

## **Briefing on the Toome to Castledawson A6 dualling proposal**

September 2016

### **Background**

RSPB NI works to ensure habitats that support rare and vulnerable wildlife are protected from the worst impacts of human development. By identifying the best places for wildlife, then ensuring they are properly protected and managed, we make sure our special places have a future. Planning case work, focused on the network of protected sites including species of conservation concern, is one of the ways we seek to achieve this objective. One such case is the A6 dualling proposal.

Roads Service proposed to dual the A6 between Randalstown and Castledawson. The RSPB replied to consultations carried out between 2003 and 2006 to determine the route of the new road proposal. The concerns we raised at an early stage led to the choice of a less damaging route, but nevertheless one with the potential to impact both a designated site and a protected species. Following a public inquiry, approval for the scheme was granted in 2007. Swan surveys have continued to the present. This makes the area probably the best studied proposed development site in Northern Ireland.

### **Lough Beg SPA and Whooper Swans**

Lough Beg is a Special Protection Area (SPA) designated under the European Birds Directive and is declared an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI). The proposed route runs adjacent to Lough Beg SPA, and through nearby fields used by whooper swans in winter. Whooper swans are a feature of Lough Beg SPA, and are an internationally protected species under Annex 1 of the Birds Directive.

The RSPB's concerns about the route were that:

- construction of the route might directly affect Lough Beg by changing ground or surface water movements;
- the route could cause direct loss of fields used by feeding whooper swans; and
- there could be disturbance effects on feeding or roosting whooper swans e.g. by noise or lights.

### **Effects on swans and compliance with environmental law**

The RSPB wanted to ensure that all correct procedures are followed in respect of national law and European Directives. We worked with Roads Service (now Transport NI) and their consultants to ensure that sufficient, good quality data was collected to inform the environmental impact assessment and assessment under the Directives.

Swan surveys showed that the birds remained on site all winter and that they did not appear to be disturbed by passing road traffic, and indeed a higher proportion than would be expected utilise the fields adjacent to the new Toome bypass.

Some fields are not currently used by the whooper swans because they are too small - whooper swans like large fields and an open vista. Roads Service agreed that it would work with landowners to remove fences to increase field size before the road is constructed, making those fields available for swans to use in the future.

RSPB NI looked at how many swans would be affected by the loss of some fields to the road, and found that all those swans could be provided with alternative habitats by the field size increase we suggested.

A number of other mitigation measures were also agreed, such as sensitive construction to avoid damage, sustainable drainage, and thorough monitoring of the swans during and after construction. Following agreement with the Roads Service on mitigation measures, which also included commitment to consider an appropriately sited viewing facility and to undertake further academic research, we were eventually satisfied that the proposal would not result in harm to the swan population, or their habitat, and withdrew our initial objection.

### **Timing of works**

A lack of capital investment meant the A6 project was effectively 'mothballed' until December 2015, when the Northern Ireland Executive announced a package of funding to take forward major projects, including the Randalstown to Castledawson section of the A6.

In January 2016, the then transport Minister Michelle McIlveen announced that 'work on site [is] expected to start by the end of the summer' (Source: [Mid Ulster Mail](#)).

Since the Minister's announcement, RSPB has been successfully engaging with Transport NI and its consultants AECOM to ensure that the recommendations in the inquiry report are carried out, including all the whooper swan mitigation measures to make sure there are no adverse effects on the designated sites or species.

In August Infrastructure Minister Chris Hazzard announced his decision to proceed with the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson Dualling Scheme and preliminary site works began in September.

We are continuing to work with Transport NI to ensure that all the whooper swan mitigation measures are delivered in accordance with the public inquiry's recommendation.

*Contact: Michelle Hill, Conservation Team Leader, RSPB Northern Ireland, Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT, email: [michelle.hill@rspb.org.uk](mailto:michelle.hill@rspb.org.uk) tel: 028 9049 1547*