

<b>Report on</b>	Northern Ireland Forest Schools Awards Scheme
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Wednesday 8th December 2021
<b>Reporting Officer</b>	Nigel Hill, Head of Parks
<b>Contact Officer</b>	Anne Reid, Parks & Countryside Development Officer

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	To seek approval to register and engage with Northern Ireland Forest Schools Association (NIFSA) to develop a schools programme in Mid Ulster District Council area for an extended two year programme 2021 - 2023
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Background</b>
2.1	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.
2.2	As part of the NIFSA programme, pupils and teachers identify an area within the local Council Park (Hill of The O'Neill) 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.
2.3	The 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.
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	This year the Forest School format has changed to a blended programme. This has been devised to lessen contact time for all, during the pandemic, and to make use of virtual learning for the staff aspect of the programme. This programme delivery costs less to deliver than the previous programme in which there were six class visits to the park at Hill of The O'Neill. Now four school sessions are delivered during two class visits. Each class visit lasts for an entire morning.
3.2	During the period September 2021 to June 2022, six local schools will be participating in NIFSA at Hill of The O'Neill Heritage Park:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Howard PS</li> <li>• Augher Central PS</li> <li>• Spires IPS</li> <li>• Donaghey PS</li> <li>• Fivemiletown PS</li> <li>• Clogher Valley Sure Start</li> </ul>
3.3	This approach has increased the school intake from three, in previous years, to six. The objective is to further develop and encourage school participation across the MUDC catchment area from 2021 – 2023.
3.4	As a result of the reduction in the number of visits to the Hill of The O'Neill Heritage Park, schools from a wider catchment area across Mid Ulster are now participating: three of the six schools in this year's cohort are from the Clogher Valley.
3.5	Interest has been shown in NIFSA by a large number of local schools and community groups in the Mid Ulster District Council area: these have all registered expressions of interest on the Mid Ulster District Council section of the NIFSA website. The Parks & Countryside Development Officer and the Education Officer (Hill of The O'Neill & Ranfurly House) are currently examining ways in which this demand for environmental activities across the Mid Ulster District Council area can be met.
3.6	The Northern Ireland Forest Schools Awards is definitely 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.
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Other Considerations</b>
4.1	<p><b><u>Financial &amp; Human Resources Implications</u></b></p> <p>Financial: The programme cost £6,000 per annum, subject to available funding being approved in 2021/22 and 2022/23 Parks and Arts &amp; Culture budget. Programme costs shared equally between Parks and Arts &amp; Culture Services.</p> <p>Human: Council's Education Officer and Parks &amp; Countryside Development Officer coordinate and delivery the project in conjunction with NIFSA.</p>
4.2	<p><b><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u></b></p> <p>Community ownership and civic responsibility will be positive outcomes of the programme with participating schools adopting an area within their local Council Park. This will become their Forest School site. They will visit their Forest School site on a regular basis every year. Here they will learn about civic responsibility and help manage the site. This will include regular litter lifting, opportunities to help improve its biodiversity, for example, wildflower planting, tree planting for example.</p>

4.3	<p><b><u>Risk Management Implications</u></b></p> <p>In line with Council policy and procedures.</p>
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Recommendation(s)</b>
5.1	Register Mid Ulster District Council with Northern Ireland Forest Schools Association and continue with a programme to engage local schools and youth groups to embrace local parks and greenspace where feasible across the district.
5.2	To provide a shared contribution of £6,000 per annum towards programme support costs (subject to available resources) from the 2021/22 budget and subject to approval of the 2022/23 budgets, funded by the Culture & Arts and Parks Departments of Mid Ulster District Council.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Documents Attached &amp; References</b>
6.1	N/A