

LOUGH NEAGH MANAGEMENT STRATEGY LAUNCHED

On 19th June in The Long Gallery, Stormont, Environment Minister Mr Dermot Nesbitt hosted the launch of the Lough Neagh Management Strategy document produced by the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee.

The Advisory Committee has been seeking the views of a very broad range of people over a period of two years culminating in the production of this ambitious Strategy.

Mr Nesbitt stated that Lough Neagh has been treated in a piecemeal way for a long time and congratulated the Advisory Committee for bringing together a whole range of issues, organisations and people in an integrated way.

The Strategy sets out a series of objectives and indicative actions relevant to the statutory sector, stakeholder bodies and private individuals and provides Government and others with a useful, if challenging, framework within which to integrate management activity in relation to Lough Neagh.

The Strategy covers an area known as the Lough Neagh Wetlands that includes Lough Neagh and Lough Beg along with all of the low-lying land and satellite lakes around the shores.

The Advisory Committee is calling for actions in relation to water quality, the preparation of a local Biodiversity Action Plan for the Lough Neagh Wetlands, the upgrading of facilities at existing recreational honey pot sites and the setting up of a navigation authority for the Lough. Sustainable development is a key theme throughout the Strategy where economic, environmental and social considerations are all kept in balance.

One of the key proposals within the Strategy is the formation of a body known as the Lough Neagh Partnership with the capacity to draw down funding and action projects on a strategic basis.

The Advisory Committee is indebted to all who contributed to the production of the Strategy, but this is just the beginning. Everyone, from statutory agencies to local community groups, should incorporate these management recommendations into their forward programmes, thus securing a sustainable and bright future for the Lough Neagh Wetlands.

The Advisory Committee will be encouraging and monitoring progress on the implementation of the recommendations within the Management Strategy. Progress will be monitored on an annual basis. Copies of the document are available from Sperrin House. It can also be viewed at www.loughneagh.com.

PROPOSED COMBINED LIGNITE MINE AND 600MW POWER STATION

Auiron (originally Mecathara) has employed RPS Environmental Sciences Ltd. to produce a baseline environmental survey on an area to the west of Ballymoney in the light of a lignite mine and power station proposal. The survey is in draft form at present. It is anticipated that Auiron will be applying for Planning Permission in the autumn when the survey will be available for public consultation.

LONGER TO LOCK

Waterways Ireland, the navigation authority on the Lower Bann River, is trailing an extension of the lock operational times. During June, July and August the locks will open from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm. If the number of boats using the locks increases significantly, consideration will be given to introducing this system on a full-time basis.

LOUGH NEAGH STRATEGIC FUND AND PARTNERSHIP

Progress on securing a pot of funding for projects around Lough Neagh has been slow but steady.

Following advice from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), an application was lodged for technical assistance to draw up a detailed operational plan, action plan and options appraisal for the Lough Neagh Strategic Fund. This application was approved earlier this year and William Consulting is now preparing the detailed documents. If all goes according to plan, it is anticipated that the full application for funding for Lough Neagh will be assessed by DARD before the end of this year.

In order to lodge the initial application to DARD, The Lough Neagh Partnership Ltd. (LNP) was set up as a Company Limited by Guarantee in November 2001. At present the LNP has only five directors who are operating in an 'interim' capacity until such times as the Inaugural General Meeting (IGM) is called. It is anticipated that the IGM will be held this autumn when membership organisations will be asked to nominate and elect directors to represent particular interests around the Lough. Organisations interested in becoming members of the Partnership or obtaining more information should contact Sperrin House on info@lnlb.org.uk.

TOOME SLUICE GATES REMEDIAL WORKS

WS Atkins – Northern Ireland has been commissioned by Rivers Agency to undertake an assessment of the engineering and environmental impacts of the Toome sluice gates.

To date the results indicate that the force of water moving through the gates has depleted the rock armour upstream and has created significant scouring downstream of the gates. In-river works will be necessary to reverse these effects and strengthen the riverbed.

Rivers Agency and WS Atkins have employed the services of a fisheries expert and have been liaising with stakeholder interests on the Lower Bann Advisory Committee to ensure that any action proposed does not impact negatively on the river system. Although the design proposals for the remedial work are still at a draft stage, it is envisaged that the in-river works will involve the replacing of rock armour upstream of the gates and the use of geotextile, concrete and rock armour on the downstream riverbed for a distance of approximately 60 metres.

Whilst this remedial work is necessary to ensure the continuing stability of the barrage that manages water levels on Lough Neagh and flows in the Lower Bann, the LBAC are following progress closely to ensure that potential short and long term impacts are minimal for fish passage, local wildlife, recreation and navigation. A full Environmental Impact Assessment will be carried out.

It is anticipated that the in-river work will take place in 2003.

DISCOVER THE LOUGHSHORE TRAIL

From this summer on, locals and visitors alike have a unique opportunity to cycle around Lough Neagh.

The new cycle route was officially opened in June by Agriculture Minister, Mrs Brid Rodgers MLA. The Loughshore Trail (also known as Route 94 of the National Cycle Network) is approximately 128 miles long and forms a continuous cycle route around the shores of Lough Neagh and along Lough Beg.

The Loughshore Trail is unique, not only because of its location, but also because it comprises mainly of quiet country lanes, and consists almost entirely of flat terrain which makes it suitable for both experienced cycling enthusiasts and family groups. The route uses the new Ferry Bridge over the River Blackwater, which was officially opened on 31st May 2002, also by Minister Brid Rodgers. There are several long off-road sections including Peatlands Park, Cot Lane, Ballyronan Wood, Clotworthy Park and Rea's Wood.

The route takes in at least 25 sites of interest along the way such as Ballyronan Marina, Ardboe Cross, and Oxford Island Nature Reserve where there are interpretive panels providing information about the Loughshore Trail, local history and flora and fauna. They suggest what to do and see in the area and provide useful telephone numbers and addresses.

The Loughshore Trail is clearly signposted with blue, cycle way signs that display the Loughshore Trail logo and the route number 94. Route maps are available to buy at outlets along the route, local bookshops and can also be purchased online at www.nationalcyclenetwork.org.uk. A brochure entitled 'Cycling the Lough Neagh Region' is also available from Sperrin House.

Cycling the Lough Neagh region makes for a healthy and environmentally friendly alternative to day trips by car.

For further information contact: www.loughshoretrail.com.

CANAL WALK, TOOME

A new public park now stretches south for 1 km from Toome village to Lough Neagh. It is bordered to the west by Toome Canal and is within the Lough Neagh Area of Special Scientific Interest.

The area has been landscaped with shrubs, trees, and pathways and has scenic view-points, picnic tables and seating. The Park, which was planned and developed by TIDAL, the local community group, is conveniently situated for usage by both the local community and visitors using the Loughshore Trail, National Cycle Network Route 94.

The tourism and environmental improvement scheme cost £296,000 and was funded by the EU Peace and Reconciliation Peace II Programme through the Department for Social Development. TIDAL have plans to build a walking and cycling path along the river to the north of the village.

SUPPORT FOR THE ULSTER CANAL

On Tuesday 12 March 2002 the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) in conjunction with the Ulster Waterways Group organised a public forum in the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan.

The aim of the meeting was to raise public awareness of the proposal to re-open the Ulster Canal. One hundred and sixty invitations were sent out but over 200 people arrived.

Colin Becker, of IWAI, set the scene, Erskine Holmes the co-chairman of the Ulster Waterways Group outlined recommendations contained in the feasibility report and the broadcaster and naturalist, Dick Warner, highlighted the economic benefits of the restored waterway. A lively discussion, chaired by Ruth Delaney, illustrated that all in attendance were supportive and enthusiastic of the project and appreciated the benefits re-watering the canal could generate. Comparisons were made to the Shannon/Erne link and to the dramatic revitalisation of communities along the waterway route.

Those present felt that it was now time for action and all were urged to seek the support of politicians, both at local and National level. There are plans to hold a similar event next year to keep the issue on agendas.

Brian Cassells

LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS – THE RIVER BANN NAVIGATION ORDER

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) proposes to introduce legislation to extend the powers of port trusts and ease existing financial controls.

In particular DRD recommends that Coleraine Harbour should remain a public trust port, have its powers extended, its constitution updated and board size reduced.

There will also be implications for the area covered by Coleraine Harbour Commissioners (CHC) with a possible reduction of their jurisdiction from The Cutts to the Coleraine Town Bridge.

It is anticipated that Waterways Ireland would extend their jurisdiction to meet with the upstream limit of CHC. The changes will be finalised and made public in the near future.

UPPER BANN NAVIGATION

The navigation between Lough Neagh and Portadown has now been reopened following the completion of the M1 bridge strengthening project.

LIFEJACKET BANNED IN ROI

Following advice from the Directorate-General for Energy and Transport of the European Commission, The Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, ROI has withdrawn approval for the use of:

Inherently Buoyant Lifejackets Type Regatta Thermo Cruise Adult/Child –
Manufactured for Regatta AS (Alesund, Norway), by Regatta S.A. Portugal (Lugar Di Riberiro, Vila Nova Da Telha, 4470 Maia, Portugal).

For further details contact the Marine Safety Directorate, Tel: 016199358,
Fax: 016620774, email: marine.notices@marine.gov.ie.

WATER MANAGEMENT SEMINAR

Tidy NI are organising a Water Management Seminar on 17 September 2002 in the Radisson Roe Hotel, Limavady. This event will deal with EC legislation on the Water Framework Directive that will have major implications for leisure boating in inland waterways. For further details contact jillian.bil@encams.org.

COASTAL WIND FARM PROJECT

A feasibility study is to be carried out into the proposed construction of a £200m wind farm at Tunes Plateau, off the north coast at Castlerock and Portstewart.

The study will be carried out by three companies – B9 Energy Off-shore Developments Ltd, Powergen Renewables Developments Ltd and Renewable Energy Systems Ltd. This consortium has been given 12 months to carry out an environmental impact assessment and secure all the necessary consents for the development.

The feasibility assessment will be based on a wind farm with a generation capacity of 150-200 MW, which is sufficient to supply electricity to 170,000 homes. It would be located 3-5 miles off the north coast and could be operational by 2008.

Local people have protested that the proposed development would look unsightly in an area of scenic beauty. Members of the Lower Bann Advisory Committee are liaising with the developers on the possible impacts of fish navigation, sand movement, tourism etc.

THE EC WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE

The EC Water Framework Directive (WFD) came into effect in December 2000. The purpose of the WFD is to establish an overall framework for the integrated protection of surface water and groundwater, based on the river basin, the natural unit for the management of water.

The goals of the WFD can be summarised as follows:

- To prevent the further deterioration of water quality and protect and enhance the aquatic ecosystem thus promoting 'good' ecological status which, for rivers will be defined by the presence of invertebrates, aquatic plants and fish communities and by water flow and physical and chemical characteristics;
- To promote wise use of, and long-term protection of, water;
- To further protect and improve the aquatic environment, including groundwater, by gradually reducing, phasing out and eventually stopping human impact through harmful discharges;
- To ensure that gradual reduction of pollution of groundwater and prevent its further pollution, and
- To contribute to mitigating against the effects of floods and droughts.

Under the WFD, it will be necessary to prepare a River Basin Management Plan for the Lough Neagh catchment, which includes part of County Monaghan. This plan will set out targets for 'good status', which have yet to be defined, and the actions necessary to achieve these targets. They will be strategic in nature and will provide a framework to report to the European Commission.

The implementation of the WFD will impact on many of the issues relevant to Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann River.

For more information: www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water.

SAVE WATER

- Install a HIPPO bag in your toilet cistern. Get one free by contacting your nearest Water Service Customer Unit.
- Take a shower instead of a bath.
- Always select the economy settings on your washing machine and dishwasher.
- Don't leave taps running when washing your teeth, vegetables or rinsing dishes.
- Mend all leaking taps.
- Use a bucket, watering can or hose with a trigger control when washing your car or watering your garden.

For more information visit: www.waterni.gov.uk

LAGAN CANAL TOWPATH

A new 1.5 mile section of the Lagan Canal towpath, near Aghagallon, is now available for walking, cycling and horseriding.

The towpath provides a cycle/pedestrian path and an adjacent bridleway from Cranagh Bridge (Whitehall/Derryhirk Road) to Annaghdroghal Bridge, and for a short section from Cranagh Bridge towards Goudy Bridge.

At a launch event held on 12 May, walkers enjoying a gentle meander through the attractive countryside, were delighted to see the local wildlife and the canal's architectural heritage particularly the beautiful old stone bridges. Although car parking is limited at present, improved facilities will be available in the near future.

Craigavon Borough Council, who led the project, is supportive of initiatives to reopen canals and towpaths because of the potential they offer to regenerate rural communities, and keep the history of the canals alive. Further work is planned with the aim of establishing a through-route from Aghalee to Ellis's Gut on Lough Neagh.

The project was developed in partnership with the landowners along the canal and was funded by Environment and Heritage Service, Sustrans, the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, the Loughshores Area Based Strategy, Landfill Tax and Craigavon Borough Council.

The towpath is open to the public and any groups interested in a guided walk, or anyone requiring a map of the route should contact Lough Neagh Discovery Centre on 028 3832 2205 or email: oxford.island@craigavon.gov.uk.

LOUGH DERG VISITS LOUGH NEAGH

The River Bann and Lough Neagh Association played a host to the Lough Derg Branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) during the first weekend in May.

The boaters from Lough Derg were extremely impressed with the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann waterway and the enthusiasm for the re-watering of the Ulster Canal. The flotilla cruised up the Blackwater River to Charlemont and the first lock of the original Ulster Canal, visited Coney Island and Oxford Island in the south and Ballyronan and The Battery on the western shore before travelling down through the locks on the Lower Bann through Portglenone, Portna, Movanager and Carnroe to Coleraine. During the trip, the IWAI President, Donal O'Siochain, presented Lough Neagh Rescue with the Association's Endeavour Cup for their extremely impressive work on the Lough.

The visitors from Lough Derg hope that in the not too distant future they will be able to visit the waterway in their own boats via the re-watered Ulster Canal.

HOG PARK POINT ON HOLD

At present, Lough Neagh provides water for approximately one third of the population of Northern Ireland, up to 252 million litres per day (M1/d). The 1992 Water Resource Strategy recommended an increase in abstraction up to 382M1/d from Lough Neagh by building a new abstraction point and treatment plant at a cost of £72.5m at Hog Park Point.

Water Service has now published a Consultation Document on a new Water Resource Strategy (WRS) for the period 2002-2030. The Minister for Regional Development launched the Consultation Booklet at an Assembly debate in early July and Water Service is now seeking comments from the public. Copies of the booklet are available from Water Service Customer Services or on the Water Service web site: www.watarni.gov.uk.

The WRS recommends a twin track approach by reducing the loss of water through leakage and making additional supplies available from the most cost effective sources and curtailing the use of uneconomic sources of water.

The recommended option in the WRS includes upgrading and enhancing the two water treatment works at Castor Bay and Dunore Point to meet the growth in demand and the new Drinking Water Regulations for high quality water. This will remove the need, on the basis of current projections, to construct a new water treatment works at Hog Park Point.

The proposals in the WRS are consistent with the recommendations of the 'Water Service: Leakage Management and Water Efficiency' report by The Assembly's Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

This report states that 253 million litres of water per day (37 per cent of treated water) leaked from Northern Ireland's water distribution system. The majority of the £22m invested on leakage over the past four years has been targeted at establishing the systems to be used for leakage detection, which is a necessary pre-requisite in the long-term strategy to manage leakage. It is planned to invest a further £25m over the next four years with the emphasis moving to detection and repair of leaks. Whilst PAC recognised Water Service's problems including an aging and leaking infrastructure and capital funding restrictions, the report stated that providing water for public consumption is expensive and losing treated water through leakage or inefficient use by customers is a waste of a valuable resource.

PAC has recommended that Water Service:

- Improve the availability of and annually update water related data,
- Review the economic level of leakage and submit this to OFWAT for validation,
- Achieved the economic leakage level before initiating work on Hog Park Point and,
- Take on a much more dynamic and enthusiastic approach to raising public awareness of the need for water efficiency and conservation.

PAC also recognised that proposals for increasing supplies would become clearer when Water Service published its review of the Water Resource Strategy.

The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee will be commenting on the WRS, with particular emphasis on issues that affect Lough Neagh.

WAKE BOARDERS – PLEASE NOTE

Anyone participating in wake boarding on the Lower Bann should become familiar with, and abide by the water-sport zoning policy. The three water-sport zones are as follows:

1. Downstream from Newferry to upstream of the fishing stands at Portglenone Forest.
2. Drumaheglis Marina downstream to Ski Supreme, and
3. Coleraine Marina downstream to Seaton's Marina.

Copies of the 'Navigation Notes and Users' Code' leaflet should be available at recognised launching points and from Sperrin House.

AREA PLAN ISSUE PAPERS

The Issue papers for the Magherafelt Area Plan 2015, the Antrim, Ballymena and Larne Area Plan 2016 and the Northern Area Plan 2016 are all available for public comment.

Each of these geographical areas covered by these Issue Papers impact on the Lower Bann corridor. The Lower Bann Advisory and Co-ordinating Committees will be lodging comments with Planning Service.

Copies of the Issue Papers can be obtained from Planning Service on 028 2565 3333 or 028 7034 1494 or www.doeni.gov.uk/planning/

CHINESE FLAVOUR IN COLERAINE

The first ever Chinese Dragon Boat Race took place on the Lower Bann at Coleraine on Saturday 22nd June.

Eight teams competed in two dragon boats brought specially from the River Lagan. The colourful and exciting spectacle was thoroughly enjoyed by participants and spectators alike. There are plans to hold a similar event next year.

COUNTRY COMES TO TOWN – BY BOAT

The River Bann and Lough Neagh Association are organising a small boat rally to Moneypenny's Lock/Portadown on Saturday, 21st September. The rally will start from Coney Island. For further details go to the RBLNA website: www.riverbannloughneagh.org or phone Michael Savage on 07715368050.