


Report on	OM Dark Sky Park & Observatory, Davagh
Date of Meeting	Thursday 10 th September 2020
Reporting Officer	Nigel Hill Head of Parks
Contact Officer	Kirsty Gordon

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	x

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To update Members on the progress and scheduled official launch of the OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory, Davagh Forest.
2.0	Background
2.1	OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory is a £1.2M facility located in Davagh Forest in the foothills of the Sperrin mountains, where a lack of light pollution allows unrivalled views of the night sky and makes the site ideal for stargazing.
2.2	OM will be home to an exhibition, observatory and telescope to showcase the uniquely dark sky, combining technology, from holographic installations to virtual reality headsets with colourful, accessible interpretation panels, to allow visitors to explore our solar system. The significance of the stars to ancient life, to the seasons and to stone circles also forms part of the exhibition experience, linking the landscape, archaeological and astronomical heritage of the Sperrins, including the nearby Beaghmore Stone Circles. The centrepiece of the facility will be a stargazing telescope, used to observe the skies via a retractable roof, and to transmit images onto large screens around the centre for visitors to enjoy an amazing stargazing experience and to explore the universe we live in.
2.3	Mid Ulster District Council have developed the project, with funding investment of £500K secured from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Rural Tourism Scheme under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and a further £245k towards the project from the Landfill Tax Fund.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The planned opening in April 2020 was postponed due to COVID-19. The official opening event of OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory will now take place in mid-October. Given ongoing restrictions associated with the pandemic, the opening event will be smaller in scale than that originally envisaged when the facility was due to open in April. However, plans are currently being finalised which will allow stakeholder, community and media previews on the day/evening which should ensure that the opening receives a significant level of exposure.
3.2	OM will then open to the public the next day, with a weekend of events to mark the occasion.

<p>3.3</p> <p>3.4</p> <p>3.5</p> <p>3.6</p> <p>3.7</p> <p>3.8</p> <p>3.9</p>	<p>Staff recruitment has taken place for OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory with the creation of eight new posts comprising (2 full-time and 6 part-time positions).</p> <p>Building and fit-out works are complete with final snagging due for completion early September. Audio Visual content is being finalised with installation and associated commissioning scheduled for mid-September.</p> <p>Additional improvement works are proposed to include the resurfacing of the access road between upper and lower car parks to compliment the commissioning of agreed traffic management and pay parking systems.</p> <p>In advance to the official Opening, OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory website will go live to the public week commencing Monday 7th September to cater for online and telephone bookings.</p> <p>Chair of the Council, Councillor Cathal Mallaghan, welcomed Rural Affairs Minister Edwin Poots to OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory on 7th August for a preview tour ahead of the opening.</p> <p>On the 8th August Geoff Maskell from BBC North Ireland came to OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory to catch a glimpse of the Perseid Meteor Shower along with night sky photographers Martin McKenna and Alastair Hamill. It was an amazing night with nearly 30 meteors and a green fireball that illuminated the sky. Geoff delivered his weather broadcast live at OM 4.30pm and 5.15pm from OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory.</p> <p>Further experiential walking and cycling developments are in the pipeline for Davagh Forest adding increased diversity to the visitor experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Davagh Solar Walk – a new public trail to link the Beaghmore Stone Circles to Davagh Forest via a gravel path and boardwalk. • Davagh Archaeology Trail – a new public access trail to connect the natural heritage of Davagh with its archaeological heritage by creating access to a Wedge Tomb and Megalithic complex within the forest. • Davagh Mountain Trails – an additional 4km of blue trail and 7km of red trail. There will also be a provision of off-road trail for use by persons with disabilities.
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Other Considerations</p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p> <p>Financial: Due to the opening being postponed by six months, revised income projections for year one are projected to reflect a significant down turn. Current visitor/tour capacities will be reduced by up to 70% due to the introduction of Covid operational procedures in line with Government guidelines and recommendations on social distancing (reduction tour capacity from 20 visitors to 6 visitors per tour).</p> <p>Human: A full complement of staff have been recruited to manage and operate OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory, eight in total.</p>

	<p>Risk Management: In line with Council policies and procedures and currently in line with Government guidelines on COVID-19</p>
<p>4.2</p>	<p>Screening & Impact Assessments</p> <p>Equality & Good Relations Implications: In conjunction with Council policies and procedures.</p> <p>Rural Needs Implications: In conjunction with Council policies and procedures.</p>
<p>5.0</p>	<p>Recommendation(s)</p>
<p>5.1</p> <p>5.2</p>	<p>This report is for the purposes of updating members on post lock-down planning and progress undertaken to coordinate the rescheduled launch date for the OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory Project.</p> <p>Members are asked to note the content of this report for information purposes.</p>
<p>6.0</p>	<p>Documents Attached & References</p>
<p>6.1</p> <p>6.2</p>	<p>OM Dark Skies Park and Observatory Ministerial Visit Friday 7th August 2020</p>  <p>Council Chair and Officials with Minister Poots in OM Observatory telescope room</p>

6.3



Geoff Maskell from BBC Northern Ireland at OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory to catch a glimpse of the Perseid Meteor Shower

