

Report on	Open Spaces & Outdoor Recreation Update
Date of Meeting	16 th May 2024
Reporting Officer	Kieran Gordon, Assistant Director Health, Leisure & Wellbeing
Contact Officer	Paul Bailie, Open Spaces & Recreation Development Manager John Howard, Open Spaces & Recreation Development Manager

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	Previously in April 2024, a request was proposed via the Development Committee to bring forward a report on visitor throughput at our primary outdoor recreational sites throughout the Council.
2.0	Background
2.1	Mid Ulster District Council encompasses a variety of outdoor sites, including parks, forests, and recreational areas, which are frequented by residents and visitors alike for leisure activities and outdoor experiences. Over the past three years, there has been a notable increase in footfall across these sites, reflecting a growing interest in outdoor recreation and a shift in public behaviour influenced by the covid pandemic.
2.2	This report aims to update Members on the overall footfall data for outdoor sites across the Mid Ulster District Council for the years 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2023-24.
2.3	Additionally, it will outline the impact of improvements made to key sites with capital investments made by council and in some cases with assistance from external funding – namely completed projects at Knockmanny Forest, Iniscarn Forest, Manor Park Moneymore, Moydamlaght Forest, Pomeroy Forrest, Round Lake Fivemiletown and Washingbay.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At designated outdoor sites within Council, footfall counters are used to measure visitor numbers. These devices are strategically located at key entrances/exits and come in many shapes and sizes. Common footfall counting technologies include sensors which can measure objects at a certain height passing by within a designated special area. Whilst each of these footfall counters can be subject to its own limitations and may not capture exactly every movement in and out of a site (<i>for example, individuals can use alternate entry/exit locations which are not in the proximity of the footfall counter</i>), these counters are an accepted measurement tool within the industry and the data arising give a fair approximation of visitors numbers (<i>whilst accepting actual usage can in fact in most case be a bit higher due to other factors</i>). Additionally, being able to record and benchmark visitor numbers can also help with strategic decisions in terms of future developments, enhancements and also for the use in funding applications,etc.

3.2	<p>The footfall data for outdoor sites within the Mid Ulster District Council for the period April 2021 – March 2024 are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021-22: Footfall - 1,001,249 visitors • 2022-23: Footfall - 1,117,870 visitors • 2023-24: Footfall - 1,231,450 visitors <p>Further details on specific sites are enclosed within the appendix.</p>
3.3	<p>The data demonstrates a consistent and significant increase in footfall over the past three years, with a notable year-on-year growth rate. Amongst many factors, this upward trend can be attributed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing Public Behaviour: The covid pandemic has anecdotally prompted a shift in public behaviour, with individuals and families increasingly seeking outdoor activities as safer alternatives to indoor gatherings. This has led to a surge in the number of people visiting outdoor sites for recreation, exercise, and relaxation. • Improvements to Key Sites: key investments and enhancements as outlined in section 2.3 above have contributed to the attractiveness and accessibility of these locations, thereby attracting more visitors.
3.3	<p>During 2023/2024, projects were recently completed at Derrynoyd Forrest and Drumcairne Forrest and as part of these projects footfall counters have been installed. Whilst figures are not available in this report, it is envisaged that data will now be generated to allow these sites to form part of this overall analysis moving forward in addition to projects that will soon be moving into delivery stage at Bellaghy, Castlecaulfield, Castledawson and Coalisland Canal as part of the funded Covid Small Settlements Scheme. These upcoming projects are expected to continue driving footfall growth in the coming years.</p>
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p> <p>Financial: Ongoing maintenance fees associated with existing footfall counters and purchase of new equipment.</p> <p>Human: Officer time to extract, record and interpret the data.</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: None anticipated at this juncture.</p> <p>Rural Needs Implications: None anticipated at this juncture.</p>
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	To note the contents of this report.

6.0	Documents Attached & References
6.1	Appendix A – Itemised sites and visitor numbers