

**Sport NI Evidence to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development consultation on the proposed Forestry Bill.**

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Parliament Buildings, Room 30.

**NICK**

Mr Chairman, on behalf of Sport NI, I would like to thank you for inviting us here today to provide evidence on what I believe to be a fundamentally important Bill for the development of sport and physical recreation in the outdoors in Northern Ireland.

I am accompanied by my colleagues, John News, Community Sport manager who, along with the DCAL, has been heavily involved in the production of the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation - "Sport Matters" and Mike McClure who is the Countryside Recreation Development Officer for Sport NI.

## PURPOSE OF PRESENTATION

This presentation will:

1. Provide a brief introduction to Sport Northern Ireland.
2. Consider the context issues of public health and well being and the contribution that forests make to improving these issues.
3. Provide recommendations for modifications to the Forestry Bill.

## NICK

1. Sport NI welcomes the Committee's interest in this important Bill.
2. No doubt you will have had the opportunity to read Sport NI's written submission, and I do not propose to repeat it.
3. Instead, over the next 10-15 minutes, my colleagues and I will:
  - Provide the Committee with a brief introduction to Sport NI, including our '**role and function**' as leading public body for the development of sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland;
  - Outline the '**contribution of sport and physical activity in the outdoors**' to public health and well being , with particular reference to the opportunities that forests can provide for increasing participation in outdoor recreation;
  - Propose, what we feel, are some important modifications to the Forestry Bill.

## SNI VISION & OBJECTIVES

- Sport Northern Ireland's vision is –  
"A culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport which contributes to a peaceful, fair and prosperous society"
- In practice, this means SNI creating and developing programmes and partnerships that will contribute to the following strategic objectives:
  - Increased participation in sport and physical activity
  - Improved sporting performances
  - Improved efficiency and effectiveness in the administration of sport

### **NICK**

1. As some Members' are probably aware, Sport Northern Ireland is the leading public body for the development of sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland.
2. Over long-term vision reflects that of Programme for Government (2008-11) and the new Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation – Sport Matters
3. There are two reasons why Government invests in 'sport':
  - a) The personal benefits to the individual – increased networks of friends, fun/enjoyment and increased confidence
  - b) The societal benefits – increased levels of social capital, a proven and effective tool for regeneration, the contribution of sport to GDP (>2.8%, or £446m per annum & 13,700 jobs) and of course health benefits.

## CONTEXT

- The Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation recognises the value of outdoor recreation for increasing the number of people enjoying physically active lifestyles
- This Strategy also has a target to improve access for outdoor recreation as follows: "By 2014 to have amended public policy frameworks to protect and promote access to and sustainable use of publicly owned land in Northern Ireland for sport and physical recreation.
- Tollymore Mountain Centre is Northern Ireland's only National Outdoor Centre.
- SNI has invested over £5 million to fully redevelop the Centre to create a "World Class," state of the art, iconic new facility for outdoor recreation.

## JOHN

- The Strategy for Sport has only last week been adopted by the Executive and the vision for this strategy is "a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport." Outdoor recreation has a significant role to play in the opportunities for people to enjoy lifelong enjoyment in sport.
- The strategy has recognised the significant role that public land could play in providing access for sport and physical recreation.
- Sport NI owns and manages Tollymore Mountain Centre which is the national centre for outdoor adventure activities and is located on the perimeter of Tollymore Forest Park.
- This centre which in 2010 will be fully developed as a world class, state of art facility trains and deploys over 230 leaders in outdoor adventure activities per annum who in turn provide thousands of young people with positive and challenging experiences in the outdoors. Forests can provide an excellent environment for our young people to experience these activities which have been shown to have such a positive contribution to their personal and social development.

## CONTEXT

### Northern Ireland Data on Obesity and Cost of Inactivity

- 59% of adults are overweight or obese (*NI Health and Wellbeing Survey 2005*)
- 22% of children in Northern Ireland are overweight or obese (*NI Child Health System 2004-05*)
- 260,000 working days lost at work costing the Northern Ireland Economy £500m per annum (*DHSSPS, Investing in Health Strategy, 2002*)
- Only 30% of the NI Population Meeting the CMO's physical activity recommendations (*NI Assembly, Inquiry into Obesity 2009*)
- More than 2000 deaths per annum in Northern Ireland can be attributed to physical inactivity (*DHSSPS, 2002*)

## JOHN

- The impact of obesity and inactivity is significant.
- The NI Health & Wellbeing survey 2005-06 indicates that **59% of adults surveyed were either overweight or obese**, and the figures for children, although lower are still extremely worrying.
- There **working days** lost due to obesity related conditions **cost the Northern Ireland economy £500m which** is a considerable resource given the current economy climate and the fact that NI Assembly has been tasked with realising £123m of efficiency savings over the next two years and a further £200-400m over the next Comprehensive Spending Review 2011-14.
- In terms of physical inactivity, according to the NI Health & Well Being Survey (2007) **only 30% of adults in Northern Ireland meet the CMO's physical activity recommendations** and according to a HPA report more than 2000 deaths per annum in Northern Ireland can be attributed to physical inactivity.
- The development of high quality and varied recreational facilities in forests can play their part in helping to alleviate this situation

## CONTEXT

- **The Six Acre Standard**
- Fields in Trust have established the "Six Acre Standard" which states that for every 1000 people there should be 6 acres of land for sport and outdoor recreation. 3 acres of pitches, 2 acres of play area for children and 1 acre of other outdoor space. This standard has been accepted by the UK Government as the benchmark for facility development.
- NI currently only has approx 60% of the established standard.
- **Public Rights of Way (PROW)**

Country	Total Area	No of miles of PROW's	Length of miles of PROW per sq mile
Northern Ireland	5,500 sq miles	129	0.02 miles
England	50,000 sq miles	118,000	2.36 miles
Wales	8,000 Sq miles	20,625	2.58 miles

## MIKE

- Northern Ireland is considerably behind the rest of the UK in terms of provision for sport and recreation not only in terms of pitch space but also in terms of facilities and areas for informal outdoor recreation.
- Data from Natural England and Countryside Council for Wales shows that Northern Ireland has very limited public rights of ways compared to England and Wales. It should be noted that following the introduction of the Land Reform Act in 2003 all land ( with a few minor exceptions) in Scotland is open for recreation provided that it is carried out responsibly and this Act and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code clearly defines responsibility.

## ACCESS FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Legislation	Impact
<p><b>Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983</b></p> <p>"A district council shall assert, protect and keep open and free from obstruction or encroachment any public right of way."</p>	<p>The order gives Councils the power to <b>create</b> Public Rights of Way – but does not require them to. Effectively more effort is expended on maintenance rather than development. There is no legal right to access upland and moor land such as the Mourne – it is done "De facto".</p>
<p><b>Countryside and Rights of Way (England and Wales) Act 2000</b></p> <p>"An Act to make new provision for public access to the countryside; to amend the law relating to public rights of way</p>	<p>Fundamentally this Act has provided people with the "<b>right to roam</b>" on upland and open land. It also enables and requires local authorities to create and develop Public Rights of Way.</p>
<p><b>Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003</b></p> <p>"Everyone has the statutory rights.....to be on land; or cross land... for recreational purposes"</p> <p>"A person has access rights only if they are exercised responsibly."</p>	<p>An Act of the Scottish Parliament to establish <b>statutory public rights of access</b> to land for recreational and other purposes...</p> <p>Effectively the majority of land in Scotland is open for access – and is not restricted to pedestrian access – but does not include motorised transport.</p>

### MIKE

- The legislation that provides access to the countryside in the rest of GB has been revised within the last 10 years to provide improved access to the countryside for informal sport and recreation through the Countryside and Rights of Way (England and Wales) Act 2000 (known as the CROW Act) and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act.
- The CROW Act has required the relevant statutory authorities to map all the open upland areas in England and Wales and designate them as open for recreation and has strengthened the requirement on Local Authorities to create and develop Public Rights of Way resulting in increased participation in outdoor recreation and giving more people the opportunity to lead healthy.
- As I have mentioned previously the Land Reform (Scotland) Act has provided open access throughout Scotland to land for outdoor recreation.
- The Department of Environment in Northern Ireland has highlighted that there is no intention to update the **Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983** as the pattern of land ownership and subsequent issues would make this difficult.
- However, the development of improved access rights to **publicly owned land** for outdoor recreation via this important Bill would make a very positive impact on providing increased opportunities for the Northern Ireland population to enjoy active and healthy lifestyles. It would also help to bridge the legislative gap regarding access between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- **Forest Service owns almost 5.7% of the total land area in Northern Ireland.**
- **There are 124 state forests geographically spread throughout Northern Ireland.**
- **Most of the Northern Ireland population live within a few miles of a forest or woodland.**
- **Forest Service estimate that they have over 2 million visitors to state forests per annum and so clearly already have a significant role to play in improving the health and well being of the population.**

### **MIKE**

- Government is the largest landowner in Northern Ireland and although there are other public land owners – the Department of Agriculture has the highest proportion of this land holding via forestry.
- The Strategy for Sport has highlighted the importance of having locally accessible areas for sport and physical recreation – by having a target to ensure that by 2018, 90% of the population have quality accredited, multi- sports facilities, that have the capacity to meet demand, within 20 minutes travel time. With the geographical spread of the 124 state forests throughout Northern Ireland – this Bill could go a long way to helping to meet this target – especially for people living in more remote rural areas.
- The Forestry Commission in GB have viewed the promotion of outdoor recreation on the public land in its care as a clear duty and responsibility to the public and have developed some superb examples of high quality and economically beneficial facilities in their forests. Sport NI staff have had the opportunity through the UK Countryside Recreation Network to see some of these sites and would recommend that members of the committee take the opportunity to visit sites such as Gientress in Scotland, Wynlatter in the lake District or Dalby in Yorkshire to see the value that a proactive approach can bring to local communities
- Coillte which is the Irish Forestry Agency have also developed a new recreational policy which they see as their “License to operate” and again see the provision of outdoor recreation as a clear duty to the public. They have developed an excellent recreation policy, a dedicated website (Coillte Outdoors) and some superb facilities such as Ballinastoe Mountain Biking trails.



#### TRENDS IN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE SPORTS

- **Independent Review of Trends in Outdoor Adventure Sports 1995 – 2008** commissioned by Sport NI and NI Tourist Board
  - **Contribution to improved public health and well being**
    - “The number of regular participants in outdoor adventure sports has increased through the period to over 44,000”
  - **Contribution to economic growth and prosperity**
    - The number of Activity Tourism Providers increased by 74% from 81 to 141 between 2006 – 2008.
  - **Contribution to the image of NI at home and abroad**
    - The development of new innovative facilities has contributed to increased numbers of visitors from outside Northern Ireland.

#### MIKE

- Sport NI and NI Tourist Board commissioned CAAN to carry out some research in 2008 into the trends in the outdoor adventure sports in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that this research was purely into the adventure sports and did not include walking, family type cycling and horse riding – the research for which will be carried out by CAAN by the end of March 2010.
- While participation in structured organised sport has seen a decline throughout this period – there has been a considerable increase in informal outdoor recreation with a 152% increase in participation numbers despite the lack of access that there is in Northern Ireland.
- Activity Tourism has been identified by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board as a winning theme for the development of the economic value that tourism brings to Northern Ireland. The NITB Signature projects in the Mourne and Causeway Coast and Glens also have a focus on activity tourism that reflects this.
- The development of high quality products for outdoor recreation such as the 5 NI Canoe Trails which have been recognised throughout the UK and Ireland as innovative and unique facilities that attract tourists into Northern Ireland and provide local people with facilities and opportunities that increase participation in sport and physical recreation.
- HM Treasury have established a value for a recreation visit which is used to establish the subvention provided to the Forestry Commission in GB by government to provide informal forest recreation.
- In 2003 a study by **Centre for Research in Environmental Appraisal & Management in the University of Newcastle** calculated that the value of recreation in Forestry Commission land in GB to be £585.95 million. Using the Barnett formula of 2.87% - extrapolating this to Northern Ireland would give a total value of £16.8 million.
- The overall Social and Environmental value of forests in GB was calculated by this study to be 1.5 billion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sport NI would recommend modifying the Bill as follows:
  - To clearly recognise the high value that forests can have with respect to recreation, health and well being.
  - To place a duty on the Department / Forest Service to provide recreation opportunities within Forests for public enjoyment and health.
  - To reflect the value forests have for local populations as well as tourists.
  - To provide a statutory right for sustainable and responsible recreation in forests rather than just a statutory right of pedestrian access.

## NICK

- While the Bill is a positive step forward for Forestry in Northern Ireland – Sport NI believes that the opportunity for Forest Service to become a lead agency in the provision of outdoor recreation and the values that we have shown it to bring could be lost as the focus of the bill seems to be more focussed on commercial gain rather than societal benefit.
- We have previously sent in recommendations through the consultation on the Bill to the Department – but clearly these had not been adopted when it went for its second reading through the Assembly.
- Sport NI welcomes the consultation now being provided by the Committee and would urge the committee to review the Sport NI recommendations for modifications to this Bill.
- There is the clear and effective model of success in Scotland with respect to access to land – and this Bill represents the opportunity to provide similar statutory rights to the population of Northern Ireland to enjoy sustainable and responsible recreational activities on public land that can have such wide-ranging benefits for health and mental wellbeing.