



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the
Economy: Outdoor Recreation Northern
Ireland

14 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Aideen Exley	Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland
Mr Chris Scott	Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: From Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland, I welcome Chris Scott, the activity tourism manager, and Aideen Exley, the marketing manager. You have about 10 minutes to make a presentation; we have been prescriptive on that so far today. We ask that you leave yourselves open for questions after the presentation.

Ms Aideen Exley (Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland): Thank you, Chairman. Good morning, everybody, and thank you very much for the opportunity to present as part of this evidence session. On behalf of Outdoor Recreation NI, I will begin the presentation, and my colleague Chris Scott will continue. I want to tell you a bit more about the organisation and what we do — it is much wider than cycling — and about some initiatives and work that we are involved in to do with cycling and our recommendations for the future.

Outdoor Recreation NI was set up in 1999. Its remit is that it is responsible for the strategic development, management and promotion of outdoor recreation across Northern Ireland for the local community and for visitors and tourism. We are core funded by four government bodies: the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Sport Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Aside from that, we also seek project funding for a number of projects and initiatives from programme money. To date, we have secured about £9 million for outdoor recreation projects.

To give you a flavour of our work, I will set out some of our key initiatives over the past number of years and our current projects. There are four main areas of work. On product development, we have developed over 450 kilometres of off-road trails in Northern Ireland. This include walking trails and off-road family cycling trails. We have trained, recruited and actively managed over 200 active volunteers to audit and manage the trails. On widening participation, we have led various community-based projects, encouraging people with disabilities, those from ethnic minorities and those in disadvantaged

communities to take part in outdoor recreation. We also proactively promote and raise awareness of the opportunities to participate in outdoor recreation to everybody in Northern Ireland as well as to visitors. We do that through our websites. We run a number of websites, two of which are CycleNI and WalkNI. We also do it through digital e-marketing programmes and various events that we run.

We directly meet a number of the objectives of three Programme for Government priorities. We believe that we help to meet the objectives of priorities 2 and 4 through the Sport Matters and A Fitter Future for All strategies. We do that through a number of initiatives, including our cycle training for community leaders, our volunteer scheme, our community paths network and the CycleNI website. We also meet some of the objectives of priority 1 of the Programme for Government through DETI's tourism strategy. We do that through the development and marketing of mountain-biking trails and off-road family cycling trails, as well as a number of our events. First, I will take you through some of our initiatives under priorities 2 and 4. My colleague Chris will take you through the tourism initiatives under priority 1. Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland led a cycle leadership programme targeting community groups and under-represented groups in the community. Our aim was to create champions and cycling leaders so that they could encourage people to become more active and involved in outdoor recreation and to cycle as part of everyday life. Funding for the initiative has now ceased, but we are looking for funding so that we can continue it.

We have 173 walk and cycle volunteers. We recruit, maintain and work with them, and they create detailed audits pinpointing the remedial work required to keep our trails at a very high standard and make sure that they are appropriate for all. These are our family cycle trails and multi-use trails such as Beech Hill in Derry/Londonderry and Castle Archdale in County Fermanagh. We also have 51 mountain bike volunteers, whom we manage, and they audit and repair mountain bike trails in our national trail centre in County Down and County Tyrone.

We are initiating a new programme called the community path network scheme, which will be central to our work in the next six years — we are putting together our strategy for the next six years. The scheme aims to create cycling and walking trails for local communities. Essentially, it is about creating trails on their doorstep. They could be looped cycle and walk trails in small towns, villages and rural communities throughout Northern Ireland. It is also about connecting the community by linking small hubs throughout Northern Ireland with cycle and walk trails.

We have just started work on a feasibility study for Derg Valley in County Tyrone, following the River Derg from Ardstraw to Lough Derg. This is a pilot study that we are doing with Sport Northern Ireland and Strabane District Council to assess the cost and understand the benefits of creating that local pathway. Another example, also in County Tyrone, that we have looked at and will seek to look at again is linking Gortin village to the Gortin Glen Forest Park. That, too, is about linking communities to places of outdoor recreation and has the potential to tie into the active travel policy. Significant investment would be required to realise this.

As I mentioned, we run the website cycleni.com, which tells you everything about cycling. It is targeted at family cycling and people new to the sport rather than club cyclists or people at that level. It contains information about all the routes in Northern Ireland where you can cycle on- and off-road. It is a very successful website that has over 80,000 visitors every year, 43% of whom are from Northern Ireland.

That is everything on priorities 2 and 4. I will now hand over to Chris, who will talk about priority 1 from the tourism angle.

Mr Chris Scott (Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland): Thank you very much, Aideen. I will concentrate on priority 1, which is growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future. I will look at two areas: cycling in general, which we have already heard about this morning, and, as a slight aside, mountain biking and its potential in Northern Ireland.

Last year was quite a big quite year for mountain biking in Northern Ireland. Over 100 kilometres of purpose-built mountain bike trail was built in 2013 across four new centres and one extended centre. It has left us with some very iconic tourism product, including Davagh Forest just outside Cookstown in County Tyrone and Rostrevor and Castlewellan in County Down. Those have been developed as national trail centres, which are centres that we can confidently promote to the out-of-state market in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. It means that we can confidently move forward as a mountain biking destination. It has been a very positive start. The figures are calculated by electronic counters on each trail. Our presentation also shows the estimated figures from the economic appraisal for each trail. The combined estimate for the first year was 40,000 visitors. The actual

number, measured from the 10-month period from June March, sits at about 62,000. Ratcheting that up to the end of the 12 months brings me to a figure of about 85,000. The interest in and visitors to the trails since investment were more than double that expected in the economic appraisals.

So the past year has been a very bright start for mountain biking in Northern Ireland. However, we still have a little way to go. Figures from our competitors in Scotland show that it generates 1.3 million visitors per annum for mountain biking alone, and they stay 300,000 bed nights, which is significant. In 2009, it was predicted that the economic value of mountain biking in Scotland would rise from £119 million to £155 million. I know from sources in Scotland that they will exceed that. So the question for us is this: with a similar landscape and similar opportunities in Northern Ireland, how do we confidently move forward as a destination?

We have a few key recommendations. First, we talked earlier about heroes and inspiration, and events such as the Giro certainly have both. Mountain biking also has great opportunities. The UCI World Cup is akin to Formula One, with events in different countries forming a series. A similar four-day event in Fort William, which was a downhill race in the UCI World Cup, had an economic impact of £2.5 million in quite a rural area. The other figures in our presentation show the additional impacts. Not only does it have an economic impact but it inspires people to get out on their bikes, as we have seen from the Giro over the past couple of days. Mountain biking events are definitely a key route to take forward.

We need to continue to promote what we have confidently. Product development alone is simply not enough. Our paper includes examples of newspaper and magazine advertising, online and offline advertising and PR that we have generated over the past year for mountain biking, mainly for titles in Great Britain. We have done that with limited resources. Additional money would allow us better to promote the product that we have invested in here.

Further development is also required. I mentioned some of the centres developed over the past year, which was a fantastic start. However, research shows that a mountain biker stays one or 1.2 nights in Scotland; a holidaymaker stays 4.4 nights. So, even with the product that we have now, we do not have the wealth of product to suit the holidaymaker who wants to come and stay longer and spend more money. Luckily, we have a range of beautiful sites in Northern Ireland that have fantastic potential for mountain biking — Glenariff, Gortin Glen, Lough Navar and Binevenagh. So we are keen, as part of our mountain bike strategy to 2020, to extend the product offering in Northern Ireland.

I will move to cycling in general. Aideen referred to CycleNI and its website, and it is important that, when we talk about events such as the Giro and how fantastic that was over the past couple of days, we consider the steps needed to move forward and achieve success. Small events should not be forgotten. We also run a sportive, which is to cycling what running is to a marathon. It is a mass participation event, and nobody is too worried about the prizes. We run the Giant's Causeway Coast Sportive in Ballycastle each year. For a small investment of around £30,000, it has an economic impact of £170,000 in the Ballycastle area over that weekend, so it is roughly a one in four return. It attracts 1,100 participants to the Ballycastle area in the shoulder season, September. So small events should not be forgotten among the grander spectacles such as the Giro.

Earlier, the Committee had a presentation from Sustrans, which has done some great work developing long-distance touring routes. Those are generally multi-day trips along roads or sections of off-road trails. We have a strong product in Northern Ireland. Perhaps further work is required with businesses in the area. You have really good experience from your trip to Mulranny of how the local businesses really interacted with the product. There are prospects. The best figures that we have are those provided by Fáilte Ireland. Its figures from 2003 show that, in Germany alone, 11 million people demonstrated an appetite to partake in cycling while on holiday in Ireland. So there is definitely a strong market demand. However, we can go forward and progress only through targeted marketing and campaigning by NITB and Tourism Ireland.

Family cycling has been talked about quite a lot this morning in the various presentations. A recent Mintel report said that bike sales in Great Britain will increase by 23% in the next five years and amount to £870 million by 2017, so that is a massive market in the UK.

I was delighted to hear that the Committee had taken a trip to the Great Western Greenway. I endorse Sustrans's comment that, if we want to move forward confidently as a tourism product — there is an obvious overlap with active travel as well — we need to make a statement in Northern Ireland and hang our hat on something. I will not go into detail on the Great Western Greenway because I think that I would be preaching to the converted. The Republic of Ireland has been able to

incorporate it in Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland campaigns and make it a key tourism promotional tactic for the area. Gordon from Sustrans talked to you about key railway and waterway opportunities throughout Northern Ireland. I firmly believe that that is the tourism product for the future.

In summary, I will leave you with a list of recommendations. For mountain biking and growing a sustainable economy, events are key. We believe that Northern Ireland should hold two international mountain biking events by 2020. For continued and further investment and to sustain promotion, our target is to generate £25 million per annum by 2020 for mountain biking alone. Promotion and product development are required to meet that target, so further mountain biking trails and investment to develop the trails will be required. As I said, for cycle tourism, it would be great to make a big statement with something akin to the Great Western Greenway for Northern Ireland and endorse that with a sustained marketing campaign. We have seen the potential in countries such as Germany.

Community path networks are immensely important. I come from Fermanagh but have lived in Belfast for the past five or six years. I cycle and walk on the roads when in Belfast. I have quite a lot of green space. I think that a lot of rural communities do not have an opportunity to do that. So community path networks are vital for those areas. They need to be backed up by having champions who have undertaken cycle leader training in the various youth and other organisations to ensure that steps can be taken, and maybe even as a pathway to Bikeability, which we talked about earlier.

That was quite a whirlwind. I hope that we have kept to our 10 minutes, Chair. We are more than happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: I think that you are a bit over the 10 minutes, but it was a very interesting presentation. Thank you. You mentioned earlier, Aideen, that the NIEA, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Sport Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board are your funders. You referred to the very successful outdoor pursuit mountain biking trails. Most are in forest parks, which are under the control of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through the Forest Service. I declare an interest as an assistant warden in the former Environment and Heritage Service. When I was responsible for the Redburn and Scrabo country parks for a time, a major mountain biking event in Redburn was turned down flat by one or two senior people in the Environment and Heritage Service, which is now the NIEA. It jumps off the page that none of those parks are still being used. In fact, the agency is reluctant even to allow horse riding in what are country pursuit areas. That is absolutely over the top, in my view and, indeed, in the view of many who work there. Given the good work of the other Departments, what pressure has been put on the agency, and what pressure have you come under, to use parks such as Redburn, which would be ideal for mountain biking? What discussions have taken place with the NIEA on that? Is there still reluctance at the top of that agency to allow progress and see the bigger picture as opposed to the inward-looking picture that it saw in my day?

Mr Scott: I have worked on that project. The good news is that we have worked quite closely with the NIEA in the past number of weeks. It has asked us to look at a scoping study for nine NIEA-owned properties. I can get you a list of those, but I do not have them in my head at the moment.

The Chairperson: It would be good if you could do that.

Mr Scott: I can pass that on. The idea is to look at a scoping study of each park to see how mountain biking, walking, horse riding and all of the various elements of outdoor recreation can be pieced together in one master plan. We will take a snapshot of what is already in park and identify the potential. The answer to the last part of your question is that I do not know. We will pitch together based on the terms of reference of the NIEA. We may pitch mountain biking for some of those parks. The reaction to that will be interesting.

The Chairperson: Maybe the dinosaurs have gone now, but I am not quite sure.

Mr Scott: I think that Northern Ireland is moving that way, thankfully. We had issues in the forest parks over the past 10 years, but we have made massive strides in the past year. The other Department that you referred to has been very helpful in that. I feel that the energy and motivation is there. We are more than happy to pass on to you the outcomes of the scoping studies.

The Chairperson: You will want to see that in other places, too.

Mr Scott: Very much so. Master planning is so important. People get anxious about mountain biking because, to be blunt, they are petrified of a mountain biker crashing into a walker or vice versa.

The Chairperson: Obviously, a competitive event would take place when a lot of people were there.

Mr Scott: Absolutely. Two weekends ago, the single speed European championships were held in Castlewellan Forest Park. That was at the end of the Easter break, so the forest park was packed full of families and so on. Through good management and planning, there was no conflict at all between the normal users of the park and the mountain bike visitors.

The Chairperson: We are still basking in the glory of the Giro last week, and you mentioned the UCI World Cup. Do we have the infrastructure to host that here? If not, what do we need to do to secure such events, given your very clear presentation on the economic benefits to towns, rural villages etc in other areas? There is a very clear history of that happening.

Mr Scott: We have come a long way in the past year. Our ambition is to look at Rostrevor for a downhill event. Rostrevor has the only purpose-built downhill trail in Ireland, so it has the trail network. Castlewellan probably has the potential for a cross-country UCI event as well. Our issue in both sites is the surrounding infrastructure. As you probably saw with the Giro, the cyclists take up a very small space, but the entourage, the media, the team mechanics and so on are equally important. Some of those forest parks are quite compact sites, so money needs to be invested more in the infrastructure for the start/finish areas. We are in a fairly good place with the trails. People who have hosted these events in Scotland have come over here, and, when we brought them to Rostrevor, they could not believe the facilities there. With tweaks here and there, we can certainly have a strong platform.

The Chairperson: Are there any discussions with other Departments to try to secure some of the legs of the UCI World Cup?

Mr Scott: We presented to the NITB events team, which was inextricably linked to the Giro, and we were well received. They asked us to look at costs and the steps needed to host the event, and we hope to have that ready by the end of the financial year. The UCI bid is made three to four years in advance. If we made a bid next year, the event would come in three or four years' time.

The Chairperson: That is helpful, Chris.

Mr Lynch: Thanks for the presentation. You spoke about having a scheme similar to the greenway at Mulranny. I know that you have something at Lough Navar at Derrygonnelly. Like you, I come from Fermanagh and have been thinking about whether there is any potential in the Erne area. In Mulranny, we were told that they compete with walkers, who are much greater in number than cyclists. Is there anywhere in the North with the potential for such a project?

Mr Scott: The Mulranny programme is a successful tourism project. The active travel element has been less successful because of the rural nature of the area. The Great Western Greenway project works so well because it was already in a tourism destination, albeit that the Mulranny Hotel had gone through hard times. You arrive in Westport and Achill, which have always been tourism destinations, and that is important.

Another key aspect of the Great Western Greenway is that it has stops of almost equal distance along the way: at Newport and various other villages. It is not a matter of creating a massive project that is alien to the tourism industry or, in the case of the Connswater greenway, to the urban environment. I will not give you a precise destination. A feasibility study, with the terms of reference that I have just given, would be necessary to determine whether anywhere in Northern Ireland was suitable for a similar project.

Gordon from Sustrans spoke about the map of disused railways. There are also opportunities around waterways. We have numerous potential sites, but a feasibility study would be required to take that forward.

Mr Lynch: A point that I made in Mayo was that most of the disused railway lines have been built on, which I know has happened in Fermanagh, and become part of developments. Most of them have gone.

The Chairperson: I take it you do not want the train down in Fermanagh now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lynch: I will not be waiting for it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ó hOisín: I welcome the opening up of many forest parks, not only for mountain biking but for horse riding and even walking. A few short years ago, many of those areas were no-go areas. What is the overall mountain biking product worth to the local economy in hard cash?

Mr Scott: I do not know at the moment. The trails were finished only in May last year, and we will work with the NITB on a research project this summer. We are waiting for the tourism innovation fund to open and hope that our application will be successful. I hope that we will have a research report ready by March or April next year, which would give us hard figures, and exactly the figures that I want to know, too.

An economic appraisal for the two trail centres at Rostrevor and Castlewellan, a project funded largely by DETI and the NITB, showed £670,000 in the first year. Ramping that up over Northern Ireland, the economic impact might be quite high.

Mr Ó hOisín: Maybe you will come back with those figures when they are available.

Mr Scott: Absolutely. We would be keen to do that.

The Chairperson: Yes, if we get those figures, you can come back to the Committee. We will also send you a number of further questions in due course.

Mr Ó hOisín: An issue that came up over the Giro was Translink limiting its bicycle-carrying capacity to four. I wonder whether there is an opportunity for various interest groups to look at that. That would probably widen bicycle use across the board.

Mr Scott: It is an issue for us even in our mountain biking projects.

Mr McCarthy: In your presentation, Chris, you said that funding for cycle training had been withdrawn at some stage. Is that right?

Ms Exley: That was me.

Mr McCarthy: However, one of your recommendations is investment in cycle training for community leaders in under-represented communities. Can you see that happening after the withdrawal of funding?

Ms Exley: We ran a three-year project funded by Big Lottery called Venture Outdoors, and cycling was an intrinsic part of that. That was all about targeting under-represented communities, and we trained cycle leaders in those groups. That has now come to an end, and, because of the popularity of walking, we have managed to secure some programme money for that. It is called the Walking in Your Community initiative, but we want to extend that to cycling.

Mr McCarthy: Will you go back to the Big Lottery?

Ms Exley: There is nothing open to us there at the moment, so we are looking at various grant programmes. We have a small amount of programme money to continue with the walking, which is relatively low cost and very effective, and we hope to seek more money for cycling when other programmes open.

The Chairperson: Finally, your resource requirement for the implementation of your operational plan is just under £650,000 for this financial year, which is quite low. Do you feel that you are adequately resourced, and is there an appropriate level of investment in the sector?

Mr Scott: We are working up our operational plan for the next six years to cover two periods of comprehensive spending review, and we will require around £4 million over the next six years. We are bidding for 60% of that from public support, so 40% has to come from elsewhere: for example, our carrying out consultation processes. We have interactions with private sector sponsorship and so on,

but the more of the 40% we have to get, the more it diverts some of our staff from doing the work that we really want to do. That is a real challenge for us. As you said, it is quite a low amount. More public support would certainly make our lives a lot easier. It would mean less diversion and that we did not have to spread ourselves so thinly in other areas. Further support would be appreciated.

The Chairperson: As I said, a number of questions will come from the Clerk's office in writing, and they will be part of the inquiry. Thank you both for coming along and giving evidence to the Committee today. We look forward to your input, which will be included in our final report.

Mr Scott: Thank you very much.