

Urgent briefing

March 2017

Disrespecting "everyday miracles and the living past"

The Lough Beg wetlands and the A6 road



friends of
the earth
northern ireland



The Lough Beg wetlands are magnificent

If you stand on Aughrim Hill or visit Church Island, you will be touched by this ancient and beautiful landscape, and most likely you will be alone. The Lough Beg wetlands are hidden from view and, apart from the calls of Whooper swans and other birds, they are silent. Until now.

It is a matter of urgent concern that a motorway is proposed for these wetlands. It is *“a terrible mistake, one that in future years will seem as incomprehensible as it is careless”*¹.

This road poses an unfathomable threat. It will rise high above existing ground level to forever fragment and ‘desecrate’ this landscape. Drawing in other developments in its wake, the serenity and ecology of this once intact wetland will become industrialised and we will have lost a global treasure.

This is an urgent briefing, a final appeal to our government to urgently review this section of road, to revise the Environmental Impact Assessment and ***not to take any further decision until we have a new government and an elected Minister in place***. We also appeal to the international community to help save this global treasure.

This is urgent because the government seems determined to push this through. As we write this briefing we do not have a government. There is a legal challenge taken by Chris Murphy that may succeed but the High Court is not permitted to look at the merits of the case.

The context behind our concerns:

Why this route when there are better alternatives? There are much better alternatives to this 4 miles of route and these other options were not properly considered. In fact, *“they couldn’t have picked a worse route”*². This is not about depriving people west of the Bann of investment. The local farmers, residents, writers and concerned global citizens are not saying a road cannot be built. They ask only for the other options to be reconsidered. There are less expensive, more efficient, and less damaging options that could have been selected in preference to this route. When the promoter of the scheme is the developer *and* the body that gives itself permission, it is no wonder the process was flawed from the beginning.³

There is a compelling vision for the Lough Beg wetlands. The area deserves to be a World Heritage Site, a landscape masterpiece that sparkles with unique culture, wildlife, history, and ancient memory. The potential for regeneration and tourism is vast. In court, the applicant for the judicial review explained that building this road through this area is like having a “Rembrandt with a corner cut off”. The area is already designated a Ramsar site, a wetland of global importance, and is meant to be protected because of its unique birds and other wildlife.

¹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-threat-to-the-landscape-that-shaped-the-marvellous-imagination-of-poet-seamus-heaney-1.2785851>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39028161>

³ Originally, the Department for Regional Development, now the Department for Infrastructure has a conflict of interest as it can grant itself permission for its own major road schemes in Northern Ireland and is the competent authority under the Habitats Directives.

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It is an Area of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area. As the place that nourished the poetry of Séamus Heaney it is a global treasure.

Just 4 miles of road

The construction of the A6 road at Toomebridge has been promoted by the NI Executive. Although it is only 4.4 miles (7 kilometres) long, the catastrophic damage the road will cause to our landscape, culture, values and reputation make it an issue of pressing international concern.

The road also poses an immediate threat to the memory of one of the world's best known poets, who wrote of his own personal dismay. The road cuts through Mossbawn, where Séamus Heaney was born, and impinges on the areas featured in the poems: Lagan's Road, Anahourish, Sluggan, and the Strand of Lough Beg.

These are the places that he spoke about in *Death of a Naturalist* and in later writings. In an interview for the Guardian Newspaper, Heaney spoke of Mossbawn being his omphalos -- the Greek word for navel - it was the centre of the young Heaney's universe. John Carey wrote in 2006 in the London Times that Heaney's poems still circle around Mossbawn and yet the road will carve through the setting of his birthplace.

The cultural significance of place was not lost on the poet or many people who claim this is similar to the campaign to protect the Hill of Tara from a new motorway. Imagine culverting the river where Constable's Haywain was painted; or bulldozing Newgrange to make way for an Applegreen service station; or quarrying the Lake Isle of Innisfree; demolishing Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and building a casino?



Heaney said: *"The swans are very much an extremely important element down there. If Galway city council was going to run a motorway near the swans at Coole Park there would be an international outcry. But I suppose these swans are just Lough Beg swans."*

More importantly, this area is the last great lowland wet wilderness left in Ireland. It is of global significance not just for the Heaney legacy but the breeding waders, such as Curlew, and the wintering Whooper Swans and Golden Plover who visit these wetlands in vast numbers. This is our last great wet wilderness that has been more or less intact for 10,000 years. The 8,000 year old Mesolithic archaeology recently uncovered on the route will be lost forever.

There is an alternative vision for the Lough Beg wetlands and it's a better vision

What we are *for* is vastly more significant than what we are against. Those objecting to the scheme – artists, local farmers, many local residents, many local businesses, historians, environmentalists - are not protestors against a 4 mile section of road but wish to be seen as protectors of our sense of place, culture and identity.

- we are *for* the 8,000 year old Mesolithic archaeology that will be forever lost
- we are *for* the call of the Curlew that had a breeding stronghold here up to the eighties
- we are *for* the protection of an ancient poetic landscape to inspire Séamus Heaneys of the future;
- we are *for* the better alternatives to this scheme;

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- we are *for* the cultural and economic revival of Mid Ulster through World Heritage Site status
- we are *for* upholding the international legislation that protects this area
- we are *for* the economic regeneration of this area that will flow from protecting this landscape
- we are *for* better transport connection with Derry
- we are *for* improvements to the A6
- we are *for* respecting the memory, interventions and legacy of Seamus Heaney
- we are *for* transparency in decisions, and seek answers as to why they picked the most damaging and, possibly, the most expensive route
- we are *for* values that can give meaning to our lives, our culture, and our history

We are only *against* cultural vandalism and mistakes that can easily be made when decision making is not transparent.

All these points were well made at the Public Inquiry in 2007 - that the other options were better. The developer of the scheme, however, gave itself permission and ignored these objections. We ask one question: who really benefits from a more damaging route?

So why did the government choose the worst option?

We may never know the real reasons⁴ but we do know that the decision to build the new stretch of the A6 was based on a deeply flawed assessment process. **The Environmental Impact Assessment is 10 years old and no longer relevant.** For example, the land, through which the new road will cut, has experienced severe flooding in the past two years. No assessment has been made of the consequences of displacing this flood water or the impact of future flooding on the feeding grounds of the birds. As climate change continues unabated it is likely that this pattern of severe flooding will continue or worsen. It is wrong to build in floodplains.



It is not just the increased frequency and severity of flooding in recent years that represents a material change to the environmental conditions that necessitates a new Environmental Impact Assessment. Other changes that have not been assessed are the shifting patterns of wildlife and birds, and the cumulative effect of airborne pollutants from other new roads and factories in the area. For many reasons, the current assessment is out-of-date, based on information gathered over a decade ago, and fatally flawed with alternatives not adequately assessed.

This road proposal was also accepted because the adverse effects on the construction could be 'mitigated' and some groups withdrew their objections on that basis. However, long term mitigation will not happen and even short term measures cannot be guaranteed. In fact, many farmers have put in writing their refusal to cooperate with the mitigation because they oppose the route of this road. It is interesting to note that the mitigation that was meant to take place for the first section of road near Toome Bridge never occurred.

⁴ Friends of the Earth has however repeatedly expressed its concerns about the systemic failure in environmental regulation in Northern Ireland; the absence of an Environmental Protection Agency; the lack of a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the roads programme; the political 'deal making' around major projects and the power of lobbyists

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Article 6.3 of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC)⁵ requires that an appropriate assessment be made if a project is 'likely to have a significant effect' on a European site (SAC or SPA). To date, no such appropriate assessment has been carried out by the competent authority – there is only a draft document carried out by paid consultants⁶. The Habitats Directive requirements are considered to be very precautionary. Projects that could affect a European site should not go ahead until alternatives are considered, overriding need is established, and compensation provisions are put in place. These conditions have not been met.

It is perverse and bizarre that the developer of this project, the Department for Infrastructure, is also the funder, the project promoter, and the regulator. Only in Northern Ireland can the developer of a major road project give itself permission and be the competent authority under the terms of the Habitats Directive. No wonder they picked the worst option.

'A common resource, an ecological treasure'

This landscape is so special that it merits the status of a World Heritage Site. The Lough Beg wetlands are already a Ramsar site, a wetland of global importance, and a Special Protection Area, designated under the European Union Birds Directive. The Toome wetlands attract in winter more migratory Whooper Swans than any other site in Ireland.



Ireland is being seen worldwide as an increasingly 'safe' place for holidays - tourism numbers are increasing year on year and the industry is sustained largely by its heritage. The success of the Wild Atlantic Way, the Giant's Causeway, Newgrange, and the Cliffs of Moher are rooted in a sense of place and the landscape. Remote areas such as Slieve League in Donegal can quickly emerge as a major driver for economic developments with thoughtful promotion.⁷ World Heritage Status, or a similar designation for an

environment so naturally endowed and culturally expressed in archaeology and poetry, would bring in far greater revenue and sustainability than a four mile stretch of road.⁸

Friends of the Earth has also written of its vision to see Lough Neagh designated as an ecologically restored Peace Park with greenways linking this vast wetland to major towns and our coast.⁹

The poetic landscape alone is of immense global significance. Séamus Heaney wrote of its importance in local terms: *"It is one of the few undisturbed bits of wetland in mid-Ulster, a direct link to the environment our Mesolithic ancestors knew in the Bann Valley and a precious 'lung' in the countryside."*¹⁰

The potential of the area is untapped. Tourists, or pilgrims, already come to soak up the places of Heaney's childhood. The new Heaney Homeplace is an excellent start. With very little effort

⁵ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043>

⁶ Despite repeated requests the Department for Infrastructure has not produced its own Habitats Regulation Assessments. Draft documents also fail to address major concerns. For example, road construction in Northern Ireland uses unlawfully extracted sand from the bed of the Lough Neagh which is part of the same SPA designation as the Lough Beg SPA. 2Up to million tons of sand are extracted from the bed of the Lough without the benefit of planning permission or Environmental Impact Assessment

⁷ <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2016/12/29/news/donegal-s-slieve-league-cliffs-see-record-tourist-numbers-854712/>

⁸ Research also demonstrates that new roads leach economic activity out of peripheral areas to bigger conurbations and a recent study concludes new roads create more traffic and reduce economic growth <http://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/transport/roads?gclid=CLDEtIWd6tICFYsFGwodsSwLYw>

⁹ <https://www.foe.co.uk/northern-ireland/news/revival-10-requirements-sustainable-northern-ireland>

¹⁰ <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2016/11/17/news/revealed-seamus-heaney-opposed-route-of-new-a6-787716/>

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the area would emerge as a tourist mecca, economically buoyant, and a source of national pride and local opportunity. This area has the potential to be an economic powerhouse for Mid Ulster, a new sustainable economy based on cultural tourism and the interplay between nature, landscape, literature, history and people.

The potential of this area was recognised at the Public Inquiry in 2007. Even then, coach tours of Japanese tourists were coming to visit Heaney's home. Evidence presented at the Public Inquiry acknowledged that: *"this road scheme is likely to make into a wasteland what ought to be primary focus of tourism and some 'commercial tourism' – connected with walking, fishing, Heaney, birdwatching, cycling, and so on – for present and future generations, and for people from both here.... and from abroad."*

Desecration

In 1995 Séamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize *"for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."* The landscape that both inspired and nurtured much of his work and the setting of his birthplace will disappear.

The Nobel citation recognised the importance of the living landscape that connects us to our history and our place in the world. Séamus Heaney wrote, in 1996, a letter to campaigners opposed to this road that recognised the need for protection:

"But the fact is that these undisturbed acres are as much a common spiritual resource as they are an ecological treasure. All over the world it is realised that the outback, as we might call it, or the undeveloped areas is the last vital ditch in need of protection."

Séamus Heaney also spoke to journalists and was moved to argue against this proposal^{11 12}. In these interviews Heaney also talks of the migratory swans that travel to these fields every winter from their breeding grounds in Iceland. They represent one of the most important feeding areas for this species in the whole of Ireland, a true wildlife spectacle.

This evidence was presented by local people to the Public Inquiry into the road in 2007:

"The visual and landscape beauty of the area is (or ought to be) obvious to all who visit it: to destroy, at a stroke, this entire, unique, hinterland of the Lough Neagh and Lough Beg without so much as reaching an awareness of the nature of the desecration (or the areas desecrated)



¹¹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/long-live-wilderness-1.1295565>

¹² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1549613/Heaney-adds-voice-to-road-scheme-protest.html>

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is something which we, undersigned, can only regard with stupefaction, amazement, and – yes – anger."

The irony is that the funding of a literary tour has been announced the week after the announcement of the road scheme in August 2016 that will traumatise this landscape^{13 14}.

A better way

There are better alternatives and options for this short stretch of road. In a recent BBC interview, actor Stephen Rea was critical, *"Do you have to choose a place that has been dignified by the greatest poet we've ever had? Are we content that people will come here to see the locations for Game of Thrones, is that where we are placing our imaginative level."*¹⁵

It is not as if better alternatives are hard to find. As Heaney said:

"My feeling was that when I saw the possible direction of the motorway I thought there was an alternative possibility to take it though an old aerodrome where there is an industrial estate and so on, which wouldn't be as much of a wound on the ecology."

In a letter to the then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, the poet said he would favour the alternative route through the disused airfield: *"Any motorway desecrates, but some desecrate more than others,"* he said¹⁶.

Upgrading the existing road, favoured by many locals, or traversing a brownfield site are viable options. Other measures can be developed to relieve congestion on the A6, and reduce transport greenhouse gas emissions.

No one disputes the genuine feeling expressed by some people that there has been a historical lack of investment west of the Bann. However, to base an argument that building this particular route will redress past decisions is misleading. The vast majority of campaigners have made this clear – it's the route, not the road. No one is arguing that there should not be investment or that improvements aren't needed to the A6. To assume that this most damaging option is the only option that will deliver investment is a dissembling of the issue.

There is no conflict between protecting what is special and improving mobility. Vandalising priceless cultural and natural heritage is not an acceptable way of managing future investment decisions.^{17 18}

Immediate action is required

To our knowledge not one of the main Executive parties has raised any questions about these concerns. To our knowledge all are in support of the road that was announced by the then DRD Minister, Michelle McIlveen,¹⁹ DUP, and then proceeded with by Minister Chris Hazzard, Sinn Fein²⁰. Despite the fact the government has known of the cultural and ecological



¹³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-foyle-west-35360152>

¹⁴ <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/seamus-heaney-literary-trail-to-be-funded-by-national-lottery-1-7166439>

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-37390499>

¹⁶ <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2016/11/17/news/revealed-seamus-heaney-opposed-route-of-new-a6-787716/>

¹⁷ https://www.foe.co.uk/northern-ireland/news/minister_in_bunker_34933

¹⁸ https://www.foe.co.uk/northern-ireland/resource/press_releases/legal-action-commences-against-department-environment-s

¹⁹ <https://www.drdni.gov.uk/news/construction-start-a6-randalstown-castledawson-scheme-year>

²⁰ <http://www.itv.com/news/utv/2016-08-17/hazzard-announces-160m-investment-in-a6-road/>

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significance of this area for over twenty years there seems to be a consensus among many politicians to disregard alternatives.

At the time of writing, after the election, we do not have a government and there is a court case that will determine the future of the project.

The current political impetus however is for the road to go ahead. We urge you to write to the political parties, fundraise, mobilise, bear witness, hold another event, support the petition signed by over 2,000 people <https://www.change.org/p/save-the-seamus-heaney-landscape-saveheaneycountry>.



The road scheme has been raised internationally and with local decision makers. We urge you to read the comments in the petition and to take some action. You can also follow the Save Heaney Country facebook page. Michael Longley, Martin Hayes, Sinéad Morrissey, Helen Vendler, Colm Tóibín and many other major figures oppose this route. Any creative response would be welcome. Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland has been supporting the campaign in many ways including writing this early letter²¹ and has made a short video²².

Sacrificing the place where Heaney was born, the feeding areas of wild swans, 'our common spiritual home', is not just short sighted but many will consider it disrespectful to his memory and to the millions of people around the world who learned from him the importance of an attachment to places honouring the 'living past'.

*"A decent way to honour him would be to honour and protect the place that shaped his marvelous imagination."*²³

As stated at the beginning, this is an urgent briefing, a final appeal to our government to urgently review this section of road and **not to take any further decision until we have a new government and an elected Minister in place**. The government must also review the Environmental Impact Assessment which is now over ten years out of date and therefore, arguably, invalid. We must demand that the Northern Ireland Executive or the direct rule Ministers review the road scheme to protect this poetic heritage.

Finally, this project draws in a much bigger story than Heaney, or swans, or the archaeology. This is an epic story of our values, of who we are, and what type of society we want to have now, and to pass on.

This struggle has been described as our Standing Rock²⁴, a place of immense importance that goes to the very heart of who we are. This wilderness has been described as sacred land, sacred water. To build this 4 mile section of road in this location is to deprive future generations of the opportunity to be inspired by this last wilderness of its type in Ireland. To build this short section in the poetic heartland of Séamus Heaney is more than just misconceived, it is a sacrilege.

²¹ <http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/a6-letter-editor-99505.pdf>

²² <https://t.co/kil2cBSgXC>

²³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-threat-to-the-landscape-that-shaped-the-marvellous-imagination-of-poet-seamus-heaney-1.2785851>

²⁴ Refereeing the struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux and other native American tribes against the Dakota oil pipeline

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Postscript

Many people across the world have expressed their concern for what is happening. These are just some of many contributions.

“Seamus Heaney was my friend, a model for civilized culture, and his landscape was a moral tableau. To reduce it for any reason is to diminish what he represented” Dave Smith
Los Angeles

“Heaney himself argued against these proposals in 2007. Many of the politicians who support this fawned at his funeral. Great way to remember the nation’s greatest poet by destroying his and, what should be, our inspiration.” Tom White, Belcoo

“And now I’ll join the rebel McCorley; under the road at Toome. The quick, they fight for country, but not for love of land or slow watery bog. Speed is the new colonizer. No time now for a Mindful Commons. And now I’ll join the rebel McCorley, under the road at Toome.”
Peter Doran, Belfast

“If you allow this bypass to proceed the resulting disturbances – both initial and ongoing – will almost certainly evict the swans. These wild whooper swans continue to come to the lough from Iceland as they have done probably since the end of the Ice Age. Nowadays with enlightened conservation attitudes more can be made of their celebrity status by appreciating their presence and safeguarding their habitats while they are with us.” Gordon D’Arcy, Galway

“It’s disgraceful decision” Chris Agee, Belfast

“Heaney's poetry will always be one of Ireland's cultural treasures and will inspire generations of literary pilgrims to search out the places that gave rise to the poems. Please, please reroute your highway and leave Mossbawn, Anahorish, Lough Beg, and all the rest of Heaney's *"outback of the mind"* untouched.” Kathleen Leahy, Hingham, MA



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Friends of the Earth Ltd, company number 1012357, registered office:
1st Floor, The Printworks, 139 Clapham Road,
London, SW9 0HP.
Tel: 020 7490 1555
Email: info@foe.co.uk
Website: www.foe.co.uk

Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland
7 Donegall Street Place
Belfast BT1 2FN.
Tel: 028 9023 3488
Email: foe-ni@foe.co.uk
Website: www.foe.co.uk/ni



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