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5 November 2004

GIANT'S CAUSEWAY VISITOR FACILITIES

Following our recent meeting with you and the Minister at Netherleigh, I thought that it might be helpful if I set out the National Trust's current position with regard to developments at the Causeway, an analysis of the process to date and how we see the Trust's role in progressing matters.

My colleagues and I are of the view that the Trust has played a full and constructive role throughout this process. As responsible partners we have at times felt the need to ask difficult but important questions; at no time have we been obstructive, and our intention has always been to try to ensure that the best possible outcome for all is reached. Likewise, we have felt the need on occasion to reiterate our position (which at times has been ignored or gone un-noted) in order to highlight those matters of principle, which as you know are often governed by our statutory purpose. We believe strongly that by focusing on these difficult and challenging areas we are helping to prevent longer term difficulties. We have certainly not been "sniping from the sidelines" and take exception to this reference made by the Minister. We have always ensured that senior staff have been available to attend meetings at short notice, often requiring difficult diary changes; we have responded to many very tight deadlines; and we have engaged in a great deal of work which would not normally have been expected of one of the partner organisations in such an exercise, particularly one facilitated by experienced and expert consultants.

From the outset we gave a warm welcome to the April 2003 ministerial announcement regarding the three-stranded approach. Subsequently we have played a full and constructive role in the development and implementation of the masterplan, the development of the World Heritage Site management plan and in the process to develop new visitor facilities. We fully engaged in the work of the steering group and then, as requested, in the series of bilaterals. We would however have liked to see the steering group continue so that all stakeholders could have considered the views of each of the parties involved and engaged in wider discussion as

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each milestone in the process was reached. We note for the record that the steering group was never formally "stood down", nor to my knowledge were its members thanked.

Throughout the various stages of the process we believe that we have clearly set out the Trust's position and in particular identified where proposed courses of action would cause real difficulties for the National Trust in its primary role of protecting the WHS and its setting, and also in the promotion of environmental and economic sustainability. In particular we have consistently reminded officials, not least in our recent meeting, that as a charitable organisation we cannot end up in a position which places the Trustees and charitable funds at risk. We contributed constructively in the development of the project objectives, participated in the quest to find a suitable location for the new facilities and engaged fully in the debate on their form and function. Furthermore we have engaged in the discussion on how the new facility should be managed, how that should integrate into the management of the WHS and how the development and management of the facilities should be financed.

As with any process of this type there have been significant difficulties for the National Trust, starting from any real consideration of the placing of facilities at a discrete location to looking seriously at a dispersed solution using existing brownfield possibilities closer to the site. A decision seems to have been taken at an early juncture that new facilities would amount to a new building at or close to the current location and other options were not given serious or due consideration. Although we believe the methodology used to decide the final location was flawed, (all available options were not considered and those making the assessment were not given any guidance on how the assessment should be made and what the criteria actually meant – contrary to Trust advice), we took the view that in order to keep the process on track, the Minister's decision on location, although not ideal, was acceptable subject to the caveats that the headland would be cleared, that there would be no greenfield development and that there would be no overall increase in parking on the site.

The Trust has contributed fully to the development of the terms of reference for the international competition. This has involved us taking soundings from our national committees and advice from experienced professionals throughout the organisation; in particular, we fed into the process the views we received from our expert Architectural Panel. These were set out in Graham Thompson's letter to Robin McMinnis of 5 August 2004. We always held the very strong view that function should dictate the form of the new facility, yet this was not taken on board by the consultants working for Government. We have engaged in real and meaningful discussions regarding the size and ratios in the new facility and were pleased to see these included in the early drafts of the competition specifications.

The Trust has also contributed fully to the discussions and correspondence relating to the future management of the new facility and has made a series of suggestions as to how the proposed management structures could be improved. Our overriding concerns about proposed management structures and the memorandum of understanding are twofold: first, only one option has been presented for the future management structures, an option which, as we have documented, poses us with a number of problems with regard to the sustainability of the entire project; and secondly, there is an implicit understanding that the management body will have responsibility for overseeing the WHS management plan: it is unlikely that the suggested model would meet UNESCO requirements for an expert body to implement the plan.

From the outset of this process we have been calling for rigorous financial modelling, indeed, we made it very clear that unless the financial projections were robust and what was being proposed was viable, we would not be in a position to sign up to any agreement. We eventually received an analysis from Locum in September, many months after we had first requested this. We are currently engaged in further discussions with your officials regarding those figures.

Perhaps the greatest issue for us from a financial perspective regards sustained investment into the World Heritage Site. We recognise the political necessity for the commitment to Moyle to maintain its income stream and we welcome the commitment given to the Trust to ensure that it will be in no worse a financial position than currently exists. Our major concern is that, unlike at similar sites throughout the world, the only investment in the World Heritage Site generated from income gained at the site comes from enterprise activity undertaken by the Trust at its shop and tearoom. As you know this means that the Trust maintains the site to its current standard the Trust must find resources from its charitable funds for the upkeep. Furthermore, if visitor numbers do increase and there is no change in the funding regime, there will be a need for the Trust to invest even more of its own resources into the management of the site. This is clearly inequitable when one considers the great benefits the WHS brings to the economy and people of Northern Ireland. The Government has said that monies generated at the site should be invested in the site, we are still unclear as to how this will manifest itself. The Trust does not understand why a firm commitment or direction cannot be given to a new organisation to invest accordingly.

Throughout this process we have called for a considered policy on transportation to and at the site; this has yet to be addressed. In order to promote a seamless visitor experience, transportation on the site needs to be one of the key considerations in the design of the new facilities. There are a number of key considerations: first, a decision needs to be taken on the best form of on-site transport, by whom it will be managed, how it will be resourced, how it will link in to the overall management regimes and how it will influence the design of the new facility; secondly, a strategic decision needs to be taken on the provision of parking facilities-most likely to be at a discrete location; and thirdly consideration needs to be given regarding how transportation between any discrete parking location, the Causeway Head and the stones will be resourced and managed and the role of other Government agencies in that.

In summary, we believe that the Trust has played a full and constructive role in this process, and at all times given freely of expert advice and time, in a manner in which no other partner has been expected to do. As this process has progressed it has come clear to us that the Trust is being asked to put charitable resources at considerable risk over a protracted period of time by participating in the management of the new facilities on the lines being currently suggested. This is more difficult to understand when the facility is envisaged as having an important role in signposting other tourism opportunities in Northern Ireland and promoting tourism generally. While the Trust, as the single biggest manager of tourist attractions in Northern Ireland, is heavily involved and committed to promoting tourism it is not our primary purpose or function to take the lead in so doing. That is the role of Government and NITB and sufficient resources should be made available to allow the job to be done properly.

We look forward to further open-minded and frank discussion with your officials, on the basis of our recent submission to Robin McMinnis, about how we can move this process forward.

Yours sincerely,

RUTH LAIRD
Director for Northern Ireland