



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry
Rail Track Phase Two Project

19 November 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase Two Project

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Trevor Clarke (Chairperson)

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr John Dallat

Mr Declan McAleer

Mr David McNarry

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I inform members that, due to the technical nature of specific parts of the inquiry, the Committee Clerk and colleagues from RaiSe have identified a special adviser in the area — Dr Robert Eadie, course director in the School of the Built Environment at the University of Ulster. Are members content to approve Dr Eadie's appointment for the duration of the inquiry?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I am advised that it will be subject to a business case.

Mr McNarry: Chairman, when you are on that, with your permission, could I ask a few questions on the issue of the rail track? The Minister said that he has asked officials for a report. It seems strange to me that he is, in a sense, asking those in the dock for their own report. Nevertheless, can we ascertain whether the permanent secretary is going to oversee that report? Can we request a copy of the report? Can we ascertain when the report will be completed? It seems that those three things would be very relevant and important to our own inquiry.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I agree with the point you are making, but, given that we are having an inquiry, it would actually prove the dysfunctional element of the Department and of how the Minister is handling the issue. I assume that we should leave that until the end of our inquiry. I will certainly insist that we should see a copy of whatever report his officials conclude. Some of the things that came out last week between his Department and Translink were interesting. I do not think that we should be assisting the Minister and advising him how to do it, but it will continue to show the dysfunctionality in his Department. However, we should ask for a copy of any report that it makes.

The Committee Clerk: We have sought some clarity on this. Members will be aware that the Minister indicated that the new chief executive of Translink was best placed with regard to the lessons learned review. However, when the chief executive came to the Committee, he indicated that it would be chaired independently. We have sought clarity on both reviews. As the Chair indicated, as part of the inquiry, we have asked and will be asking for quite a lot of information to be made available.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful for that, and I am satisfied. My only anxiety at this moment is that the report could be, shall we say, delayed, and that it would not fit in with our timescale. When are these reports to be —

The Committee Clerk: The Minister indicated that he expects the report to be on his table by the end of the year. The Committee evidence sessions on it, bearing in mind that we are currently out of consultation, are being planned for the last two meeting in January.

Mr McNarry: I am content with that. Thank you very much.

Mr Dallat: I seek your guidance on this, and you can tell us whether it is relevant to what we are doing. You may have seen a letter published in one of the papers yesterday from Ciaran Rogan, which seemed to give a lot more information than we were aware of about the increase in the tender price from £20 million to £40 million. He went into detail to explain the fact that, due to the increasing passenger numbers, the passing loop would have to be moved from Eglinton to Bellarena. Of course, that brought in a whole range of new questions, and George Robinson asked one in the Assembly yesterday about whether landowners had been approached about the acquisition of land at Bellarena. While we thought that phase 2 was automatic, all those changes in policy were being made without us being told. There was an open day about a year ago in Coleraine — I am sure, Cathal, that you were at it — and some of the directors of Translink were there. They were quietly telling us that overcrowding on the train was a serious problem and that it would be standing room only. Obviously, in the meantime, somebody decided that they could not live with that and that they were going to make longer platforms and change the passing loop. Chairperson, we were not told any of that. You know that there is a serious risk that, because of their incompetence and because of the austerity measures and everything that is sweeping the country, people may well be denied the upgrade, and I think that David referred to that. I hope not. I think that the Minister said that he was ring-fencing it, but everyone knows that ring-fencing means nothing. Not only have they delayed the upgrade, they may well have put in jeopardy somewhere between £20 million and £40 million.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I agree with the points that you are making, although we do not really want to get bogged down with them at this stage. I think that politics was being played on the issue at Question Time yesterday when a member from the Minister's party asked a loaded question in relation to DFP's involvement at this stage. How DFP could be involved when it does not know the cost of the project or whether it is viable struck me as a loaded question. I do not think that we should get bogged down in the detail.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, can I say one thing, and it is important? It is important for everybody to know this, and I hope that you can tell other people. This railway was saved because politics was put to the one side, and you know that because you were in Antrim council. Seven councils came together and protected the railway from closure, so the last thing that we need now is party politics.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I appreciate your point. The reason why I am using the word "politics" is that the question was raised by a member of the Minister's own party to try to shift the blame to DFP. We are all aware that all the Executive parties supported this at the early stage. If this becomes unviable, it will not be because of all the other parties' commitments; it will be because of the mishandling between DRD and Translink. I am concerned that there seems to be an emphasis to shift the blame to the other Executive parties to find the money. If there had not been incompetence on the project all along, we would not be talking about the risk to the project; we would be talking about the delivery and the opening of the line. I felt that politics were being played yesterday and that is the reference that I am making, as opposed to any wider politics.

Mr Ó hOisín: I do not want to widen out the debate, but I felt that Question Time yesterday was very interesting on a number of issues, including that. However, not least — I was on the radio this morning about it — there was the shock announcement that, in the report on the dualling of the A6, an alternative route is being sought for the Dungiven bypass, which is 1.1 kilometres longer, involves two bridges, and yet, when the pricing was given for it, the price remains the same as that for the 4.8 kilometre route that was originally envisaged. That was sprung on us yesterday, and it is something that I am seriously concerned about. That came during Question Time yesterday.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I think that, as a Committee, we should revisit that. I was not watching out for the whole of the A6. I have a particular interest in the first section of it, which is a constituency issue for me. However, when I heard the figures that were talked about yesterday, if you add together

all the costs involved in the whole scheme, you question the expectations that it will ever be delivered. I take the point that you are making now. I think that the Committee should ask more questions about that.

Mr Ó hOisín: The bottom line on that is that the public inquiry finished in October 2012. The inspector's report has been sitting on the Minister's desk since February of this year, and now we are getting hit with this double whammy again. Effectively, it could scupper, or indeed double the price of, this section. So, it is a concern for the Committee, and it is something that blindsided us yesterday.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I have to say that they tried the same on the first part of the A6. They made a suggestion for the route outside Toome after we had been through the public inquiry. I would not say that all the problems had been ironed out, but the hearing had taken place; the conclusion had come; and then the Department put forward another suggestion for some works that it was going to do around Toome — that was illogical. It is just as you said for Dungiven. It set in train, again, all that fear over what is happening. I think that the Committee should ask some questions about that.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you, Chair.