

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Publicly Owned Land Used for Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland

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Research undertaken by



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The lead agency for the development of sport in Northern Ireland



BACKGROUND

‘Sport Matters’: the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-19 was adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive in December 2009. The Strategy has highlighted three important pillars upon which success will be built:

- **Participation**
- **Places**
- **Performance**

Within the strategy improved access to the natural environment for sport and physical recreation (often known as outdoor recreation) has been identified as a critical element to enable the increase in participation in outdoor recreation to be sustainable. Outdoor Sports have seen a very significant rise in participation levels (152% increase from 1995-2008 from Trends in Outdoor Recreation Research).

The access legislation in Northern Ireland differs significantly from that in the rest of Great Britain and as a result there is significantly less accessible land for outdoor recreation. Land ownership in Northern Ireland also is significantly different from the rest of Great Britain as most farms are of a much smaller scale – with a proportionately higher number of the population with land owning interests.

Public land comprises of at least 83,716 Hectares (Ha) which is just over 6% of the land area of Northern Ireland (1,358,000Ha in total – excluding inland waterways). Inland waterways make up an area of 55,890Ha. The improved provision of access for a range of outdoor recreation activities within this public land would be consistent with the Northern Ireland Assembly aim to **“promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being”**.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2009, the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) was commissioned to undertake research to highlight the extent and use made of publicly owned land for outdoor recreation across Northern Ireland.

Funded by Sport Northern Ireland and supported by Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) the research was initiated following the findings of an earlier research study, ‘Trends in Outdoor Recreation 1995-2008’ (CAAN, 2008), which showed that one of the greatest factors affecting outdoor activity development in Northern Ireland was the lack of activity specific facilities. The study was completed in August 2010 and the full report is available to download on CAAN’s website, www.countrysiderecreation.com

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Public land

The research focused on land owned by the following public bodies:

- 3.1.1 Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD)
- 3.1.2 Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL)
- 3.1.3 Department of the Environment - Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) owned sites
- 3.1.4 Forest Service Northern Ireland
- 3.1.5 District Councils
- 3.1.6 Loughs Agency
- 3.1.7 Northern Ireland Water
- 3.1.8 Waterways Ireland

3.2 Outdoor recreation activities

Within the research study, information on the following outdoor recreation activities was collected.

- 1. Land based:** Adventure racing, archery, caving, clay pigeon shooting, climbing, coasteering and bouldering, cycling, diving, fell running, fishing, horse riding, kite bugging, land sailing, model flying, mountain biking, orienteering, and walking.
- 2. Water based:** Boat cruising, boat trips, canoeing, jet skiing, sailing, water ski / wakeboarding and windsurfing.
- 3. Air based:** Gliding, hang / paragliding, kite surfing, microlight flying, sky diving / and parachuting.

Please note that this research is not an exhaustive list of all locations where the above activities take place, but rather where they take place on publicly owned land.

3.3 Data collection and collation

For land based outdoor recreation, information was collected only for those sites over 1 hectare in size. For water based recreation, all applicable sites regardless of size were included. Sites such as jetties and slipways are in the majority under 1 hectare in size, but given that they are key access points for water based recreation they have been included within the report.

Information was collected as to whether each activity taking place at each site was on a 'formal' or 'informal' basis.



An activity was considered taking place on a 'formal basis' either when the land manager encouraged the activity to take place or when the land manager provided facilities for the activity at the site e.g. route signage and interpretation panels. In addition, those activities which took place under a permit system at a site were also classified as formal recreation. Activities defined as operating on an 'informal basis' were those that were not encouraged to take place by the land manager or where the user has established 'de facto' access. Further detail can be found in the full report.

Site specific information for each site was also collected, to give an indication of facilities available for use by recreational users. This included:

1. Site size
2. Charged access
3. Shop present
4. Café present
5. Activity provider on site
6. Caravan or camping facilities present
7. Route signage present
8. Interpretation panels present
9. Literature available either published or online
10. Parking available
11. Parking charge
12. Bicycle parking
13. Toilets
14. Disabled toilets
15. Additional facilities
16. Restrictions on recreation - environmental or permit based

Please note that the results recorded in the research are based on the information received from each of the public bodies and any conclusions drawn from the report are dependant on the accuracy of the data supplied. On occasion, a limited response was received from nominated representatives and as a result some regions appear to be under represented. Consequently council owned land has been divided up according to county, rather than an individual map for each council area.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the number of sites, total land and percentage of public land owned by the participating public bodies. DOE owned land was subdivided into National Nature reserves, State Care monuments and Country Parks whilst Forest Service land was subdivided into Forest Parks and Forests. Councils were subdivided into Counties.

Two methods were used to ascertain the area (ha) of each sites. When known, the public bodies submitted the area figures and/ or supplied accurate GIS data of land ownership, allowing the area to be calculated. When the area of the land submitted was not known, the perceived area of the site in question was calculated using GIS tools. Consequently, the data displayed in Table 1 should be treated as a guide rather than an absolute figure.

Public Body	Type of site or County	Number of sites	Total number of sites (%)	Land Owned (ha)	Total Land Owned (ha)	Total Land Owned (%)
DARD		4	1	146	146	0.2
DCAL		20	3	114	114	0.1
DOE (NIEA)	National Nature Reserves	27	8	2,620	3,489	4
	State Care Monuments	21		91		
	Country Parks	8		778		
Forest Service	Forest Parks	9	18	6,847	75,435	90
	All other forests	115		68,588		
Local Councils	Co. Antrim	157	55	1,494	3,386	4
	Co. Armagh	31		309		
	Co. Down	86		555		
	Co. Fermanagh	5		280		
	Co. Londonderry	72		615		
	Co. Tyrone	23		133		
NI Water		40	6	942	942	1
Waterways Ireland		62	9	28	28	0.03
Loughs Agency		2	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.0005
Totals		682	100	83,540	83,540	100

Table 1: Number of sites, total land and percentage of public land owned by the participating public bodies.

Table 2 shows those activities which are considered to take place on a formal and informal basis on publicly owned land within Northern Ireland, excluding council owned land. It should be noted that some activities cited as operating on a formal basis are one-off events only rather than repeat activities, e.g. formal mountain biking on Forest Service land for a one-off competition.

Public Body	Number of sites	Total Hectares	Activities operating informally	Activities operating formally
DARD	4	159	Cycling	Walking, Horse Riding and Archery
DCAL	20	113	Walking and MTB	Walking, Canoeing, Cycling and Fishing
NIEA	56	3,489	Walking, Canoeing, Cycling, Fishing, MTB, and Horse Riding	Walking, MTB, Canoeing, Cycling, Adventure Racing, Horse Riding, Orienteering, Fell Running, Archery, Adventure Racing, Climbing, Clay Pigeon Shooting, Hang gliding, and Model flying
Forest Service	124	75,435	MTB	Walking, MTB, Canoeing, Cycling, Adventure Racing, Horse Riding, Orienteering, Fell Running, Archery, Adventure Racing, Climbing, Clay Pigeon Shooting, Hang gliding, and Model flying
NI Water	40	942	Walking	Walking, Cycling, Horse Riding, and Fishing
Waterways Ireland	61	28	Walking and Cycling	Walking, Boat Cruising, Canoeing, Fishing, Jet Skiing, and Sailing
Loughs Agency	2	0.4	Walking, Boat Cruising, Canoeing, Fishing, Jet skiing, and Sailing	Boat Cruising, Canoeing, Jet Skiing, Sailing, and Water Ski / Wakeboarding

Table 2: Activities taking place on a formal and informal basis on publicly owned land within Northern Ireland, excluding district council land.

Table 3 shows the activities taking place on a formal and informal basis on Council owned land, divided by County.

County	Number of sites	Total Hectares	Activities operating informally	Activities operating formally
Antrim	157	1494	Walking, MTB, Horse Riding, and Cycling	Walking, Horse Riding, Archery, Adventure Racing, Boat Cruising, Boat Trips, Canoeing, Climbing, Cycling, Fell Running, Model Flying, Fishing, Orienteering, Sailing, and Water Skiing
Armagh	31	309	Walking, Horse Riding, Canoeing, Cycling, and Fishing	Walking, Horse Riding, Boat Trips, Canoeing, Cycling, Fishing, Orienteering, Sailing, Water Skiing, and Windsurfing
Down	86	555	Walking, MTB, Horse Riding, Canoeing, Cycling, and Fishing	Walking, Horse Riding, Canoeing, Boat Cruising, Cycling, Fishing, Jet Skiing, Model Flying, Sailing, Orienteering, and Windsurfing
Fermanagh	5	280	N/A	Walking, MTB, Boat Cruising, Canoeing, Caving, and Cycling
Londonderry	72	615	Walking	Walking, Horse Riding, Adventure Racing, Boat Cruising, Canoeing, Cycling, Fishing, Jet Skiing, Kite Buggy, Kite Surfing, Sailing, Orienteering, Water Skiing, and Windsurfing
Tyrone	23	133	Walking	Walking, Canoeing, Cycling, and Fishing

Table 3: Activities taking place on a formal and informal basis on Council owned land, divided by County.





RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** The collated research in its GIS format has the potential to be utilised as a website, allowing venues for outdoor recreation to be readily accessible to the public. Consideration however needs to be given to the ongoing day to day management, maintenance and updating of such a website.
- 2.** Public bodies should agree to provide an update on the information within this report at least on an annual basis, to ensure that the information remains relevant.
- 3.** This research should be used as a recreational planning tool for government departments, both at a local and strategic level.
- 4.** There are a number of activities, especially mountain biking, which are poorly catered for by the public bodies, particularly with regard to specific facilities for the activities. These should be reviewed to see what further potential opportunities can be created on public land to cater for these outdoor activities.
- 5.** The number of activities taking place on an informal basis on certain public body land is very low whilst for others it is very high. This suggests that some public bodies are much more relaxed about allowing recreational users to use their land, recognising that although demand for specific facilities is there, limited resources prevents them from providing dedicated facilities for these activities.
- 6.** The potential for further development of outdoor recreation activities on all publicly owned land across Northern Ireland is significant and should be addressed. Given the success of the Scottish Land Reform Act 2003, all public bodies that have land that is usable for recreation should be working towards developing an 'open access' policy. This would clearly demonstrate a commitment to Sport Matters: the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-19 by creating improved access opportunities across Northern Ireland to create opportunities for healthy lifestyle.
- 7.** The results of this research should be included within the new Outdoor Recreation Strategy for Northern Ireland currently under preparation.