

*John Lennington*

## NOTES ON IMPROVING PUBLIC UTILISATION OF AND ACCESS TO STORMONT ESTATE. AUGUST 1997

### Existing Estate Facilities

Stormont estate is a major urban open space on the outskirts of East Belfast. It is at present extensively used by the public living in the Upper Newtownards Road, Dundonald and Belmont Road areas of Belfast. The main forms of usage include; as a place to walk dogs, as an area in which to walk or exercise and as a backdrop for wedding photographs. To facilitate this public access the estate management has installed public toilets and benches, have planted and maintained shrub and flower beds and have developed and maintained extensive footpaths through the woods, especially those bordering the eastern boundary of the estate.

In addition to the general public, the estate grounds are utilised for leisure by many of the civil servants based in the various offices housed within the Estate. These civil servants use, not only those areas open to the general public but also open spaces surrounding the office complexes in the west of the estate. Members of the Civil Service Sports Club are provided with facilities (sports pitches, bowling greens, etc.) within that part of the Estate bordering the Upper Newtownards Road. A number of invited, special interest groups (City of Belfast Urban Forestry Group, Royal Forestry Society, etc.) have been given supervised access to areas of estate woodland not normally open to the general public. Finally, the Estate hosts part of a major cross country race run in early spring.

There are, at present, a number of areas within the estate that are not available to the general public or to civil servants. These include the woodland behind Parliament Buildings fence line, (including the top part of Spenders Glen, the eastern glens and the woodland surrounding the 11 acre field); The bull field, now used for training police dogs, and the pleasure gardens surrounding Stormont Castle

### Proposals for extending public access to Stormont Estate.

I believe that there needs to be fundamental rethink of the extent of public access allowed within the estate. A clear and strong case should always have to be made if public access is to be denied; not, as at present, the other way around. This would probably lead to the opening up of the woodland behind the Parliament Buildings security fence, the Bull field and the park land surrounding the sports facilities.

Once a strategic decision has been taken on those areas where public access is to be encouraged, a review of the available resources within the estate will highlight possible usage's (for example. the creating of extensive woodland walks and jogging tracks,

publicising notable features within the estate, such as Carson's monument, Lord Craigavon's grave, with information boards or providing guided tours through Parliament Buildings). This review will also highlight existing resource limitations that need to be addressed.

To obtain maximum advantage from increased public access to the Estate I believe that it's essential that the estate be used by a wide cross section of the Northern Ireland population. For this to be realised, careful promotion will need to take place. We have already been successfully promoting the woodland within Stormont Estate to special interest groups and I believe that the availability of the estate for recreation should be promoted in other ways, including events like 'peace concerts', outside broadcasts, sponsored walks, etc. Great care must be taken with these to ensure that they don't appear 'one sided' in the present political climate.

The grounds around the office complexes and Stormont Castle are so interlinked with the offices that unlimited public access to these areas will be difficult. They are, and are likely to remain, the domain of the civil servant and politician. This does not negate a review of the recreational facilities and access to the grounds surrounding these offices. With many thousands of civil servants based within Stormont Estate, from all sections of the Northern Ireland population, they and their families are an important potential source of publicity and goodwill for the estate. The areas surrounding the offices should be developed for recreational use with the increased provision of seating and associated plantings, etc.

#### **Implications of increased public access to Stormont Estate**

The opening up of Stormont Estate to the general public will have a number of significant implications on estate management. These include;

- 1) A requirement for more facilities. Additional public access areas will require additional car access, parking, seating and paths. They will also require increased woodland management and security patrols to ensure site safety. There is, at present, a notable absence of children's play facilities, a situation that may need to be addressed. Resources to match these increased costs will need to be found.
- 2) There may be a conflict of interest between adequate site security and preserving the environmental value of some of the remaining old woodland on the one hand, and on public access on the other. These conflicts must be addressed in a way that assumes that public access is a desirable outcome.
- 3) There is a risk that unacceptable usage of Stormont Estate may increase with increased public access. In particular vandalism, trespass and substance abuse by adolescents may be difficult to control, especially given the size and layout of the estate. For this reason I

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recommend that care be taken on the form of public usage promoted, discouraging, in particular, unsupervised group activity by young males

4) To ensure that the estate is readily available to all sections of the population in Northern Ireland, the twin issues of opening times and public car parking facilities need to be addressed. At present the estate closes at 9.00 pm. during the summer months. This may need to be extended to 10.00 pm during June and July. Public parking is confined to the surrounds of the main entrance, which, as well as being inadequate, detracts from the grandeur of the front gates and the lime avenues. It may be possible to zone parking at the sports complex for public use outside normal office hours. This could be achieved by reviewing the line of the security fence that currently partitions this carpark.

## POSSIBLE POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Carson's Statue is intimidating to some people, and comment is made on this point.
2. Wedding and similar group photo location should be encouraged - particularly cross-community groups.
3. Invitation to different sporting groups to use Stormont as a venue, including sponsored walks, events etc.
4. Advertise Stormont Estate. Make it known it is open to the public.
5. Provide car parking for public after office hours.
6. Provide safe play zone and kids play area.
7. Improve durability of walking areas with bark/ reinforced grass.
8. Improve perimeter security to minimise vandalism and risk of danger to kids.
9. 24 Hour security patrol/Rangers
10. Promotion of Estate and buildings in high quality handout/booklet.
11. Fence/culvert open streams to POW Avenue.
12. Provide footbridges to glen and waterway barriers.
13. Feature flower beds and other (higher cost) ornamental gardening.
14. Make Ranger service more user friendly.
15. Make bus tours welcome on the Estate, currently only by special arrangement.

Pavements need to be upgraded to cope with increased numbers/restricted maintenance - pressure grouting of joints. Use of thicker slabs than used in recent years.

Buses tend to put wheels over pavements. Tour bus stopping areas need defined.

Cafe facilities for public/ tearoom.

Provision of special function catering location.

Provision of forest fire detection system for public access.

Improved safety barriers for public near waterways and wetlands.

Boost participation in Forest Of Belfast tour itinery.

Encourage group tours of Estate and special walks through forest areas.

Use of Estate for:

- Cross country runs
- RUC displays
- Army displays
- Hot air ballon festival ( using 11 acre field?)
- Sports festivals.
- East Belfast Community Festival venue.