

Cc PS/Minister (DOE)
PS/Minister (DETI)
Secretary
Mr McConnell
Mr D McAuley (NITB)
Mr Briant
Mrs L Browne (NITB)
Mrs Heron
Mr Hayden
MC

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH NATIONAL TRUST TO DISCUSS FUTURE OF GIANT'S CAUSEWAY HELD ON TUESDAY 17 JULY IN NETHERLEIGH

Present: Sir Reg Empey
Ms Ruth Laird (National Trust)
Mr Patrick Casement (National Trust)
Mr Paul Mullan (National Trust)

The Minister began by saying that as NI's most visited site and its only World Heritage Site he understood the importance of protecting the area around the Giant's Causeway and the National Trust's (NTs) concern regarding the future plans for the area. He went on to say that there was potential for visitor growth but this should be sustainable and although it was necessary to provide facilities for visitors this should not be to the detriment of the site.

The Minister said he understood Moyle District Council's decision to sell the site following the Best Value Audit report. He pointed out that all DCs have a responsibility to their rate-payers to secure the best deal possible. Ms Laird was very concerned if the NT bid was unsuccessful, the Minister encouraged it to bid nevertheless. She also asked if it was likely that other parties (eg NITB) would be involved in that decision-making process, to which the Minister replied that he was not aware of this suggestion and he thought it highly unlikely.

Ms Laird said she was disheartened when she heard of Moyle DC's decision to sell – she thought that the funding on the table from the NT, NITB, HLF and the DC's contribution that this partnership approach would have been sufficient to rebuild the visitor centre to a high specification. The Minister was keen to point out that a similar partnership should not necessarily be ruled out altogether even now.

Ms Laird acknowledged that the decision to sell the site and the recent planning application for the change of use for 'The Nook' should be considered independently of each other, however it is difficult to view these issues in isolation.

The Minister reported that he had met Sam Foster (DOE) on 5 July to agree a mutually satisfactory process for taking forward the preparation of a World Heritage

Site Management Plan. Mr Foster accepted that DOE had made a mistake in not consulting NITB before now. There was consensus between the two Departments that the site should not lose its status.

Regarding 'The Nook' application the Minister said he too was personally very concerned about the suggested change of use as it is located at the entrance to the existing visitor centre and he had expressed these to Mr Foster at their meeting. He concluded that even the initial developers were sensitive to environmental issues, this did not necessarily mean that any future owner would be as sympathetic. He emphasised how important it was not to make a mistake at this stage by prematurely granting planning permission before the strategy for the area as whole, had been developed. The work on the Plan is needed urgently and is vital in order for the DOE to make fully informed decisions on this or any other future planning application for the area. The news of the uncertainty in the area should influence other potential developers when they are considering submitting plans.

The Minister said he got the impression that DOE's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) was supportive of the need for conservation however he accepted Planning Division's legal obligation to deal with the application within a reasonable timescale. The Minister was of the view that DOE needed to make clear asap that 'The Nook' application would be refused.

Ms Laird intimated that she had heard rumours that the developers are interested in developing extensively in the area and could include converting the Causeway Hotel to apartments.

The meeting concluded with Mr Mullan reporting that Unesco planned to visit the site end July/beginning August as a result of lobbying by concerned individuals. He advised that Unesco is considering classifying the site 'Under Danger' (a term usually used for areas in Third World countries). The Minister advised the delegation to provide DOE with this information and any other relevant information in order that it can use it in its defence if the application is refused and legal action taken. Unesco has also stated that it will support the NT in a judicial review if planning permission is granted.

Marion Magill
APS/Sir Reg Empey

18 July 2001