

**MINUTES OF THE LOUGH NEAGH MEETING WITH MLA's
HELD ON TUESDAY 27 JULY 2021**

Time and Venue: 14:30, via Video Conference

In Attendance:

Liz Loughran	DfI Director of Transport Policy
Catherine McEvoy	DfI Regional Planning & Policy Division
Christine Horner	DfI Active Travel Branch (Note Taker)
Mark Hammond	DAERA Head of Natural Environment
Patsy McGlone	MLA (SDLP)
Dolores Kelly	MLA (SDLP)
Roisin Lynch	Cllr (SDLP) (Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council)
Francie Molloy	MP (SF) (Mid - Ulster)
Emma Sheerin	MLA (SF)
Ciaran Toman	Parliamentary Assistant to Dolores Kelly MLA

Apologies :

Helen Anderson	DAERA
Paul Donnelly	DAERA

Ref	Item	Action
1.0	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS	
1.1	LL welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made. Apologies were received from Helen Anderson and Paul Donnelly DAERA	
2.0	DfI STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITIES	
2.1	LL gave the background on ownership of the lough, previous meetings and set out the DfI statutory responsibilities which are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain the 44 navigational markers on the Lough; and • Dredging the mouth of the six mile water river at Antrim. • Discretionary powers for water recreation. 	
2.2	MH gave a summary of DAERA mainly regulatory responsibilities in respect of the Lough <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • certain activities need consent to be undertaken for example where can be dredged; • fishing; • water quality of the lough; • assist councils with local development plans; • Funding RSPB and LNP; and • Carbon emissions around the lough. 	

3.0	LOUGH NEAGH DEVELOPMENT TRUST	
3.1	<p>FM gave background information on previous NI Assembly debate on Lough Neagh with his proposal to purchase the lough. The DTNI report was commissioned by the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Minister Michelle O'Neill, as a result of their recommendations Lough Neagh Development Trust (LNDDT) was established.</p>	
3.2	<p>MH confirmed that actions were taken by DAERA to assist LNDDT to establish if it is a long term viable sustainable trust, the measures that needed to be completed by the trust were not undertaken. DAERA do not have the vires to set up a Trust like this and provide funding. The Trust have not provided DAERA with any proposals for action and it is unclear if they are still active.</p>	
3.3	<p>FM raised the problem with dredging the mouth of the river Blackwater which is currently blocked and asked for action. LL agreed to consider DfI role in this.</p>	
4.0	THE WAY FORWARD	
4.1	<p>Actions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider dredging the mouth of the river Blackwater at Lough Neagh. 2. DfI officials to raise possible letter with Minister Mallon from her to Minister Poots. If the Minister is minded to send a letter, it would inform of the recent approach from MLA's on Lough Neagh, set out DfI's limited responsibilities, but offer support if DAERA is going to take actions forward. 	<p>DfI</p> <p>DfI</p>



Department for

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**FROM: NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure**

DATE: 28 SEPTEMBER 2021

**TO: EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs**

REF: DfI/SUB/0660/2021

LOUGH NEAGH

I have recently had a number of approaches from elected representatives from several political parties and the Lough Neagh Partnership in relation to a more concerted and dedicated development plan for the management of Lough Neagh.

Subsequently, officials from my Department and an official from DAERA met with Patsy McGlone MLA, Dolores Kelly MLA, Ciaran Toman (advisor to Dolores Kelly), Francie Molloy MP, Emma Sheerin MLA, Cllr Roisin Lynch on 27th July 2021.

You may already have been advised that the elected representatives were keen for a government Department to take the lead in the development of Lough Neagh. My officials explained the very limited statutory responsibilities of my Department in relation to the lough which are:

- maintenance of 47 navigation markers;
- dredging the SixmileWater river where it enters the lough in order to maintain navigation; and
- regulation of the water levels on the lough.

My Department also has limited discretionary powers which may be exercised for limited purposes, namely, improving or restoring, or promoting the recreational or navigational use of, any waterway.

However, I understand that around 2014, the then DARD Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, with the support of the NI Executive, took the lead on commissioning a report on the future of the lough from Development Trusts NI (DTNI). A Lough Neagh Development Trust (LNDDT) was established and registered as a limited company and volunteers were nominated as interim board members. I understand that LNDDT were

to undertake some activities and return to your Department on progress and projects which could be grant funded.

I am very supportive of this lead taken by DAERA and I would seek an update on your current position regarding Lough Neagh, including whether any proposals have been put forward by LNDT and how you intend to engage with the key stakeholders on this issue. I want to offer my support for the work of your Department and to advise that I would be content to consider part funding of any relevant projects from my Blue / Green Infrastructure Fund, should they be identified.

The Executive has a common interest in seeing development of Lough Neagh, whilst recognizing that the bed and soil of the lough is in private ownership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Mallon', written in a cursive style.

NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure

**From the Office of the
Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs**



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**FROM: EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

DATE: 28 OCTOBER 2021

**TO: NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure**

YOUR REF: DfI/SUB/0660/2021

OUR REF: CORR 1047/2021

LOUGH NEAGH

Thank you for your memo of 28 September 2021, seeking an update on DAERA's involvement with the Lough Neagh Development Trust.

There is a wide range of diverse interests in Lough Neagh and there is a local opinion that this important natural asset is not being utilised to its full potential for the benefit of the local community. In this respect an Assembly Motion was passed on 17 April 2012, calling on the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to convene a working group to explore and pursue the potential for a cross departmental approach to bring Lough Neagh into public ownership. The lough bed is currently owned by the Earl of Shaftesbury. That working group concluded that there was no merit in bringing the lough bed into public sector ownership. Following this a lobby emerged for a community led approach to the ownership and management of the lough and the then DARD Minister agreed, in August 2015, to commission Development Trust NI (DTNI) to explore options for a such an arrangement and identify the resources required to underpin this.

DTNI appointed an expert project advisory panel and undertook extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders. The key findings and recommendations of the exercise were set out in the 'Future of Lough Neagh' report, which was completed in March 2016. The main recommendation was the endorsement of the community led approach, through a Development Trust, as the preferred option to advance the long term development of the Lough, covering areas such as tourism, navigation and waterways safety, the economy, environment and



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habitat, and the needs of the local community. The report also recommended that the Development Trust should attempt to gain ownership of the lough bed. The Earl of Shaftesbury has been open to this approach.

To move the process forward a company – ‘Lough Neagh Development Trust’ (LNDDT) was established. An interim Board was appointed to lead the Trust through the process of membership recruitment and the election of a permanent Board. Since then, the LNDDT has submitted various proposals to the Department, seeking further funding to bring the process to its next stage. The funding is considered necessary to support the establishment of an electoral process to elect a permanent board, undertake further stakeholder engagement, complete a due diligence exercise to determine the viability of acquiring the lough bed and other administrative roles. The cost of this work, which would be carried out over a 3 year period, could be between £200,000 and £400,000 and is not a priority for DAERA at this time.

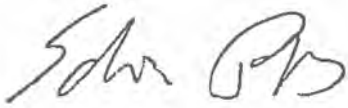
As the transfer of ownership of the lough bed is not a priority for DAERA the Department has no further proposals to provide financial support to LNDDT, however the Department has offered to make approaches to the Strategic Investment Board and the Department of Finance’s Innovation Lab to determine whether they might be able to provide some expertise to the Group, however neither organisation was in a position to lend support.

In terms of DAERA’s current involvement in Lough Neagh, the Department, through the Rural Development Programme, has funded a number of projects on and around the Lough representing an investment of almost £2.3m. Projects undertaken include:

- **Lough Neagh Rescue** which received a grant of £480,000 for the provision of a purpose built base
- **The Lough Neagh Gateway Centre**, which received a grant of £500,000 towards the cost of the £2.45m, purpose built tourist facility along the shores of the Lough that will provide a gateway to access the Lough,
- **Ballyronan Marina** while received a grant of £500,000 for the provision of a play park upgrade, woodland walking trail and additional car parking facilities and a further £488,000 towards the cost of providing the first on-water glamping accommodation in Northern Ireland and;
- **The Lough Neagh Cooperation project** which was undertaken by 3 Local Action Groups and includes accessibility improvements at Loughshore Park, Antrim, the provision of wild campsite improvements at Washingbay and the installation of a viewing platform, improvements to fishing facilities and the provision of a 1km access trail at Portglenone at an overall cost of £330,000.

As regards the environment, the Department is heavily involved through various initiatives. NIEA has management plans in place and is implementing a wide range of initiatives to help manage water quality, habitats and species of the Lough. It is also continuing to support monitoring and surveillance of the condition of the Lough’s environment including its water, habitats and species and to support research to better understand the environment of the Lough to help inform future management. These activities are being delivered through stakeholder engagement and by working in partnership with others in particular River Trusts, NGOs, angling clubs, Local Authorities and the LNP.

In respect of future responsibilities for the lough, you will be aware of the Lough Neagh Seminar which was run by Lough Neagh Partnership in March 2020. This identified that the main barriers impacting on the lough's potential to contribute to the local community were dredging, the lack of recreational or navigational markers and regulation of the water levels. It concluded that an inter-departmental policy on Lough Neagh should be established and that the Department for Infrastructure should be asked to take the lead in drawing up and promoting a Lough Neagh Strategy along the same lines as it did for Rathlin Island. DAERA would endorse this approach and I can assure you that we would be content to be an active participant.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edwin Poots', is positioned above the typed name.

EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



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**FROM: NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure**

DATE: 29 DECEMBER 2021

**TO: EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs**

REF: Dfi/SUB/1041/2021

LOUGH NEAGH DEVELOPMENT

Thank you for the response to my letter seeking an update of your current position regarding Lough Neagh development and any proposals by Lough Neagh Development Trust.

I understand the difficulties of prioritising funds and it is unfortunate that it has not been possible for your Department to take forward any of the proposals that were forthcoming from the Trust. However I welcome the various other projects which have been funded through the Rural Development Programme representing an investment of almost £2.3m and DAERA's wider involvement in environmental initiatives, implementation of management plans, monitoring and surveillance and research activities to help inform future management of the Lough.

Given the current legislative powers of my Department and the limited discretionary powers which may be exercised for limited purposes, combined with the financial pressures facing my Department, I am not in a position to agree to lead the development and promotion of an interdepartmental Strategy for Lough Neagh, nor do I believe it would be appropriate for Dfi to do so.

As stated in my previous letter I am content to consider part funding any relevant projects from the Blue/Green Infrastructure Fund should they be identified. In addition, my officials will continue to engage with stakeholders to address any specific barriers in relation to dredging, maintaining water levels and navigational markers that have been identified as impeding the lough's potential to contribute to the local community.

**NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure**