

Report on	Forest Schools Programme for 2024/25
Date of Meeting	16 th May 2024
Reporting Officer	Kieran Gordon, Assistant Director Health, Leisure & Wellbeing
Contact Officer	Martin Conlan, Recreation & Countryside Officer

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

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To update Members on the Forest Schools programme for 2024 - 2025 within the Mid Ulster District Council area.
2.0	Background
2.1	<p>Northern Ireland Forest School Awards is an environmental awareness initiative which encourages local schools to visit and take on an ownership of their local Council Park. It has been operating successfully at Hill of The O'Neill Heritage Park, since April 2017, and through the Parks, since 2018, as part of the education programme at Hill of The O'Neill & Ranfurly House.</p> <p>As part of the NIFSA programme, pupils and teachers identify an area within the local Council Park that they can develop as their own Forest School site. Here they undertake exciting and innovative activities to help them understand the importance of our natural environment and local heritage. Activities can include making a map of the Council Park using only natural resources, den building, as well as the use of trees to help children better understand maths.</p>
2.2	At Hill of The O'Neill & Ranfurly House, teachers involved undertake a Forest School Leader qualification (OCN Level 3). This gives them the confidence to continue visiting the Council Park year after year and developing more exciting outdoor activities to replace classroom led lessons.
2.3	Much interest has been shown in NIFSA by many local schools and community groups in the Mid Ulster District Council area via both programme applications and expressions of interest on the Mid Ulster District Council section of the NIFSA website. The Recreation & Countryside Officer within Council's Health, Leisure & Wellbeing department along with the Education Officer (Hill of The O'Neill & Ranfurly House) will continue to examine ways in which this demand for environmental activities across the Mid Ulster District Council area can be met.

<p>2.4</p> <p>2.5</p>	<p>Previously in January 2024, Members at the Development Committee resolved to approve the continuation of Forest Schools Project up until March 2025. (minute reference: D006/24). The Hill of The O'Neill & Ranfurly House programme costs £6,000 per annum, subject to available funding with costs shared equally between Health Leisure & Wellbeing and Arts & Culture Services within Council.</p> <p>Members had requested an update report be brought back to a future Development Committee with a schedule detailing the dates and locations for the forest school programme.</p>
<p>3.0</p>	<p>Main Report</p>
<p>3.1</p> <p>3.2</p> <p>3.3</p> <p>3.4</p>	<p>Recently 3 staff members within Dungannon Park have completed the Forest School Leader qualification (OCN Level 3) and this brings the total number of qualified staff to 5 who can deliver the Forrest school programme within Council.</p> <p>In March 2024, invitations were sent out to primary schools to apply to participate in up to 6 forest school sessions for the 2024/25 school year, beginning in September 2024 at Hill of The O'Neill Heritage Park, Dungannon for Nursery, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils.</p> <p>Furthermore, in April 2024, invitations were sent out to primary schools to apply to participate in up to 4 forest school sessions between September and December 2024 at Dungannon park for Nursery, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils. Towards the end of 2024, it is anticipated that another invitation will be sent out to schools to encourage them to apply to participate in up to 4 forest school sessions at Dungannon Park and some other suitable locations in the district between February and May 2025.</p> <p>In addition, the Health Leisure & Wellbeing department are running 4 x Family Forest School drop-in events during summer 2024. Drop-in sessions are free of charge and no booking is required. All sessions will run from 1pm to 4pm and are suitable primarily for nursery and primary school ages, with family members encouraged to join in activities also. Lessons will be delivered by council staff who have achieved Forest School Leader qualification (OCN Level 3) and locations are listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sunday 26 May at Dungannon Park • Sunday 30 June at Knockmany Forest • Sunday 28 July at Pomeroy Forest • Sunday 25 August at Ballyronan Wood <p>Further information is available via the Council's website:</p>

3.5	<p>https://www.midulstercouncil.org/forestschools</p> <p>The Northern Ireland Forest Schools Awards continues to prove a very popular addition to the Council's education programme. The continuation of this programme will maintain this connection of environmental awareness and citizenship skills with Council Parks, while extending the learning of ecological and conservation skills to even more pupils and teachers in the Mid Ulster District Council area.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p> <p>Financial: The NIFS Awards programme costs £6,000 per annum, subject to available funding being approved within existing budgets. Programme costs are contained within the approved 24/25 revenue budgets and costs shared equally between Health Leisure & Wellbeing and Arts & Culture Services within Council.</p> <p>Approx £1,500 in costs to coordinate the Family Forest School drop-in events in summer 2024 – contained within 24/25 revenue budgets.</p> <p>Human: Staff time and commitment. Health Leisure & Wellbeing staff support the programme and have undertaken the required training to deliver the workshops and activities associated to the FSNI Scheme. Education Officer (Hill of the O Neill) and Recreation & Countryside Officer within the Health, Leisure & Wellbeing department coordinate and delivery the project in conjunction with NIFSA.</p> <p>Risk Management: Considered in line with relevant Council policies and procedures.</p>
4.2	<p>Screening & Impact Assessments</p> <p>Equality & Good Relations Implications: Considered in line with relevant Council policies and procedures.</p> <p>Rural Needs Implications: Considered in line with relevant Council policies and procedures.</p>
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	To note the contents of this report.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	N/A