

# A New Look at the Northern Ireland Countryside

## A REPORT

*prepared by*

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*for*

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# A NEW LOOK AT THE NORTHERN IRELAND COUNTRYSIDE

A REPORT PREPARED FOR CHRIS PATTEN M.P.

The Minister with Responsibility for  
The Department of the Environment (N.I.)

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## **1. THE REMIT**

- 1.1** The writer was asked to review the structure and organisation for countryside and nature conservation in Northern Ireland and to advise the Minister. It has been assumed that this is in the context of other land use in the Province, particularly agriculture and that the review should have regard to local government. At the outset, it was accepted that the operation of the planning system was integral to countryside and nature conservation and should therefore be considered in the review.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1** Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the United Kingdom, though it has been influenced from time to time by both Scotland and England. Its historical background, scale and pattern of population settlement are different, as are its land tenure and the arrangements for government. In Northern Ireland the land acts of the 1880s effectively nationalised all tenanted land which was then sold off on an annuity basis to the previous tenants. This produced a form of land tenure consisting of very small owner-occupied farms of an average size of 50–70 acres (20–28 ha). There are no agricultural holdings acts as in the rest of the U.K. so that any leasing of land is on a year to year basis called conacre. The small farm size creates a strong demand for land with resultant high prices. Another major difference in Northern Ireland which sets it apart from the rest of the U.K. is direct rule. The combination of a limited democratic base where responsibilities are generally few but consultative influence is significant is fundamental to the way in which attitudes, policy implementation, control and new initiatives are approached.
- 2.2** Land tenure and direct rule are only examples of differences between the Province and the rest of the U.K. but they are important ones. They mean that structures which may work effectively in Scotland or in England and Wales, do not necessarily sit comfortably in the Northern Ireland scene.

## **3. THE PRESENT STRUCTURE FOR COUNTRYSIDE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

- 3.1** Unlike the rest of the U.K. the functions of countryside and nature conservation are combined in Northern Ireland and these are derived from the Amenities Lands Act of Northern Ireland 1965 and are exercised through Conservation Branch within the Conservation Division of the Department of the Environment. Within Conservation Division there are also the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch and the Archaeological Survey and the Environmental Protection Branch. Conservation Branch is headed by a Principal and includes four scientific/professional people at PSO, SSO, HSO and PTO II level. There is a countryside warden staff of 12. In addition there are administrative and support staff. The Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch has a Senior Principal level professional post, a Principal level professional post and an administrative Principal. The branches effectively run themselves but there is an Assistant Secretary in charge of Conservation Division who reports to an Under Secretary. The Head of Conservation Branch has always been an administrative grade and is not an opportunity post.
- 3.2** Support services are provided elsewhere in DOE. Land acquisition is carried out through the Chief Valuer's organisation and the Conservation Branch has no land agency expertise to advise or carry out negotiations. These last, therefore, are often protracted and unsatisfactory.
- 3.3** Construction work is usually carried out by Works Division which can mean delays such as the start of the new visitor centre at Crawfordsburn Country Park. The Branch is fortunate in a member of staff who acts as action man on construction and maintenance works.
- 3.4** Conservation Branch has no graphics or cartography support. They have no science or research capability. The staff are accommodated in quite inadequate premises in a wooden hut at Stonnont, remote from the Assistant Secretary or the other branches in the Conservation Division.
- 3.5** The Branch is responsible for 6 Country Parks and 40 Nature Reserves. About 70 industrials are employed of whom some are rangers, the latter also support the wardens. 48 ASIs have been designated. These do not include woodland or most of the wetland sites. These have not been included as there is currently no provision to control changes of use affecting them. ASIs on Forestry Division land have not been designated either. There are 8 AONBs where the Branch has a limited consultative role. The Branch gives grant aid for example to the National Trust for wardening services and to district councils for open space grants.

#### **4. COUNTRYSIDE AND NATURE CONSERVATION — LEGISLATION**

- 4.1** The term countryside is used to describe an amalgam of farms and forests, loughs and hills, and plants and animals. It is a place for recreation and importantly a place where people live and work. Wildlife and its conservation is part of this whole countryside with its many interlocking and sometimes conflicting interests. People often take the countryside for granted, forgetting that it is a resource to care for and use wisely. Within it lie the inherent variability of the genes of plants and animals from which crops and livestock have been developed. It is a source of food and wood and of the wellbeing of man. Conservationists have to understand the use as well as the conservation of the countryside and must contribute to finding the right balance between the two. Interest in wildlife led, in the immediate post war years, to important nature conservation legislation in the rest of the U.K., and with powers to create national parks in England and Wales (National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949). It was 16 years later in 1965 when the Amenity Lands Act (N.I.) 1965 reached the statute book with rather less enabling powers for nature conservation. In particular, the carrying out or commissioning of research was not included, except for very limited purposes. It did however include some useful and forward looking sections on other aspects of countryside. These last allowed for the setting up and developing of Northern Ireland's Country Parks, and it is well to remember that the '65 Act pre-dated both the 1967 Countryside (Scotland) Act and the 1968 Countryside Act in this respect. There was no further legislation in Northern Ireland until the Access to the Countryside Order of 1983 and the two present Draft Orders (Draft Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order and Draft Wildlife Order). These last consolidate previous legislation in the Province and bring it broadly in line with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1981.
- 4.2** Throughout the last 20 years staff numbers in Conservation Branch particularly on the professional and scientific side, have been minimal. The development of countryside and nature conservation activities have therefore depended on a few committed people. Both Branch staff and Committee members have worked together with limited legislation and with small resources. In looking ahead to change, their efforts and achievements during these past years should be recognised and saluted.

#### **5. THE ISSUES**

##### **5.1 Introduction**

- 5.1.1** The decision to put in hand the review was influenced by pressure to set up an appointed body. This view emerged during the consideration of the Draft Orders, (Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order and Wildlife Order) by the Environment and Agriculture Committees of the N.I. Assembly. Whether or not to set up an appointed body was not seen by the writer as either the first, or the most important question. Such a question related to a mechanism rather than to the issues which underlaid the concerns over nature conservation and countryside brought out in the Assembly debates. It was felt, therefore, that an essential part of the review was to try and understand these issues and to visit both places and people in the Province and learn from them.
- 5.1.2** To this end, a variety of places were visited in order to gain some better understanding of the Northern Ireland countryside, and a number of meetings with organisations, people, government departments and district councils were arranged during May, June and August in order to learn from their thinking. (A detailed list is appended for information). These visits and meetings were both interesting and instructive and the writer much appreciated the welcome and helpfulness she met with on all sides, as well as the commitment of those she met to improve the quality of life in the Province. She also appreciated the efficiency of Conservation Branch in organising the programme.
- 5.1.3** It was clear from the outset that the question of staff and resources was central to the future of nature conservation and countryside in the Province, and that inadequacy of these, combined with the limitations of the 1965 Act was fundamental. Though the lack of enabling powers was not always fully understood there was concern on all sides about the lack of staff and resources both for current activities of Conservation Branch and for the new functions which will arise from the new Draft Orders.
- 5.1.4** The new Draft Orders will not only put on the statute book powers and functions which have existed on the mainland for many years, they will include the new requirements for ASSI notification and protection which exist in the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. These requirements alone will require considerable staff time if implementation is to take place smoothly and constructively and for management agreements where necessary to be developed harmoniously. Some of the problems over notification which are being experienced across the water are due to some extent to the limited number of experienced staff available to undertake what is often a delicate and difficult task.

- 5.1.5 The Draft Orders will provide new opportunities in the Province for grant aid to voluntary organisations, and councils. For the first time there will be powers to carry out and commission research in the countryside. There will, too, be new opportunities for developing relationships between conservation and agriculture and for increasing awareness of the countryside.

## 5.2 The Views of Others

### 5.2 (1) THE PLACE OF CONSERVATION IN DOE

Concern is widely expressed about the influence and status of Conservation Branch. Many people feel that a small branch, however dedicated its staff may be, is without real influence in a large department such as DOE. It is felt that it cannot exercise adequate influence within the Department so that conservation priorities will nearly always take second if not lower place to other priorities. Furthermore, because of its place within DOE, Conservation Branch cannot make its views effectively heard outside the Department or be seen to take an independent line which is at variance with the overall DOE stance on a particular issue. Thus the 'official' conservation case is in effect absent at a public enquiry such as Kinahalla and its voice at early policy formulation within DOE on issues such as the development of water resources is missing.

### 5.2 (2) WATER

In discussion, there did not appear to be any strong wish for consultation by Water Service with Conservation Branch. The writer recognises the need to provide an adequate supply of clean water and that this is the Service's primary concern. The level of leakage effects the need to augment existing supplies, and she was interested as to whether this leakage was being effectively tackled. She noted a reluctance to discuss with Conservation Branch a recent report on the development of potential water sources in the Province at an early stage even though this could have implications for nature conservation and countryside.

The Water Service indicated that they were not concerned with spending money on recreation other than angling except where this was included in an initial capital construction such as at Spelga Dam. In view of the availability of angling water in the Province, they did not feel it was necessary to make further waters available where this necessitated further treatment.

### 5.2 (3) ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

There appeared to be little liaison between the Environmental Protection Branch and Conservation Branch; indeed the former felt that their activities were self contained even within Conservation Division. They depended on the Water Quality Branch of the Industrial Science Division of the Department of Economic Development for the analysis of samples and on Water Service itself for technical appraisal. Collection of water samples for agricultural discharges are carried out by the bailiffs who are employed by Fisheries Conservancy Board and for industrial discharges, by the public river inspectors. Outfalls, rather than rivers, are sampled so that the unlawful dumping of effluent, agricultural and otherwise, is not screened. This was recognised as a limitation and it was also suggested that fines were quite inadequate. Apparently, the retention of prior notification before work eligible for agricultural grant aid is carried out, has not been used as an opportunity to insist on proper arrangements when new silage pits and livestock buildings are to be constructed.

### 5.2 (4) THE PLACE OF DANI

There was a general recognition of the important place of the Department of Agriculture (DANI) in Northern Ireland affairs. The relative importance of farming to the Gross National Product (GNP) of the Province, combined with the problems of very small units and the general levels of education and training among farmers have given rise to a respected but somewhat paternal Department. Some efforts have been made to create a better understanding of conservation among agricultural advisors and farmers and those attending the agricultural colleges do receive some conservation training in their courses. Relationships have also been developed between the Department and Conservation Branch, but there is concern that it is not involved at the policy planning stage for developments such as major drainage schemes which may have considerable overall effect on flora and fauna. This does not mean that there is not consultation at later planning stages, and indeed the writer's attention was drawn to the efforts made in the case of the Blackwater Drainage Scheme to amend the scheme in the interests of nature conservation requirements.

### 5.2 (5) DRAINAGE AND FISHERIES

Drainage Division have been spending over £200,000 annually on recreation provision; this has not been clearly related to demand and it has not been co-ordinated with other countryside recreation. It was recognised that this function could be more usefully carried out elsewhere.

Discussions suggested that there was little consultation between Fisheries Division and Conservation Branch. Fisheries Division manage much of the freshwater angling in the Province and are concerned to manage it well for public use. Here they differ from Water Service who favour angling club involvement in control of their waters. Undoubtedly there is a common interest in marine habitats between Conservation Branch and Fisheries Division in both commercial and resource management terms as well as Fisheries Division's regulatory functions. These are important areas in the Province, but evidence suggested that meaningful relationships were yet to be developed.

## 5.2 (6) FORESTRY

The writer found practically unanimous commendation for the Forest Service's activities, both for its recreation provision and for its arrangements for Forest Nature Reserves and National Nature Reserves. The mechanism of the local conservation committees which are representative of conservation and other interests was well regarded. These committees can advise on use of new land acquisitions and evaluate the conservation interest. This was understood to be a valuable and practical arrangement which can provide flexibility for different management regimes in National Nature Reserves on forest land and allow for early and meaningful consultation. The committees bring forestry and conservation interests together and allow for sensible dialogue and understanding of each others objectives. The Forest Service's 11 Forest Parks complement the Country Parks and it was pointed out that together they provide a very comprehensive network of major countryside facilities for people in the Province to a degree not found elsewhere in the U.K.

## 5.2 (7) THE PLANNING SERVICE

Crucial in the wise use and development of the countryside outside agriculture and forestry, are the functions of the Planning Service. With direct rule, this Service is uncomfortably placed between district councils with a consultative role on the one side and Departmental direction at Provincial level on the other. Planning staff work with no elected member support and direction and are therefore much more exposed than planners across the water. Discussions suggested that they do not always take consultation with Conservation Branch very seriously and they point, with some reason, to the lack of professional staff to service Conservation Branch in countryside planning matters. At the same time there is a reluctance to concede a role for Conservation Branch in matters such as local plans for AONBs.

Countryside and recreation planning do not appear to have been developed to any great extent and this was highlighted by a number of people, and demonstrated in the siting of some recreation facilities. Urban planning and job led development along with the difficult issue of buildings in the countryside not unnaturally appeared as key issues. Buildings in the countryside is particularly difficult and was discussed by district councils, planners, farmers and conservationists alike. There was some agreement that better design could be encouraged while it was conceded that the Planning Service did not always have the necessary architectural skills.

It was pointed out that the Planning Service was operating in a post "Cockcroft" era where planning controls had been relaxed. This had resulted in greater freedom to build houses in the countryside generally including AONBs except in areas of special control. Though the farming community felt they should have a right to build houses on their own land, some members of the Planning Service felt there was a danger of "suburbanisation" in some parts of the countryside, while others felt that planning within AONBs required reviewing. The writer was reminded that the Planning Acts are more recent in the Province than elsewhere in the U.K. and are less well accepted. It was admitted that enforcement could be difficult and the number of starts without planning consent are significant. In general, the need for better arrangements between Planning and Conservation both for AONBs and for other areas of countryside planning was conceded.

## 5.2 (8) OTHER APPOINTED BODIES — TOURISM AND SPORT

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board recognised the importance of the countryside to tourism and its dependence on maintaining the richness and diversity of both the natural and built environment. They see a potential for an increase in tourism in the Province over the next decade. They recognise that both tourists and local visitors take part in countryside recreation and that there is no clear dividing line between the two since holidaymakers from Belfast to Lough Erne or to the Mourne Mountains and those who come from outwith the Province use the countryside alike. They comment that a more integrated approach is required for the wise use of the countryside including recreation planning.

Both the Tourist Branch of the Department of Economic Development and the Tourist Board have an interest in countryside facilities as they are used by tourists. To this end they offer grant for such facilities usually in response to district council proposals. It was indicated that their interest was primarily developmental and commercial and that they did not consider, at least primarily, its affect on the countryside resource. They saw this as the job of others. Similarly the Department of Education working through the Sports Council for Northern

Ireland, grant aided certain countryside facilities, where these were largely used by local visitors. The Sports Council is interested in promoting sport and physical recreation in the countryside. It sees a growth of interest in countryside matters and a need to improve co-ordinating arrangements.

In discussion, it was conceded that there was currently a lack of co-ordination in investment in countryside facilities. This, along with comments from others, supported the writer's impression that there was little co-ordination of planning and development of recreation facilities outside Country and Forest Parks in the Northern Ireland countryside. Though visitor numbers to the Parks are generally known, there appears to be little data on the pattern of visitor demand in the countryside other than those for accommodation or general visitor numbers. Expensive facilities with high running costs can be created without knowledge of likely visitor use, with grant aid which appears to be largely reactive.

Both the Tourist Board and the Sports Council favoured the setting up of an appointed body, which they saw as the most effective way of going forward in the countryside. The writer was also able to discuss at first hand the working of two appointed bodies, and to understand to some extent the relationships between them and their parent departments. In both cases, those concerned stressed the importance of making the arrangements work and recognising that this was not always easy. In both cases, some diminution of the appointed body's functions appeared to be underway.

## 5.2 (9) DISTRICT COUNCILS

The writer visited several district councils and met individual committee councillors elsewhere. She also visited the Association of Local Authorities Northern Ireland (ALANI) at the Lisburn BC offices in Hillsborough. Attitudes towards countryside varied, though within their very limited powers, recreation both urban and rural is important to district councils. It was recognised that co-operative ventures between district councils whether for recreation or for other purposes, did not normally take place and indeed it was suggested that this would be unlikely to happen unless there was pressure to do so from elsewhere. District councils which included Strangford Lough or the Mourne were aware of the importance of these areas in countryside and recreation terms and in the case of the Mourne Advisory Council, supported its activity.

Planning issues particularly buildings in the countryside were important issues, though district councils have a consultative role only, this is one of which they make full use. Whether or not their involvement should extend beyond the consultative role is a matter of debate.

Surprisingly, perhaps, refuse dumping, which is a district council responsibility, appeared as an irritating and sometimes quite difficult problem for some councils, and the writer was somewhat surprised that steps had not been taken to solve this on a more integrated basis with the help and advice of the Planning Service and the Environmental Protection Branch. Lack of suitable sites could sometimes mean that councils were forced to consider sites which were sensitive from the nature conservation side.

Relationships between district councils and Conservation Branch appeared to be generally harmonious if limited, and indeed there are examples of co-operation such as the co-operative venture where a countryside warden has been appointed jointly by Conservation Branch and the Craigavon District Council. Given staff and time, it was agreed that these relationships could very usefully be developed. District council attitudes towards the setting up of an appointed body were mixed. Those that were in favour wished to see strong representation on it from district councils, appointed by themselves. Some underlined the need for farming representatives also. On the other hand a council such as Fermanagh was opposed to an appointed body and was concerned that this might mean the imposition of a national park in their area, a proposal which had been opposed in the past. By some it was recognised that an appointed body would have a higher political profile than a committee which might not be helpful.

## 5.2 (10) VOLUNTARY BODIES

Voluntary conservation bodies feel particularly strongly about the bureaucracy of the government departments, their size and powerfulness, and the need, as they see it, to get nature conservation and countryside out of the departmental structure in order to give it status and greater effectiveness than is currently the case.

There is criticism of Conservation Branch's inability to survey sites of high conservation interest in the Province and to carry out adequate work for ASI designation. It is felt that Conservation Branch is not able to undertake special surveys of wildlife interest relating to large scale proposed new developments while the need for habitat survey and the improvement of the biological data base was also stressed. The Branch's ability to take initiatives or to support the initiatives of others in the countryside was limited as was its ability to respond to planning questions. Some of these concerns centred on Strangford Lough, where it was felt some effective mechanism



was required to handle recreation pressure and to help in resolving different interests. Conservationists and others look for more science and professionalism in the nature conservation/countryside field and for more status and effective influence at the level of policy decisions by what can be described as the "official" countryside voice.

It should be stressed however, that there was wide recognition that these criticisms were often the result of inadequate staff resources and the lack of enabling legislation rather than a reflection on the competence and commitment of Branch staff.

The voluntary conservation bodies have made a valuable contribution in Northern Ireland and have been influential in pushing the conservation and recreation case. The work of the Ulster Trust for the Preservation of the Countryside in promoting long distance routes and greater awareness of the countryside and the National Trust's efforts over Strangford Lough, including better recognition of the important wildfowling interests, are both examples.

The voluntary bodies generally stressed the increase over the last decade or so of interest in wildlife and countryside in the Province, accepting that this may have been rather slower than generally across the water. Part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that environmental and biological education became regular parts of school curricula much later than in the rest of the U.K. It is probably fair to say that the inception of the Mourne Advisory Council and the still early development of the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation (UTNC), are both examples of these changes.

Discussions indicated that the Mourne Advisory Council initiative is both important and interesting. It is concerned with the Mourne Mountains which are a clearly defined area with significant recreation pressure largely from walkers. The Mourne Advisory Council is an example of a group with considerable local involvement. The appointment of a countryside warden by Conservation Branch provides a valuable support and liaison role.

Some of the concerns expressed by conservationists and others have related to conservation and recreation management within special areas in the Province of which the Mourne Mountains and Strangford Lough area are recognised as two. Up to date, legislation has not allowed for financial support or the deployment of staff in such areas by Conservation Branch but this will change with the new Draft Orders.

Undoubtedly the lack of enabling legislation in the '65 Act to carry out or commission research except in very limited instances, has been a disadvantage in the Province. This was highlighted on several sides and became increasingly recognised by the writer during visits and discussions. A number of people looked to the future for developing relationships between Conservation Branch, the Universities and the Museum in the research and survey field.

Those that favoured the setting up of an appointed body saw its responsibilities spanning the activities of Conservation Branch and including those of the two advisory committees. Indeed some people suggested that it should also include the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch activities. There was a recognition that any such body in the Province should cover all aspects of countryside and maintain the advantages over the rest of the U.K. which exist at present in Northern Ireland.

## 5.2 (11) THE ADVISORY COMMITTEES (NRC AND UCC)

Many of the problems identified were recognised by the two advisory committees (Nature Reserves Committee and Ulster Countryside Committee) who, because of their direct involvement, understood clearly the lack of enabling legislation and problems of staff and resources. Though they recognised the need for an improved profile, for nature conservation and countryside, they were cautious with regard to too much organisational change. They highlighted the need for more promotional activity and for the better use of Nature Reserves for access and education along with complementary developments within Country Parks. They recognised that civil servant departments are not naturally good at these last activities and that there was reason for looking at different ways of getting results.

It is fair to say that the contribution of Country Parks in the Province was quite widely recognised while their potential for education and increasing awareness of the countryside was seen as part of their objectives. The countryside warden service has developed well in Northern Ireland over the last decade and their role in building links with other interests in the countryside is recognised as important. The need to increase the service particularly in areas of recreation demand or high nature conservation interest was pointed out.

## 5.2 (12) THE FARMING COMMUNITY

The farming community is influential in the Province. In spite of the small farm size and the limitations of conacre and land available for expansion, farmers have achieved a good level of efficiency particularly on better land. There is pressure to improve land where even a marginal increase in acreage can be very significant to the viability of a unit. Such a situation was observed in part of the Mourne where very stony but reasonably fertile land was being reclaimed from moorland.

After a generation of efficiency in food production, farmers in Northern Ireland are particularly vulnerable to the changes brought about by surpluses and the imposition of milk quotas because of their very small farms and high dependence on milk production from very small herds. These problems are exacerbated in the west where soils like the surface water gleys of Fermanagh are particularly difficult.

Livestock dependence with grass as the primary crop has maintained small fields with attractive hedge patterns and mainly unobtrusive farm buildings. These contribute to a pleasing, and on the whole, well cared for landscape. Among the farming community, there is some feeling that grants for hedge removal should still be available in the Province since there has been no wholesale removal of hedges as say in East Anglia. However, it is probably fair to say that this suggests a lack of demand and farmers appear to have preferred to construct new roads with agricultural grants which have not always been sensitively sited or constructed. Undoubtedly, the high dependence on grass crop with very considerable silage making has caused effluent problems. The writer gained the impression that though there was awareness of this among the farming community the problem was yet to be effectively tackled.

The Ulster Farmers Union did not favour the setting up of an appointed body. They believed the present mechanism worked well though they accepted the need for gradual change. They recognised the need for better countryside resources and the value of the countryside warden service in resolving potential conflicts. They stressed their support for the Access to the Countryside Order 1983 and for the Draft Orders. They were concerned, and this view was shared by individual farmers, that an appointed body might not be as balanced in its approach as the Department, and that there might be pressure to set up national parks. Comments from both farming and conservation interests highlighted the need for building better relationships and understanding between each other with a greater awareness and knowledge of each others problems.

- 5.3 The writer has discussed the *views of others* under broad headings. It is not possible here to refer to the contributions of all the people and groups individually who expressed views. Suffice it to say that the many concerns were widely held and the writer learned from them. She now goes on to consider the way ahead.

## 6. THE WAY AHEAD

What changes should be made, which are the key areas for improvement, and what is the best kind of organisation to undertake this role in Northern Ireland, lies at the heart of the way forward.

### An Appointed Body or not?

- 6.1 The writer shares the widely held view that the present status and level of staff and resources for countryside and nature conservation in Northern Ireland is inadequate. Though capital has been generally available and not always fully utilised, this is, in part, a result of limited staff time to implement developments.
- 6.2 The writer was impressed by the commitment of staff within Conservation Branch and the high calibre of those in the countryside warden service, but recognised the lack of professional and scientific people within the Branch and the quite limited opportunities for their advancement. The need for professional and scientific leadership at a higher level and a much greater input by conservation at policy level combined with a higher profile generally, was very clear.
- 6.3 Present staff numbers and scientific professional leadership are inadequate for carrying out the functions of the current legislation. These functions will increase dramatically with the implementation of the new Draft Orders and will mean a new and developing role for any conservation organisation. To carry out these will require a quite different level of staffing than is presently the case.
- 6.4 Many people have been attracted by the idea of setting up an appointed body in Northern Ireland to carry out these responsibilities. They look across the water to the Nature Conservancy Council and the two Countryside Commissions and see a clearer and apparently more independent and influential role, and what is perceived to be

a more effective voice. They look for a vigorous body in Northern Ireland outwith the large departments such as the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland (DOE and DANI). It has to be remembered in this context that DOE has wide responsibilities and understandably has been pre-occupied with matters such as housing. It is probably fair to say that housing provision is now well advanced and other big new developments, with the exception of lignite and water supplies, are not envisaged.

- 6.5** It can be argued that the activities of DANI are more likely to be influenced by DOE than by a small outside body, and that DOE itself is more likely to be influenced from within than from without. The writer recognises the role of the Assembly in the scrutiny of departmental activities. This role is a new and developing one which can evolve to create a new and important element within government structure. Nevertheless the present priorities, powers and range of activities of the departments suggests that the ability of appointed bodies to exercise real influence is limited. There must therefore be real concern about the large departmental bureaucracies and their capability to react positively to ideas, initiatives and interests which are new or inconvenient. Discussion with some of the divisions both within DOE and DANI seem to demonstrate a pre-occupation with their own, sometimes narrow, interest with no enthusiasm for other interests, particularly if issues are put forward not in tune with the division's own.
- 6.6** The ability of appointed bodies to flourish in this atmosphere is open to question, and it is not clear to what degree DOE would be prepared to relinquish rather than duplicate any functions which were vested in such a body. Certainly, the examples of the Sports Council and the Tourist Board, except in outside promotion, are not entirely convincing examples of real responsibilities outwith departmental control.
- 6.7** Nevertheless, some people see an opportunity unique in the U.K. to create a body which combines responsibility for countryside and nature conservation — the whole countryside — which can vigorously pursue the new opportunities and new commitments which will flow from the Draft Orders. They feel that such a body will be more effective and will be more likely to take new initiatives than will be the case if these remain with a large department which has other priorities. There is concern too about the need for scientific and professional staff and the Department's past record on this is not encouraging. There is real doubt about the ability of DOE to provide a structure where the voice of countryside can be independently heard or make its views known.
- 6.8** The writer has considerable sympathy with these views and believes that they represent areas of real concern in the Province which cannot and should not be side-stepped.
- 6.9** It has also been argued that conservation is in a better position within DOE than outside. Reference is made to the fact that resources for capital projects are more available than they would be for a small appointed body with a limited budget. In addition it has been suggested that there are better opportunities for informal and effective consultation between Conservation Branch and other divisions within DOE and to some extent, DANI, than would be available to an outside body.
- 6.10** The availability of capital resources within a large department is an important and practical point. Indeed, in a budget as large as that of DOE, Conservation Branch's capital requirements are probably quite marginal and along with the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch, they benefit from this. However, the financial argument is less convincing when it comes to staff and accommodation since the present arrangements do not create the impression that conservation is important within DOE. The argument put forward that there are opportunities for consultation within DOE between conservation and other interests either at policy levels or over proposed developments were not borne out in discussion or in situations perceived by the writer. DOE does not appear to use its conservation arm in promoting policy level discussions with DANI over such matters as fishery interests or drainage schemes. The apparently different situation with forestry seemed to be the result of the different attitude within that service, and the mutual co-operation between it and Conservation Branch.
- 6.11** Though much of the evidence to the Assembly was about the creating of an appointed body the underlying concerns were much the same as those which the writer has been able to explore in more depth. In different degrees and in different ways these concerns are quite widely held. For example, though the farming community is opposed to an appointed body and to the designation of national parks, they have supported the Draft Orders with their new functions and they have recognised the need for more resources. District councils too have taken a keen interest in the question of an appointed body and in doing so, they have recognised their own responsibilities for recreation provision in the countryside.
- 6.12** None of the arguments then suggest that the present situation is satisfactory or that the present arrangements can continue unchanged. There is a real need for improvement which can operate within the present Northern Ireland

scene, but with the flexibility to change if circumstances in the future should alter. Fundamental to any new arrangement must be the ability to build and develop good relations between countryside, agriculture, forestry, fishing and other interests on land and water; and to this end any proposal for change must be at least broadly acceptable so gaining the co-operation of all.

## **7. THE PROPOSALS**

### **7.1 A New Service and a New Division**

**7.1.1** The writer has spent time in considering the issues and in seeking to improve her understanding of the Province. She is fully aware of the concerns felt should countryside and nature conservation continue within DOE. However, she is even more doubtful of an appointed body's ability to flourish in the present structure of government in Northern Ireland, particularly when this is combined with lack of support by the farming community. She, therefore, does not recommend the setting up of an appointed body for countryside and nature conservation in Northern Ireland but *she does recommend a new and strengthened Conservation Service within DOE headed up by an Under Secretary and to include a Countryside Division and a Historic Monuments and Buildings Division, each with an Assistant Secretary level post in charge. She also recommends that there should be one (advisory) committee for the proposed Countryside Division with a new role.*

**7.1.2** She now goes on to discuss in more detail her proposals for a Countryside Division and for changes in the present system and in the existing (advisory) committee structure.

**7.1.3** The creation of a new Countryside Division will raise the profile of conservation within the DOE and also in the Province generally. However, there are also a number of other areas which require some change. These changes flow in part from the new functions and commitments which are contained within the Draft Orders and are included in the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983. This all adds up to a very significant development role which will require changes in staff levels and content, if it is to be effectively carried out.

### **7.2 Responsibilities for Countryside — The New Look**

The writer now considers some of the areas of work to be undertaken by the proposed Countryside Division and the other changes which are required. These are set out under the following headings:

- (1) Relations with Historic Monuments and Buildings.
- (2) Relationships between countryside and other divisions in DOE including policy formulation, and with other departments particularly DANI.
- (3) Planning arrangements for countryside.
- (4) Co-ordination of investment in recreation facilities in the countryside.
- (5) Grant aid.
- (6) Working with district councils.
- (7) Meeting with the farming community.
- (8) Local countryside bodies — their role.
- (9) ASSI notification and management agreements.
- (10) Research in the countryside.
- (11) Promoting awareness in the countryside — conservation education.
- (12) EEC directives.
- (13) Support services.

#### **7.2 (1) RELATIONS WITH HISTORIC MONUMENTS AND BUILDINGS**

Though the writer has not been directly concerned with Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch, it became clear that there was a link between the built and the natural environment and that visitors to the countryside enjoy historic buildings as part of their experience. Indeed the development of the Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh or the idea for a scenic historic route in the Sperrins are examples, as is perhaps the opportunity to integrate more effectively the new countryside centre at the Quoile with the adjacent historic monument. Indeed the point was put to the writer on several occasions that the functions of the two Branches might be combined.

- (a) *The writer recommends that the two organisations should strengthen their links within a new Conservation Service, and that support services such as photography and graphics which exist to a small extent in the Historic Monuments and Buildings should be expanded for the benefit of the Conservation Service as a whole. An essential part of this proposal is that a building should be made available which can house all the staff of the new Conservation Service since without this, it is not really possible to develop sensible cohesion or jointly used*
- (b) *support services. The writer recommends the early provision of a building to accommodate the proposed Conservation Service.*

## 7.2 (2) RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COUNTRYSIDE AND OTHER DIVISIONS IN DOE INCLUDING POLICY FORMULATION, AND WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS PARTICULARLY DANI

The creation of a Conservation Service headed by an Under Secretary, will allow for input at policy formulation level within DOE and will mean that the Under Secretary concerned will have a primary interest and responsibility for putting forward the conservation view. This does not mean that the conservation view should always prevail, but rather that it can contribute to policy formulation and to the reaching of decisions.

This, it is believed, will allow for meaningful relationships between conservation and other interests to develop and for more effective consultation than has been the case in the past. DOE should also consider with DANI how best the conservation interest can be brought to bear on policy issues which affect the countryside and marine and fresh waters.

*The writer recommends that DOE reviews its arrangements for policy formulation and consultation internally and with DANI for countryside matters generally.*

## 7.2 (3) PLANNING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE

The writer spent time not only listening to the comments of others about the Planning Service but talking to planning officers in different parts of the Province who with their colleagues had the day to day problems of dealing with development control as well as plan making. She believes therefore that she has some understanding of the difficult job they are called upon to perform. District council members are concerned about development control decisions and exercise influence and pressure on planners without carrying the responsibility for decision making. The changes brought about by "Cockcroft" were to a large extent the result of pressure to relax controls on buildings in the countryside in the context of unenthusiastic attitudes towards planning generally. There is a need now to improve dialogue and understanding between district councils and planning and to develop local policies; in some of these conservation can make a contribution.

Nevertheless, the writer made it clear at the outset of the review that planning arrangements were an important part of the countryside care and evidence suggests that some changes are required. Key areas are the level of consultation within the countryside including those for ASSIs, and the arrangements for development control and for preparing local plans within AONBs.

- (a) *The writer recommends that discussion between the Planning Service and the proposed Countryside Division should take place to establish the level, procedure and criteria for consultation between them. This should include some input into area plans in largely rural areas and consultation on specified classes of planning applications in the countryside generally including any change of use affecting ASSIs. Consultation on specified classes of planning applications within AONBs and, probably a few outwith, and those affecting key ASSIs should be mandatory. Where the proposed Countryside Division and the Planning Service are unable to reach agreement on this last category, it should then be referred to the Minister. Experience elsewhere suggests that the need for referral is likely to be quite limited.*

AONB is a 'countryside planning' designation and the Draft Orders enable money to be spent on countryside and nature conservation within them. Expenditure is not limited to them, but along with parts of Fermanagh, they contain prime landscape and varied nature conservation interest which attract visitors. Careful consideration is therefore needed in siting developments in AONBs. The management of recreation use within them requires the sensitive siting of facilities, the planning of access and car park provision and the safeguarding of farming interests by the activities of a countryside warden service. This calls for a local plan combining countryside

- (b) *planning and visitor management. The writer recommends that local plans for AONBs should be prepared by the proposed Countryside Division in partnership with the Planning Service.*

The writer is not competent to suggest what classes of planning application should be the subject of the consultation procedure recommended. She believes that this is a matter which should be discussed between the Planning Service and the proposed Countryside Division and with the advice of the Committee. Part of this process will be in improving relationships and this must include professional countryside planning input by the proposed Countryside Division. In this context, the current situation where members of a committee comment individually to the Planning Service cannot continue to be regarded as acceptable.

At present the system does not allow for the 'official' countryside case to be made at a public enquiry where the overall DOE view is different. This is a matter of considerable concern and one with which the writer has sympathy, particularly as in the rest of the U.K. there is provision at government expense through appointed bodies for the countryside case to be put at a public enquiry when this is considered necessary. Of course, such occasions do not occur very often but this of itself is not a reason for making no change. The writer has proposals to make but will deal with this when discussing the Committee.

## 7.2 (4) CO-ORDINATION OF INVESTMENT IN COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION FACILITIES

This lack of co-ordination was conceded on all sides and struck the writer quite forcibly. It could lead to poor recreation planning as there was often little data on which to base possible visitor use. It is wasteful of capital and could result in high running costs for district councils. Since recreation and conservation in the countryside are very closely linked, there are good reasons on financial management as well as countryside planning grounds to bring these activities much closer together. *The writer therefore recommends that the present budgets and functions carried out by Drainage Division for recreation provision, those carried out by DED (Tourism Branch) under countryside amenities and those functions of the Department of Education which relate to countryside recreation but not organised sport, should all be transferred to the proposed Countryside Division.*

## 7.2 (5) GRANT AID IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The provision of grant aid will be available for a wider range of activities and bodies than has been the case previously. The Draft Orders state "to any body of persons having among its objectives the protection of wildlife or the preservation of the countryside". "Body", here, can be taken to include district councils and voluntary bodies and also bodies such as the Mourne Advisory Council provided these last have a proper constitution and a reasonable track record. It is important that the advisory and expertise role of the proposed Countryside Division is developed side by side with their grant giving function. Experience elsewhere has shown that grant aid linked with advice can be used as a way of improving standards of facilities in the countryside both in appearance and in function. It can also be used to help guide bodies towards creating the right kind of provision in the right place. Furthermore, it can be used to help develop skills in presentation and in developing greater awareness of the countryside.

Opportunities to develop partnership arrangements in the countryside should be considered. These might be with the Historic Monuments and Buildings or in the joint provision of countryside wardens with district councils. This has already been successfully tried for example by Conservation Branch and Craigavon Borough Council by the joint provision of a countryside warden, and in the Lagan Valley. The proposed Countryside Division could support with grant aid joint projects between a district council and a voluntary body such as the National Trust. This kind of arrangement has been developed in Scotland by the National Trust for Scotland with Cunninghame and Inverclyde District Councils with countryside grant. Grant aid could be used to assist in the development of voluntary bodies in the Province and to support and influence such bodies as the Mourne Advisory Council. *The writer sees the development of an advisory and grant giving function as an important new aspect of work of the proposed new Division.*

## 7.2 (6) WORKING WITH DISTRICT COUNCILS

Recreation provision is an important function for district councils. Along with their consultative planning role, this brings them into contact with the countryside. The contribution of Newry and Mourne and Down District Councils to the activities of the Mourne Advisory Council (MAC), the arrangements for wardening at Lough Neagh and in the Lagan Valley and the interest of Ards Borough Council in the Strangford Lough Advisory Committee are all examples of co-operation between district councils and countryside interests. The new grant aid arrangements in the Draft Orders and the proposal to streamline investment in countryside facilities will assist district councils in their work.

*The writer recommends that the proposed Countryside Division should develop new initiatives with district councils in co-operation with other countryside interests.*

## 7.2 (7) MEETING WITH FARMERS

Most of the countryside is occupied by agriculture and farmers traditionally have seen themselves as the guardians of the countryside though they know this view is not always shared by others. The writer believes that there is considerable scope for developing relationships between the proposed Countryside Division and the farming community. She sees an emphasis on relationships at local level and for getting local people talking on the ground. *She therefore recommends that discussions should be actively pursued with the Ulster Farmers Union and the agricultural advisory services with a view to initiating such local groups.* She believes that the

Ulster Farmers Union will see this as a positive approach. Examples of subjects which could be usefully explored at this level are nature conservation, ASSI notification, recreation problems, footpaths, refuse dumping and new buildings.

## 7.2 (8) LOCAL COUNTRYSIDE BODIES — THEIR ROLE

The writer has already referred to the Mourmes Advisory Committee (MAC) and is aware of the numbers of committees which are concerned with Strangford Lough of which Strangford Lough Advisory Committee (SLAC) is the most representative of the local interests. So far, the Mourmes Advisory Council is generally undertaking a useful role and appears to be broadly acceptable at local level. It is therefore an example of a useful mechanism which might be developed in other parts of the Province, bearing in mind that its strength lies in its local support and in not being regarded as a body imposed from Belfast. Under the new Draft Orders there will be new opportunities to support such bodies in their activities and to move towards a more integrated approach for an area, particularly when, like the Mourmes, it is designated as an AONB. However, it would be wrong to assume that such bodies could only be useful in AONBs. *The writer recommends the encouragement and support of local countryside bodies. (See Appendix III).*

## 7.2 (9) ASSI NOTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT AGREEMENTS

Renotification of both existing and new ASSIs is from experience in the rest of the U.K. a time consuming and delicate task. There has to be a clear understanding of the criteria on which designation is based and this must be grounded in good science and proper evaluation. Since the Province is without a nature conservation review (NCR) which identifies key sites in the rest of the U.K. there is considerable leeway to make up.

The approaches to landowners over notification of ASSIs on their land and the formulation of lists of activities which will require consultation with them will require very careful handling if constructive progress is to be made. Linked with notification are management agreements since they may be required in a number of cases and these will generate an on-going commitment of staff time. Arrangements will also have to be worked out for notification on land which is subject to turbary rights since these may have to be handled rather differently. *These functions will require land agency skills as well as those of science and administration and it is well that this commitment should be recognised.*

## 7.2 (10) RESEARCH IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The proposed Countryside Division will have responsibilities for carrying out and commissioning research which have not previously existed in the Province. Though it would be unreasonable to expect it to include a major in house capability, it must be able with its own staff, to carry out, at least with contract help, the basic survey and monitoring of sites in the Province and to be able to evaluate these for future listing and designation. This work, should not be parcelled out only to contract staff so that the knowledge of and expertise about what exists in the Province in terms of high nature conservation interest is lost at the end of the contract.

In terms of commissioning research, this requires the involvement and direction of staff of the proposed Division if priority work is to be carried out to their satisfaction. There should, therefore, be a spectrum of activity ranging from in house work, sometimes including contract help, to work which is carried out by outside bodies.

On the nature conservation side, the science and research group within the proposed Countryside Division will wish to liaise with the chief scientist team of NCC in order to keep in touch with activities across the water, while on the recreation and landscape research side, links would be formed with CRRAG (Countryside Recreation Research Advisory Group).

The writer understands that within the Universities and the Museum in Northern Ireland there is considerable biological expertise and there should therefore be opportunities for the proposed Countryside Division to enter into longer term research contracts with these bodies. The Universities probably depend to a significant degree on research contracts commissioned by the departments, so that this new research function will be welcomed by them.

With experience, and liaison with bodies in G.B., the proposed Countryside Division will develop a clearer understanding of the priorities in biological, recreation and landscape research which relate directly to its countryside responsibilities. There is, however, an increasing need for research at the interface between conservation and activities such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries. As the writer understands the present situation, agriculture, forestry and fisheries research are funded by DANI and are largely production orientated, and as such do not necessarily take into account the effects on habitats and landscape of agricultural and other changes. These are of increasing importance both as a result of increased environmental and recreation interest and because of the changes which may come about with altered agricultural support.

*The writer therefore recommends the setting up of a research liaison committee covering the interests of countryside, agriculture, forestry and fisheries to review current research and to identify areas requiring investigation and where overlapping, if any, exists. The committee should also make suggestions for future research work and funding and advise DOE and DANI and Ministers.*

## 7.2 (11) PROMOTING AWARENESS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE — CONSERVATION EDUCATION

Conservation education and better understanding of the countryside have been seen to be of increasing importance across the water over the last 10–15 years. With so much of the population living in towns, contact with the countryside is limited and understanding and caring attitudes for it are often absent. The NCC and the two Countryside Commissions have all put time and effort into this field and have developed packs and leaflets for use in schools. There is wide use of Country Parks for education and this is supported by local authorities. As yet, the Province, for well understood reasons, lags behind in this field — some of these reasons are lack of staff. The countryside warden service recognises the opportunities within Country Parks and the advisory committee members felt that more use should be made of suitable Nature Reserves for education.

Linked with this is the promotion of countryside awareness generally and also through the activities of the proposed Countryside Division. The Division should develop its own image and labels so that it becomes recognised outside DOE as an identifiable service. It is a matter for future consideration how much the proposed Countryside and Historic Monuments and Buildings Divisions would wish to co-operate in this.

*The writer recommends that conservation education should be developed more widely in the Province and that the proposed Countryside Division should promote its own image and activities.*

## 7.2 (12) EEC DIRECTIVES

The writer understands that at present all EEC directives concerning the environment are handled by the Environmental Protection Branch. Some of these will refer directly to matters for which that Branch is responsible for example, atmospheric pollution (such as where there are proposals for reductions in levels of SO<sub>2</sub> or NOX emissions). However, it is important that the proposed Countryside Division should be aware of these directives, and where they relate to conservation matters which are the proposed Division's responsibility these should be referred to them. *The writer therefore recommends that new arrangements should be made for handling environmental EEC directives in which the proposed Countryside Division would be involved.*

## 7.2 (13) SUPPORT SERVICES

The writer referred earlier to the development of a graphics and photographic unit for the Conservation Service as a whole. She suggested this could also develop the skills for interpretation which could be available not only to the proposed Conservation Service but also to voluntary bodies and district councils.

In the longer term the development of other common services within Conservation Service could be further considered and might even extend to some combined use of industrial staff or arrangements for maintenance operations. *The writer therefore recommends the setting up of a graphics and photographic unit for the Conservation Service as a whole and the development within it, of skills in interpretation.*

In the previous paragraphs the writer has made a number of significant recommendations. Nevertheless, for some of the changes proposed, it is the implications for staffing that are fundamental and the need to provide the proposed Countryside Division with people and resources to fulfil the new commitments. These are summarised in the following paragraphs.

## 7.3 Proposed Countryside Division — Structure

7.3.1 In the Report the writer has referred to the new responsibilities which flow from the Draft Orders and the new level of professionalism which will be required to carry out these tasks effectively. Another recurring theme in the Report is the need to build and develop new relationships, with the departments and their divisions, with the farming community, with district councils, with voluntary bodies, with planners and with local countryside bodies. To do this effectively requires leadership, a professional approach and the ability to create new links and structures. It requires a well staffed Countryside Division led by a person at Assistant Secretary level to carry out this development role, a role which may be significant for the future of the Northern Ireland countryside. To find the right person for this post will be important and to have the widest possible choice, it should in the first place be advertised outside the departments. The next paragraphs outline a structure for the proposed Division which is which is set out in more detail in Appendix I.



**7.3.2** The Assistant Secretary level post previously recommended and a Senior Principal post as deputy should both be opportunity posts. Below these the writer proposes an indicative structure comprising five "sections" each headed by a Principal level post (four of which will be opportunity posts) and which will cover the following areas of work:

- (1) Wider Countryside
- (2) Reserves and Country Park Management
- (3) Science and Research
- (4) Countryside Planning
- (5) Administration

Nine professional/scientific and three administrative main grade posts are proposed with a two to one ratio of support posts some of which will be professional/scientific.

**7.3.3** It is proposed that the countryside warden service should be increased by four — six posts and that this should be regraded on the head forester scale. Consideration should also be given to the appointment of countryside "project officers" for areas such as Strangford Lough.

These proposals are set out in detail in Appendix I.

#### **7.4 The Committee and its Role**

**7.4.1** The writer believes that there is a need to strengthen the committee structure and to increase its role if some of the concerns which have been expressed are to be met. The writer proposes that there should be one, and not two committees as is currently set out in the Draft Orders. The opportunity within Northern Ireland which does not exist across the water to look comprehensively at the whole countryside is one of the strengths within the Province. This strength is broadly recognised within Conservation Branch but it is a matter on which the views of individual committee members varied. Some members tended to see their roles as separate and were apprehensive of what others might see as priorities in the countryside.

*However, if the committee role is to be strengthened and is to go beyond a limited advisory one, then it seems quite clear to the writer that there can only be one, and she recommends accordingly and suggests that it is called the Northern Ireland Countryside Committee. She now goes on to discuss changes and new responsibilities for the Committee.*

**7.4.2** *The writer recommends that the Committee should have a responsibility to keep under review matters affecting the Northern Ireland countryside and to advise Ministers accordingly. This gives the Committee a role in raising policy issues of concern and new initiatives which they feel should be considered.*

**7.4.3** *The writer recommends that the Committee should be able to appear at a public enquiry and put the countryside case when the proposed Countryside Division is unable to do so because of a different DOE view. In these circumstances, the Committee should be able to engage the necessary professional and technical people to support them while costs incurred would be borne by the proposed Countryside Division budget. This, of course, does not preclude Committee members from supporting proposed Countryside Division staff on other occasions.*

**7.4.4** *The writer recommends that the Committee should be responsible for the payment of grants to voluntary bodies with technical support from the proposed Countryside Division staff and that in terms of this function only, the head of the Division would act as the Committee's accounting officer jointly with the Permanent Secretary. The committee would advise the Department on the payment of grant outwith the voluntary sector and in the light of the writer's recommendations under "Co-ordination of Investment in Countryside Facilities", this will become an increased responsibility.*

**7.4.5** *The writer recommends that the Committee should have a particular role in advising the proposed Countryside Division on promotional and educational activities and for taking an active part in them.*

**7.4.6** *The writer recommends that the Committee should have an ability to set up ad hoc committees on a short or longer term basis to provide additional specialist advice. However, she would go on to warn against too many such sub-committees or for allowing them to become too permanent.*

- 7.4.7 *The writer recommends that the Committee should advise the proposed Countryside Division on its existing and new and increased range of activities following the enactment of the Draft Orders.*

The writer sees this proposed increased role for the Committee as one which will require more time, particularly from the chairman. She suggests therefore that consideration should be given as to whether or not the chairman should receive a part-time salary. Though many people give their time free to public service it has to be recognised that there is a limit depending on individual's financial position and commitments. It would be unfortunate indeed if a potential chairman was unable to accept office for such reasons.

- 7.4.8 The writer has recommended the setting up of a new Conservation Service including the range of interests of countryside and historic monuments and buildings. In this context, *she recommends the setting up of a new small committee consisting of two representatives from the Northern Ireland Countryside Committee and two representatives from the Historic Monuments and Buildings Councils.* This committee would advise the Minister and the DOE on the following matters:

- (1) To review the range of activities of the two divisions and to consider matters of common interest.
- (2) To raise matters of mutual concern.
- (3) To consider any changes in working arrangements between the proposed Countryside and Historic Monuments and Buildings Divisions.

It is suggested for consideration that such a committee might be called the Northern Ireland Heritage Committee.

## 8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The dissatisfaction with the present arrangements for nature conservation, amenity, and recreation in Northern Ireland which has been widely voiced and which led to the writer's investigation is, in the writer's view, well founded. Some people, therefore, will be disappointed that the Report does not propose the setting up of an appointed body, and they will feel that the status quo view has prevailed. This is not so. The writer believes that changes are essential and that if the recommendations put forward in the Report are properly implemented, they can provide a better basis for conservation and recreation in the Northern Ireland countryside than would be possible with an appointed body.

But the opportunities for change provided by the Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and the two Draft Orders must be grasped and the chance to develop new relationships in the countryside seized with purpose and understanding. Such initiatives can benefit those who live and work in the Northern Ireland countryside and those who visit and enjoy it, but most important of all will be the contribution to the quality of life in the Province.

To do this requires a will at political and departmental level to change, and a commitment to provide the staff and resources to do the job.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. The Remit

The writer was asked to review the structure and organisation for countryside and nature conservation in Northern Ireland and to advise the Minister.

### 2. Background

The writer believes that direct rule and land tenure are two significant differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K. which mean that structures which work in Scotland or in England and Wales may not do so in the Province.

### 3 & 4. Present Structure of Countryside in Northern Ireland

The writer reviews briefly the present arrangements for countryside and nature conservation in Northern Ireland and also the legislation.

### 5. The Issues

The writer is concerned about the issues for nature conservation and countryside in the Province and sets out under the *Views of Others* the synthesis of her examination of these and these are briefly summarised below.

The lack of status for conservation within DOE and therefore in the Province.

The lack of any real involvement of conservation in policy formulation within DOE or in relation to DANI policy in the countryside.

There needed to be a wider recognition of the conservation interest within the divisions of both DOE and DANI.

There is concern that the 'official' conservation case could not be heard when this was at variance with an overall DOE view.

It was recognised that the present level and numbers of staff is inadequate for the present legislation particularly within scientific and professional grades. The Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and the Draft Orders will mean new commitments and a significantly increased workload including the development of science and the ability to commission or contract research.

There is a general lack of a data base for flora and fauna and in the field of recreation. Survey, monitoring and studies are required as well as commissioned research contracts.

Arrangements with the planning service both at the levels of consultation and in the making of local plans for AONBs were unsatisfactory.

Co-ordination of investment in countryside facilities was largely absent. The use of grant aid with advice to improve the design and functioning of recreation facilities, has yet to be developed.

It was recognised that there is a need to build relationships with other interests in the countryside.

A variety of views were expressed as to whether or not to set up an appointed body for countryside/nature conservation in the Province.

### 6. The Way Ahead

The writer considers the issues put forward including the proposal to set up an appointed body. She suggests that an appointed body would not flourish under direct rule and without the support of the farming community, however, she sees the need for change including strengthened countryside arrangements within DOE and a strengthened committee and goes on to make the following recommendations:

**7.1.1** *The writer recommends* a new and strengthened Conservation Service within DOE headed by an Under Secretary and to include a Countryside Division and a Historic Monuments and Buildings Division, each with an Assistant Secretary level post in charge. She also recommends that there should be one (advisory) committee for the proposed Countryside Division, with a new role.

**7.2.1** (a) *The writer recommends* that the two organisations should strengthen their links within a new Conservation Service.

- 7.2.1 (b) *The writer recommends* that there should be the early provision of a building to accommodate the proposed Conservation Service.
- 7.2.2 *The writer recommends* that DOE reviews its arrangements for policy formulation and for consultation internally and with DANI for countryside matters.
- 7.2.3 (a) *The writer recommends* that discussion between the Planning Service and the proposed Countryside Division should take place to establish the level, procedure and criteria for consultation between them. This should include some input into area plans in largely rural areas and consultation on specified classes of planning applications in the countryside generally including any change of use affecting ASSIs. Consultation on specified classes of planning applications within AONBs and probably a few outwith and those affecting key ASSIs should be mandatory. Where the proposed Countryside Division and the Planning Service are unable to reach agreement on this last category, it should then be referred to the Minister.
- 7.2.3 (b) *The writer recommends* that local plans for AONBs should be prepared by the proposed Countryside Division in partnership with the Planning Service.
- 7.2.4 *The writer recommends* that the present budgets and functions carried out by Drainage Division for recreation provision, those carried out by DED Tourist Branch under countryside amenities and those functions of the Department of Education which relate to countryside recreation but not organised sport should all be transferred to the proposed Countryside Division.
- 7.2.5 *The writer sees* the development of an advisory and grant giving function as an important new aspect of work of the proposed new Division.
- 7.2.6 *The writer recommends* that the proposed Countryside Division should develop new initiatives with district councils in co-operation with other countryside interests.
- 7.2.7 *The writer recommends* that discussions should be actively pursued with the Ulster Farmers Union and the agriculture advisory services with a view to initiating the development of local groups.
- 7.2.8 *The writer recommends* the encouragement and support of local countryside bodies.
- 7.2.10 *The writer recommends* the setting up of a research liaison committee covering the interests of countryside, agriculture, forestry and fisheries to review current research and to identify areas requiring investigation and where overlapping, if any, exists. The committee should also make suggestions for future work and funding and advise DOE, DANI and Ministers.
- 7.2.11 *The writer recommends* that conservation education should be developed more widely in the Province and that the proposed Countryside Division should promote its own image and activities.
- 7.2.12 *The writer recommends* that new arrangements should be made for handling environmental EEC directives in which the proposed Countryside Division would be involved.
- 7.2.13 *The writer recommends* the setting up of a graphics and photographic unit for the Conservation Service as a whole and the development within it of skills in interpretation.
- 7.4.1 *The writer recommends* that there should only be one advisory committee and suggests that it is called the Northern Ireland Countryside Committee.
- 7.4.2 *The writer recommends* that the Committee should have a responsibility to keep under review all matters affecting the Northern Ireland Countryside and to advise Ministers accordingly.
- 7.4.3 *The writer recommends* that the Committee should be able to appear at a public enquiry and put the countryside case when the proposed Countryside Division is unable to do so because of a different DOE view.
- 7.4.4 *The writer recommends* that the Committee should be responsible for the payment of grants to voluntary bodies and that, in terms of this function only, the Head of the Division would act as the Committee's accounting officer jointly with the Permanent Secretary.

- 7.4.5**      *The writer recommends* that the Committee should have a particular role in advising the proposed Countryside Division on promotional and educational activities and for taking an active part in them.
- 7.4.6**      *The writer recommends* that the Committee should have an ability to set up ad hoc committees on a short or longer term basis to provide additional specialist advice.
- 7.4.7**      *The writer recommends* that the Committee should advise the proposed Countryside Division on its existing and new and increased range of activities following the enactment of the Draft Orders.
- 7.4.8**      *The writer recommends* the setting up of a new small committee consisting of two representatives from the Northern Ireland Countryside Committee and two representatives from the Historic Monuments and Buildings Councils to advise the Minister and DOE.

## PROPOSED COUNTRYSIDE DIVISION — STRUCTURE

The writer now goes on to look at the staffing levels and requirements for the proposed new Countryside Division. The following sets out an indicative structure and responsibilities which the writer believes will be required to undertake the work.

The proposed Division would be headed up by an Assistant Secretary level post with a Senior Principal level post as deputy. Both these posts should be opportunity posts allowing for strong scientific/professional leadership and strong administrative support, or good administrative leadership with strong scientific/professional support. Both these alternatives could be effective. However, the writer holds the view that at this particular time there would be advantages in the headship of the Division being held by a scientific/professional person provided care was taken to recruit someone of quality and experience.

Five Principal level posts are proposed, four of which should be held by scientific/professional people and one by an administrator. The writer suggests how their responsibilities might be grouped, but this should be regarded as indicative only since it would require detailed consideration by the Division management. However, such further consideration would not of itself alter the staff requirements proposed.

### (1) Wider Countryside

- (a) Grant aid to district councils etc. and including servicing the N.I. Countryside Committee on grant aid to the voluntary sector.
- (b) Countryside advice including interpretation and conservation education.
- (c) ASSI notification and management agreements.
- (d) Development of projects. Encouragement of local countryside bodies — new developments in the countryside.

This section would be mainly concerned with new initiatives in the countryside, grant aid and ASSI notification and would not be directly concerned with management though it would require to draw on both the management section and the science section for advice and help. *This section should include 2 main grade posts and adequate support staff.*

### (2) Reserve and Country Park Management

- (a) Responsibility for Nature Reserves including management.
- (b) Responsibility for Country Parks including management.
- (c) Countryside warden service.
- (d) Provision of management advice relating to nature conservation.
- (e) Land negotiations.

This section will have the main management responsibilities within the Division including those for nature conservation. They will depend on the science section for some input. *2 main grade posts including a land agent and adequate support staff are proposed.*

## 3. Science and Research

- (a) Survey and evaluation of sites of nature conservation interest, including a nature conservation review (NCR).
- (b) Criteria for ASSI to support notification and advice to "Wider Countryside" section on activities which could change the nature conservation interest of these sites.
- (c) Research commissioning for nature conservation.
- (d) Liaison with scientists in related fields in the Province and with those in bodies such as Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE) in G.B.
- (e) Liaison with those carrying out agriculture, forestry and fisheries research in Northern Ireland.

This is an important and new area of work which needs to be vigorously pursued in order to provide information on important nature conservation sites, habitats and for the provision of base line biological data. This section will require to have a significant input into "Wider Countryside" and "Reserves and Country Park Management". *Three SSOs with adequate support staff are proposed for this section.*

### (4) Countryside Planning

- (a) Developing relationships with the Planning Service.
- (b) Plan making for AONBs.
- (c) Countryside input in area plans.
- (d) Consultations on development control.
- (e) Directing and commissioning recreation survey and investigation and data collection. Commissioning work on scenic assessments and changes in the appearance of the countryside.

The provision of staff with professional planning expertise was not included in Conservation Branch. This has made it difficult to develop a useful and professional relationship with the Planning Service or to provide proper input to planning matters. The recommendations for local plans in AONBs and the consultation on development control matters require new initiatives and staff input. *Two main grade posts are proposed for this section with adequate support staff.*

#### **(5) Administration**

- (a) General support of other sections including cartography.
- (b) Servicing the N.I. Countryside Committee.
- (c) Staff and personnel matters.
- (d) Building and maintenance contracts.
- (e) Promoting the countryside library and publications.
- (f) EEC directives.
- (g) Special responsibilities for developing computerised data handling in the Division as a whole at scientific, planning and management level and making sure it is compatible.
- (h) Responsibilities under the Draft Wildlife Order.

Administration has an important role in supporting the work of the other sections. Consideration for instance should be given to deploying staff within the "Wider Countryside" section and the Planning section so that there can be day to day direction by professional staff engaged in planning and grant aid case work.

The responsibility for developing computerised handling of records, ASSI information, planning and grants case work and the work resulting from the Wildlife Draft Order, and achieving the necessary compatibility, should be made the responsibility of a designated member of staff. It should also be remembered the considerable saving of staff time which can be achieved by the use of word processors in writing papers, reports and repeat letters.

The new ASSI notification work will produce a greatly increased need for mapping and it will be much more satisfactory to provide in house staff and equipment for cartography.

Promotional work with responsibility for publications and possibly line management responsibility for library and cartography will be important and will require a main grade post. *Three main grade posts with adequate support staff are proposed.*

#### **General**

It is not possible for the writer to propose in detail a staff structure for the proposed Countryside Division, since this depends on a detailed assessment of work load and responsibilities. However, it is suggested that a ratio of two to one support staff posts to main grade posts should provide a good guide. It will be recognised that all the main grade posts except those in Science and Administration are described as scientific or professional. But it has been assumed that the main grade posts in Science are SSOs and those in Administration are likely to be administrative. It is of course recognised that there are now a number of administrative posts in Conservation Branch.

The writer would now like to turn to the countryside warden service. They look after 6 Country Parks and about 40 Nature Reserves with 4 in the pipeline and are extremely stretched. As well as their responsibilities for resource and visitor management, there are opportunities to build up the educational use of Parks and Reserves. Important too is the local liaison function. This is fundamental in building up relationships with farmers and others at local level. This suggests that main grade warden posts should be graded onto the head forester scale in DANI and that their numbers should be expanded by the order of 4-6 posts.

Consideration should be given to appointing "countryside officers" who can act over a large area as a catalyst and liaison officers. They would operate on a much larger geographical base than a warden. This role is partly carried out by the countryside warden in the Mourne.

The writer would like to stress the developmental role of the Division, with the creation of new linkages and structures, and the building of new relationships in the countryside. This role is part and parcel of the activities set out in this Appendix.

### G. B. STAFF LEVELS — SOME GENERAL COMPARISONS WITH NORTHERN IRELAND

The proposals for a Countryside Division envisage changed staff levels including a significant increase in professional/scientific staff. It was felt helpful, therefore, to set out in very general terms the order of staff employed by public bodies in countryside and nature conservation in a notional geographical area in G.B., broadly similar to Northern Ireland. In doing this account must be taken of those services provided at British or national level.

Local authorities carry out a substantial amount of countryside activity which is undertaken by DOE in Northern Ireland. In this context there is of the order of two dozen posts at varying levels mainly in professional grades who, to a greater or lesser degree, are involved in countryside planning and recreation provision including the development and management of country parks and a range of related issues. This figure does not take account of the total range of support staff nor necessarily the input at directing staff level and does not include countryside wardens. On the nature conservation side there are of the order of 7–8 posts (scientific) which include main grade posts and a principal equivalent level post. There is also land agency assistance and what is described as the chief warden post which is largely concerned with reserve management. Not included here are administrative support posts or the input in advice and technical services provided at headquarters level. Wardening levels operate currently at 3–4 Nature Reserves per warden which is regarded as inadequate.

This does not include staff of the chief scientist team of NCC, who handles research, or the habitat teams which carry out survey and monitoring work in G.B. More specialist countryside work carried out in liaison with local government and to some extent the voluntary sector includes two main grade officers on countryside planning and grants and a main grade officer on promotional aspects of the countryside including publications. There are also back-up facilities in graphics and cartography and there is a research and development capability in landscape, recreation and countryside planning matters operating in Scotland and another in England and Wales. These will be required in the Province. Some capability will be required in research competence equivalent to that provided by the chief scientist team of NCC, and for survey and monitoring as provided by the habitat teams on a country basis. There are more generally, also support staff at administrative level, and senior posts at directing level in the countryside and nature conservation which have not been included. There are also varying numbers of contract staff.

In view of the different systems and organisation on the two sides of the water, it is difficult to provide precise comparisons, however, the writer draws attention to the quite different level of staffing in G.B. particularly at the professional and scientific level compared with what is current practice in the Province. What are proposed as staffing levels within the proposed Countryside Division would bring Northern Ireland nearer that level.



## LOCAL COUNTRYSIDE BODIES IN SELECTED AREAS

The writer is aware of the concern over the conservation and recreation planning in selected areas in the Province such as Strangford Lough or the Mourne. In general the activities of the Mourne Advisory Council (MAC) and Strangford Lough Advisory Committee (SLAC) have been commented on and the writer has suggested that such initiatives should be supported.

The writer does not believe that there is a blue print which can be put forward for countryside bodies in all selected areas or that they can each be approached in precisely the same way. The development of suitable structures will require discussion with local interests and consultation with countryside interests generally, all of which will take time; time which it is suggested will be well spent if it achieves acceptance and credibility of such bodies and the support of district councils and the farming community.

In the light of the above, the writer suggests some general points which may be helpful in developing arrangements with countryside bodies in AONBs or other selected areas.

The Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and the Draft Orders provide new enabling legislation for countryside planning, access, employment of countryside staff and capital expenditure on conservation and recreation facilities. These provide a new framework and new opportunities within AONBs and to some extent for eligible local countryside bodies in selected areas outwith AONBs.

Grant aid will be a matter for the proposed Countryside Division or the proposed Northern Ireland Countryside Committee (NICC) and it would, therefore, be reasonable for NICC to have a representative on such a countryside body. This would also help the countryside body to keep in close touch with the proposed Countryside Division and so benefit from advice, guidance and technical help on the one hand and for the Division to provide encouragement and executive action on the other.

The Mourne Advisory Council (MAC) and the Strangford Lough Advisory Committee (SLAC) have demonstrated the need for representation of local interests and the support and co-operation of the local district councils. Such district councils should be prepared to make a commitment to mutually agreed local policies for the area concerned through the local countryside plan where an AONB is concerned and to co-operate in agreed action.

Departmental interests should be prepared to consult and co-operate in AONBs (or selected areas) with the countryside body concerned and in the light of the local plan. A departmental group for the area could usefully be set up to include countryside, planning, water, fisheries, drainage, forestry and agriculture as appropriate which should report to the countryside body concerned. This should help to ensure that executive departmental action harmonises with the objectives of the local plan and the activities of the countryside body.

The employment of staff by the proposed Countryside Division in partnership with others is likely to be fundamental. The writer has suggested that these could be called countryside officers. Part of their role would have similarities to that of the countryside wardens and indeed the present post in the Mourne is an example. Though such an officer might not have the same kind of responsibility for a Nature Reserve or a Country Park as a countryside warden, it is important that these officers have some kind of geographical base related to the proposed Countryside Division's land responsibility. There could, of course, be more than one countryside officer in an AONB or selected area and it would be important that there should be properly defined responsibilities and line management arrangements for countryside officers and co-operation between them and countryside wardens.

## LIST OF MEETINGS AND VISITS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## Meetings

The Ulster Trust for the Preservation of the Countryside — representatives.  
 The Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation — representatives.  
 The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers — Northern Ireland Officer.  
 The Ulster Architectural Heritage Society — representatives.  
 The Northern Ireland Committee of the British Field Sports Society — representatives.  
 The Wildfowling Associations — representatives.  
 Queens University — individual staff members.  
 The New University of Ulster — Vice Chancellor.  
 Ulster Museum — individual staff members (marine and plant biologists).  
 The Magilligan Field Centre — representatives.  
 The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds — Chairman and Chief Officer in Northern Ireland and Director and headquarters staff.  
 The National Trust Northern Ireland Region — representatives.  
 Dr. R. Buchanan.  
 The Ulster Countryside Committee.  
 The Natures Reserves Committee.  
 The Ulster Farmers Union — the lands, commercial and general committee.  
 The Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association — representatives.  
 The Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland — the Secretary and senior colleagues.  
 Fisheries Division — representatives.  
 Forest Service — representatives.  
 Drainage Division — representatives.  
 The Department of Economic Development (Tourist Branch) — representatives.  
 The Northern Ireland Tourist Board — representatives.  
 The Department of Education — representatives.  
 The Northern Ireland Sports Council — representatives.  
 The Mourne Advisory Council — representatives.  
 The Strangford Lough Advisory Committee — Chairman.  
 The Arts Council of Northern Ireland — Director.  
 The Historic Buildings Council — Vice-Chairman.  
 The Ulster Folk Museum — Director.  
 The Ulster American Folk Park — representatives.  
 The Environment Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly — Chairman and members.  
 The Agriculture Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly — Chairman and members.  
 The Association of Local Authorities Northern Ireland — representatives.  
 Fermanagh District Council.  
 Limavady District Council.  
 Down District Council.  
 Ards Borough Council.  
 Moyle District Council.  
 Newry and Mourne District Council.  
 The Landscape Institute — representatives.  
 The Chairman of Enterprise Ulster.  
 The Director of the Northern Ireland Milk Marketing Board.  
 Commander Maxwell De Ros Estate.  
 Dr. J. Parsons — Cuan Sea Fisheries.  
 The Department of the Environment — the Secretary and senior colleagues.  
 Water Service — representatives.  
 Environmental Protection Branch — representatives.  
 Planning Division — the Under Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Chief Planning Officer.  
 Divisional Planning staff in: Fermanagh  
   Co. Antrim  
   Co. Down  
 The Minerals Unit in Belfast.  
 Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch including the Archaeological Survey — senior staff.  
 Conservation Branch — nearly all the staff were met including the countryside warden service.

## Visits

A good deal of the Province was covered at one time or another by travelling to different parts. The following list therefore is not comprehensive but indicative of the range of visits.

Lough Beg and Lough Neagh including Oxford Island, Randalstown, Shanes Castle and views of some of the islands.  
 The north and east Antrim coast including the Giants Causeway and part of the coastal path.  
 Glenariff Forest Park, Straidkilly Wood and Lindford Wood.  
 The Belfast hills, Colin Glen, Deramore and part of the Lagan Valley.  
 Nature Reserves, Forest Nature Reserves, Forestry Division Areas and recreation facilities in Fermanagh including parts of Upper and Lower Lough Erne.

Castle Archdale Country Park.  
Crawfordsburn Country Park.  
The Roe Valley Country Park.  
Benone.  
The Sperrins.  
The Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh.  
Parts of the Blackwater and Oona Rivers.  
The Mourne Mountains.  
Tollymore Forest Park.  
Castlewellan Forest Park.  
Rostrevor National Nature Reserve.  
Strangford Lough — sections of the shore and also some of the islands.  
Farms in Fermanagh, County Antrim and County Down.  
Loughry Agricultural College.  
Quoile Nature Reserve.  
Scrabo Country Park.

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