

Local lobbyists saddened to 'lose' LE Aoife



The decommissioning ceremony of the LE Aoife on Waterford's South Quay on January 31st. The vessel has been gifted by the Government to the Maltese Navy. | Photo: Noel Browne

Plans to convert the decommissioned LE Aoife into a maritime museum on the riverside in Waterford, which was also to double as a training vessel for the Naval Reserve have been left on the rocks after the Government gifted the Aoife to the Maltese Armed Forces.

The Aoife is to become the Maltese Navy's main vessel for "a number of years" according to Defence Minister Simon Coveney "to assist with the huge humanitarian challenge of mass migration from North Africa".

The news came as a huge disappointment to a group of Waterford lobbyists, led by Councillor Eddie Mulligan, which had first mooted the idea of 'anchoring' the Aoife on Suirside in July 2013.

"The project team were bitterly disappointed to read through the internet that the LE Aoife was withdrawn from sale and immediately gifted to the Maltese Armed Forces as a part of cooperation on defence matters," said project spokesperson Michael Garland. "Whilst recent tragic events in that part of the Mediterranean have underlined the potential role this aging patrol vessel may play in the refugee crisis.

"As an island nation, the connection with our maritime past is fundamentally important and as we can see from our seafaring history just how the current Island of Ireland has been formed and shaped on the back of those connections in terms of our citizens, our communities, our politics and our industries.

"Equally important, is the fact a focus on our maritime heritage will no doubt have helped shape Waterford's future and this must include Waterford City becoming the favoured location for a future National Maritime Museum."

A business plan regarding the acquisition of the Aoife was due to be presented to Waterford City & County Council CEO Michael Walsh by Cllr Mulligan tomorrow (Wednesday).

Said Mr Garland: "The securing of the LE Aoife as an educational tool and historic reference would have enabled the City to create a unique museum piece for the whole of the South East region.

"The proposed plan to locate the LE Aoife in the heart of the City and the suggested placement of the City's authentic replica Viking Longboat to be berthed alongside would show, in real time, 1100 years of maritime history in Waterford.

"The LE Aoife in the heart of the city would also have acted as much needed link between the Viking Triangle, The Waterfront and the Merchant's Quarter."

In a brief statement to The Munster Express, the Department of Defence said: "The Department of Defence is now in active discussions with the Maltese Authorities in relation to the transfer of the LE Aoife.

"As the Minister indicated in the Dáil (last) week, he has been favourably disposed to acceding to Malta's request for this vessel as same is required to assist Malta in dealing with the refugee crisis."