving the lives of people and communities in Northern Ireland and that planning authorities should contribute positively to health and well-being in plan-making and decision-taking under the reformed two-tier planning system.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I want to start with country parks. From the briefing papers we got, particularly from the departmental Assembly liaison officer (DALO), and evidence that the Committee has heard, it seems that Forest Service has developed an extensive cycle network in Rostrevor, which I assume is just as dangerous as paths in country parks. Your briefing paper states:

"Redburn Country Park at Holywood, County Down, has very steep and short paths and there is resistance from the local community to facilitating cycling in the Park after a cycling fatality."

How many years ago did that fatality take place?

Mr Bob Bleakley (Department of the Environment): About 20 years ago. It is ingrained in the folk memory.

The Chairperson: The folk memory of the locals?

Mr Bleakley: Of the local people.

The Chairperson: Right. Maybe that leads on to my next question: when was the last time that the local community was consulted? Your statement goes on to say:

"The North Down Coastal Path runs through Crawfordsburn Country Park, where NIEA is considering a cycle link from the Coastal Path to Crawfordsburn village. Consideration will also be given to possible cycle paths in parts of Peatlands Park and Ness Country Park."

What does "consideration" mean and how long has the Department been considering this? What difference is there between the health and safety issues that Forest Service has and those that the country parks might have? Is there not just a culture of not wanting cyclists, or even people on horses, in country parks?

Mr Bleakley: We have horses in Redburn and Crawfordsburn and horses available in Castle Archdale. There is not a culture of not wanting horses. It is a case of balancing competing demands. The worry about Redburn is that you could make provision for elite cyclists who want to go on downhill cycling trails and thrill rides. The risk is that unless that is routinely supervised, you get kids from the local area trying the same thing unsupervised. We do not have a permanent presence at Redburn.

The Chairperson: What is the difference between that and the forests? Forest Service does not have people there permanently either. Is it not that a series of excuses are being made, and that the wider picture and economy of Northern Ireland are being forgotten about?

Mr Bleakley: Many of the forests are more remote. Getting there is more difficult. Redburn is right in Holywood. It is much more difficult for parents to supervise. With regard to the willingness of Forest Service, many of their paths are designed for vehicles. Their property is of a much larger scale than ours. As Mr Greenway explained, we have already asked Outdoor Recreation NI to look at where we could put in cycle paths. I will point out that we already have a cycle trail at Castle Archdale. The north Down coastal path is a Sustrans route, and it runs right through Crawfordsburn Country Park. I have asked within the last six months, or probably more recently than that, for the warden there to look at how we can make the link from Crawfordsburn village. There is a path that goes down beside the Old Inn, and I see no reason why it could not double as a cycle track. It is not that widely used by pedestrians, and the evidence shows that cyclists already use it.

The ideal would be if we could link a country park to an existing cycling route so that it is on a network of paths. As regards Peatlands Park, when the Lough Neagh cycle trail was being investigated — the one that goes right round Lough Neagh — we were approached to see if we would allow it to pass through Peatlands Park, and we said that we certainly would. However, making the link into the park proved to be impossible at that time. If the link could be made, we would be more than happy to have a link to that cycle trail. Whilst a lot of it is over peat bog and the paths are soft, there are some paths that would be suitable for cycling or where we could make some modifications to make them suitable. So, we have no culture of not wanting cyclists, but we want to be sure that cycle trails are in places where it is safe to put them and where it will not diminish the experience of other users. The sort of trails that we would be looking at would be family-type cycling trails rather than thrill-type cycling trails.

The Chairperson: Can I put on the record the point you made in relation to Redburn Country Park being in the centre of Holywood? As far as some of the other trails are concerned, one is in the middle of Rostrevor, which, I assume, has young people on bikes, and another is in the middle of Castlewellan, which probably has a lot of young people as well.

Mr Bleakley, I really think that the parks are way behind the rest of Northern Ireland and have not moved forward in seeing the benefits to the economy. We have just heard from the Chief Medical Officer about the benefits to health and all the rest of it. I think that you are just making a series of excuses not to allow it to take place. It will never be 100% safe. There will always be accidents in

something like this, and it cannot be supervised 24 hours a day, but if other places can do it, why can you not do it?

Mr Bleakley: I have said that we already have done it in some parks, and we are looking at the possibility of doing it in others. You asked how long it was since we consulted on Redburn. It is within the last three months.

The Chairperson: How long have you been considering Crawfordsburn and other parks?

Mr Bleakley: I made the recommendation about six months ago.

The Chairperson: So, it has been considered only in the last six months. Has the cycling unit at DRD been in conversation with you since it was set up?

Mr Bleakley: Regarding Crawfordsburn, the only thing was the approach by Sustrans in relation to the north Down coastal path. We work closely with it, and it put in a new path for us that meant that the cyclists were not charging through the holidaymakers lining the edge of the beach. They went around the back of the grass area, and there is a cycle path from there through to the visitors' centre. It is now a case of going on further, partly out of the exit route and then taking it up into the village.

The Chairperson: Do you accept that a lot more could be done?

Mr Bleakley: Certainly, more could be done, yes.

The Chairperson: Will you consider talking to the Tourist Board and other agencies? For instance, the Tourist Board is looking at the possibility of a downhill leg of the Mountain Bike World Cup coming to Northern Ireland in the future. That event is not on a par with the Giro, but it is certainly up there. We know the benefits that the Giro has provided for the Province. Are you prepared to play your part, and is the Department of the Environment prepared to play its part in encouraging future tourism activity given the spend that it brings to the economy and the benefits it can have for future health?

Mr Bleakley: If there is funding available and we have suitable —

The Chairperson: It is not about funding. Sometimes you have to go and chase funding. There is funding available through the European Community. What moves have you made as a Department to try to get funding in for cycling through European money, which has been available? Many other countries, including the South of Ireland and parts of the rest of the United Kingdom have been very successful in drawing down major money. Through the lottery fund, for instance, £48 million is coming into the Connswater area. Have you done anything to try to get funding from elsewhere?

Mr Bleakley: In the light of the cycle trails that have been put in recently, particularly the one at Castle Ward on which my wife and I cycle frequently, it has come to our attention that funding may be available for us. That is what led us to approach ORNI to see what it reckoned. We have had experts look at Redburn, and you could put in a downhill cycle trail at Redburn. It is a very small park. We are putting in a running trail at Redburn, and I do not think that we can even get 5 kilometres of running trail. So, your downhill cycle will be over in seconds.

The Chairperson: To finish from me for the moment, €600 million was available for cycling infrastructure from 2007 to 2013. Have you been aware of that sort of funding being available from the European Community, which would be ideal for country parks, maybe the one at Limavady?

Mr Bleakley: We are aware that some funding is available. I was not aware of the scale of it.

The Chairperson: You have done nothing about trying to secure some of it.

Mr Bleakley: As yet, no, not directly, but we have engaged with Outdoor Recreation NI.

The Chairperson: You either have or have not.

Mr Bleakley: We have not sought the funding. First, you find where you would want to deploy it, and then you make your application. That is the situation that we are at.

Mrs Hale: Apologies for coming late. I was at a road safety event in Kinallen in my constituency. My question focuses on Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 13 and is on the Department's commitment to incorporating cycle paths into new developments and to promoting sustainable transport. Given that PPS 13 focuses on new developments and that, in the past decade, we have had a housing boom and a crash leaving many new developments with unadopted roads and footpaths, how do you see planning helping this retrospectively?

In Hillsborough, we have a medium-sized development being built on both sides of the village with no new road access because planning visualised that these substantial four-bedroom houses will all only have one car each and that everyone will walk and cycle. If you lived in Hillsborough, you would not walk or cycle, because it is not safe. It is a beautiful Utopia to think that planning will encourage this, but how do you realistically want to encourage people to, as Norman Tebbit says, get on their bikes and leave the cars at home?

Mr Angus Kerr (Department of the Environment): There are a number of things there. Clearly, PPS13 emphasises the importance of making provision for cycling and so on when dealing with planning applications, as does PPS3, which is a more operational policy that sits underneath it. The particular issue of dealing with existing developments that already have permission and maybe have been halted because of the recession is difficult. Obviously, if those sites come forward through an additional planning application, then new measures can be taken to look at cycling and modes other than the car in how we deal with particular planning applications.

The other aspect of that would be to look at the more forward-planning aspects of planning. As you are aware, we are about to hand over planning powers to councils, and there is an opportunity in that for a council to bring forward a development plan for an area, which could look at particular issues for a specific town, area or settlement and maybe come forward with individual policies that would suit that neighbourhood and community and suggestions as to how you could address some of those issues. That is even more the case with the new powers that councils are getting on community planning and the regeneration powers. There is a lot more scope for councils to be able to link those up with planning and begin to look at comprehensively developing an area, if there is a problem area within a particular settlement. That may be a way for that to be handled.

Mrs Hale: Thank you. Hopefully, they will do a better job.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gentlemen, I am sorry for missing your presentation. I had a local school in. The Chair touched on this subject with regard to the Roe Valley Country Park, which is in my own neck of the woods. I just cannot understand why cyclists are not encouraged; in fact, cyclists are actively discouraged in the country park, which, when you look at it, lends itself to cycling. If you imagine the figure eight on top of the figure eight, that is the way in which the country park is laid out. Part of it could be designated for cycling, or for cycling and walking, with appropriate warnings, for very little cost. Where are we with regard to opening that up? We had figures as recently as last week on visitor numbers, which were somewhere in the regional of 300,000. If cycling were allowed, I am sure that that number would increase accordingly.

Mr Bleakley: Again, we will be looking at the path network at the Roe Valley. Certainly, some paths involve steps, steep drops or are close to water, and that may be inappropriate. However, there are some paths that may be appropriate, and we are going to see whether there are any that we can open for cycling, but I do not think that you could do the whole figure of eight safely.

The Chairperson: Those are just more excuses, Mr Bleakley, quite frankly. How does the towpath operate along the side of the Lagan, for instance, with water on one side and a cycle path and people walking? From where we are sitting looking in, it appears that there is a total reluctance by the NIEA to even think outside the box. You have been so long inside the box that you cannot get out of the box.

Mr Bleakley: That is why we are getting other people to look at it who are outside the box.

The Chairperson: I am sure that you have had many surveys over the years, and there does not appear to be any movement. Other people can do it, the towpath can do it and the greenways can do it. The Comber to Belfast greenway can do it and accommodate cyclists and pedestrians. The towpath right through to Lisburn and right along the side of the canal in Lisburn can provide for cyclists as well, but all you do is make excuses about health and safety issues. Everybody must have the same health and safety issues. Have you even talked to them about how they got around that?

Mr Bleakley: Not specifically, but we have annual stakeholder forums in relation to our country parks, and we have not had pressure during those forums for provision of cycling in the parks.

The Chairperson: This is pressure from Northern Ireland plc. You are in a new era. Civil servants are no longer running the country. There is an elected Government here now running the country, and you have to listen to what is being said.

Mr Bleakley: I am listening, Chairman.

The Chairperson: Well, I hope that you are listening.

Mr Bleakley: I am.

The Chairperson: Various people have been along to give evidence on this. We are looking at the benefits of cycling to the economy, which are immense, as are the benefits to tourism in Northern Ireland. It is good, but it can be even better. We just heard from the Chief Medical Officer about the benefits to health.

Now that we are in a new era with the 11 councils, it is perhaps time that Departments worked with the new councils to provide a network. So, people from many different aspects are going to have to think outside their boxes. Quite frankly, in the papers that we have in front of us, which will be published in the report, it appears that the NIEA is stuck in the Dark Ages.

Mr Bleakley: I will certainly take account of what you are saying.

The Chairperson: It is not what I am saying. I am trying to portray to you the evidence that we have.

Mr Bleakley: And, as I say, we will have to weigh up the pros and cons in each individual case. As I said, we already have some cycle paths in our properties.

The Chairperson: Some, but very few.

Mr Bleakley: And we will look at what other ones we can put in.

The Chairperson: Some but very few. It is only a token really, is it not?

Cathal, do you want to continue?

Mr Ó hOisín: I do not agree that Roe Valley Country Park, in particular, does not lend itself to cycling. Benone Beach is used for multiple purposes, including horse riding, wind yachting, dog walking and all sorts of things, but I think that the country park could, with a code of practice and perhaps some restrictions, be used for cycling. The country park has been open for 40 years. I am just wondering when that might be considered? Have we any sort of timescale for it?

Mr Bleakley: Within about six months, we should have a view from ORNI on what we can do. After that, we will have to make cases and seek funding, because we do not have funding at the moment.

The Chairperson: Is it not sometimes up to officials to make decisions? You are highly paid, are you not?

Mr Greenway: As Bob said, the Department has brought in Outdoor Recreation, which has expertise in this area, to look across the estate to see where cycling could sensibly and safely be incorporated and with what restrictions. In limited cases, cycling would not be appropriate in the mix of usage that we described. As Bob indicated, in around six months' time, Outdoor Recreation will make its recommendations. Officials will come in at that point, having taken specific guidance from experts in the field on each of the pieces of the estate. At that point, recommendations can be made. There will almost certainly be costs involved. Ultimately, the Minister will need to consider how to take that forward. I think that it is about how, rather than whether, to take it forward. At the moment, we are, in a very specific way, getting evidence from a body that has agreed to give its expertise. The Tourist Board, DCAL and others are involved in that work as well to see how we can do this within the estate.

The Chairperson: How much is the process costing?

Mr Bleakley: We fund Outdoor Recreation quite considerably already.

The Chairperson: By how much do you fund it?

Mr Bleakley: I do not have the figure.

The Chairperson: Perhaps you can let the Committee have that figure in due course.

Mr Bleakley: I will do that, Chairman.

The Chairperson: On the issue of road safety, which was raised earlier, and this is probably for you, Iain, there is a suggestion that any new roads or whatever being built by DRD should have cycle facilities, because it is cheaper to put them in now as opposed to doing that at a later stage. I hear what you say about the possibility of injuries to cyclists; you will never do away with that. However, the Chief Medical Officer suggested that the overall benefits would be pretty serious because of the money that would be saved in tackling diabetes and conditions like that. Do you think that you should be consulted on new roads in terms of the provision of cycle networking? I assume that you are consulted on road safety in major schemes taking place.

Mr Greenway: My concern is that the number of cycling deaths and serious injuries, which is the key measure we use in the road safety strategy, roughly doubled between 2002 and 2012. As the Committee will be aware, most categories of road-user deaths and serious injuries have declined significantly over that period. Of course that is a concern. I emphasised how we see them as vulnerable road users without the metal around them. Increasing cycling is likely to lead to increased casualties; that is just a mathematical piece. The danger is that, if that level becomes such that people are put off cycling, it becomes a much wider ramification than the costs of those injuries to the health service or the individual families and so on.

We are working very closely with DRD. It has active travel targets around walking and cycling to school, for instance. Minister Kennedy is very keen to develop a cycling strategy for Northern Ireland. The first meeting of that working group is later this month. I am the DOE rep on that cross-departmental working group. The point I will be making is that we want to be in this together and do all we can to ensure that we mitigate the level of those injuries so that we do not get to a point for cycling and walking — more people will walk in this country than will ever cycle, so we must not lose the walking piece — where people are put off. If people are put off cycling or walking because of their perception of the danger, we all have a problem. I want to be in there at the beginning, as you have indicated. DRD is one of the road safety partners and is a member of the road safety strategy delivery board. That is on the Roads Service side of things. It is a member of Transport NI. It is very much working with us. There are a number of action measures in the road safety strategy around engineering. Road safety, as you are aware, is built around engineering, enforcement and education. DRD's piece is predominantly engineering, such as the nature of road surfaces, the positioning of road infrastructure and furniture and facilities for cyclists. You are quite right: generally, it is much easier to build those in than retrofit them.

The Chairperson: Do members have any final comments or any more questions?

Thank you very much for your presentation. There are a couple of things that we will ask you for, such as the survey that was carried out and the funding to Outdoor Recreation.

Mr Greenway: Thank you, Chair and Committee.