



Belfast Hills Partnership



Annual Report



April 2021 - March 2022

Company Information

as at 31/03/2022

Directors

C Chisholm
A Crean
E Cunningham
M Donnelly
R Drew
N Enright
N Fraser
C Hamill
D Kinahan - co-opted
A McAuley
A McFarland - co-opted
M Morgan
J Watts

Independent Chair & Director

D Flinn

Company Secretary

L Pinkerton

Treasurer

P McCloskey - co-opted

Company Number

NI053189

Charity Ref Numbers

XR70288 NIC100859

Auditors

MTS Accountants
1 Lanyon Quay
Belfast
BT1 3LG

Bankers

First Trust Bank
35 University Road
Belfast
BT 7 1ND

Solicitors

Cleaver Fulton Rankin
50 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7FW



Chair's Report

Belfast Hills Partnership has seen another year come and go with lots of new and exciting developments in the Belfast Hills. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are still being felt, our volunteer numbers remain strong, and we have worked hard to tackle a number of ongoing issues and challenges in the Hills. I am glad to report that BHP has had another stable year financially, demonstrating considerable resilience in uncertain times.

Covid-19 continued to be a major factor in 2021-22; even as lockdowns receded, visitor figures to the Belfast Hills stayed up by roughly 20%. Whilst a welcoming development this also brought new impacts and challenges such as path erosion, littering and parking. Joint work with our partners to manage and mitigate visitor impacts now form an important area of future work for us.

Internally we saw a continuation of remote working and luckily minimal levels of staff illness. Despite volunteer and outdoor group work requiring in-person contact, we still managed to maintain good levels of project delivery for which our staff should be warmly congratulated. Online meetings, events and delivery of other services also became the norm, and could well be here to stay.

While we have seen positive progress, there remains the need to tackle perennial issues such as fly-tipping and trespassing. We managed to secure funding for cameras, signage and licences to monitor fly-tipping hotspots. This had an immediate effect; discouraging casual fly-tipping and obtaining evidence to support prosecutions by local councils. Whilst this required time and persistence, we were greatly helped by the support

and appreciation of local residents.

In addition to our practical work, we are also in a good strategic position with the opportunity being taken to revise a range of key documents for the partnership such as a new Strategic Plan, Belfast Hills Recreation Plan and a revised Land Acquisition Policy. The latter is particularly timely, given the increasing levels of land acquisition for environmental purposes such as the Glas-na-Bradán site by the Woodland Trust. Our volunteers were up on the site many times during the winter to help create this new woodland.

We continue to scan the range of potential funders for our planned work to meet the needs of the hills, their wildlife and people, however it is apparent that, while there is no shortage of new funds becoming available, there is a worrying trend for such funding to be restricted to project costs only. As we face mounting energy and rental costs we can see a rising problem for charities like ourselves in how to cover this increasing expenditure.

Despite the difficulties we all faced during the year, I believe that the staff and Board have managed to achieve a very positive range of successes and progress for which much gratitude is well deserved. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all. A special thank you to those who left us during the year: Jo Boylan who left to work for our close partners the Woodland Trust and Drew Launchbury who worked on the Our Bright Future project. I look forward to us achieving more in 2022-23 and beyond with all of your help.

David Flinn

Chairperson, Belfast Hills Partnership



The discovery of the presence of Pine Marten in the Hills has been a personal highlight of the last year. Footage captured thanks to Black Mountain Wildlife & Rewilding Project.



Manager's Report

2021-22 will be remembered as the year we got the office back up and running in the emergence from Covid-19. With plenty of positive news stories, 2021 saw media coverage for BHP via programmes such as Mahon's Way, BBC Home Ground and early preparations for Chronicles of Belfast.

The impacts of the pandemic saw some changes to our work practices, with hybrid working becoming central to how we operate. We delivered a series of remote talks and presentations, with online delivery proving so popular that we are continuing these beyond lockdown. Covid-19 also caused the inevitable postponement of the 2021 Belfast Wildfire Conference until November 2022, which BHP are organising for NIEA. However, it is worth mentioning that we managed to maintain volunteering and surveying activities throughout much of lockdown.

This year we welcomed Drew Launchbury and Lisa Critchley into the posts of Youth Outreach Officer and Woodland Officer, respectively. Drew was with us until November 2021, close to the end of the Our Bright Future programme which was replaced with the Wild Youth Programme in January 2022. I would like to thank funders such as the Lottery Fund and our partners Breedon Group for supporting this programme. We also saw Jo Boylan move after 10 years with BHP into a role with our partners the Woodland Trust. I'd like to thank both Drew and Jo who may have left but remain part of the BHP family.

We continued to deliver across our range of work areas; surveying, volunteering, and improving the hills. This included ongoing support for a range of local community initiatives such as small volunteering groups. We have also continued

strengthening partnership work with the likes of Woodland Trust, the Million Trees project, NIEA, and Belfast Health & Social Care Trust.

A major step forward in the hills has been the acquisition and initial development of Glas-na-Bradán Wood by the Woodland Trust. It is located on a 97 hectare site on Collinward hill just northwest of Cave Hill and will offer not just new habitat but also new access paths and facilities. This reflects a new trend towards direct acquisition. As this potentially develops across other parts of the Hills, so we must ensure that increased access is well managed and that we leave space for nature and minimise impacts on landscape, agriculture and local communities. The ongoing growth in interest in the Hills is also reflected in the increasing demand we are meeting for health walks for people who want to enjoy the hills, their wildlife and landscape to the benefit of their physical and mental health.

Lastly, we should not forget the ongoing office work behind the scenes, such as the work of the Board in developing our Risk Management Plans. Out of this, for instance, came our certification for Cyber Essentials - key to securing BHP from a growing threat to small charities.

There are a range of additional targets met and achievements outlined in the following pages, but I would like to take the opportunity to thank both our staff and our volunteers, including the members and observers on the board, who continue to deliver an increasing workload across a range of work areas.

Jim Bradley

Manager, Belfast Hills Partnership



Over the last year we have managed to report over 20 incidents of fly-tipping to the relevant authorities. Together we work to discourage and actively prevent fly-tipping incidents.



The following pages highlight key work carried out under four key themes:



Improving

Making positive changes on the ground



Involving

Getting people directly involved in managing their places



Planning

Working out how to manage the hills better in future



Learning

Gathering & disseminating information to help engage people & make changes





Improving

Making positive changes on the ground

Woodland Creation: Over 34k trees planted via Woodland Officer & volunteers across 14 different sites in the Belfast Hills. 5 farm plans produced. Gave away 1,500 trees, engaging with over 2,000 members of the public in partnership with Belfast City Council and The Conservation Volunteers.

Wildflowers: propagation & wildflower plug planting at 3 sites.

Invasive Species: controlled or removed at least 6 priority invasive species including Japanese Knotweed & Himalayan Balsam across 7 sites.

Tree Nursery: with the help of volunteers we collected & propagated roughly 1,000 tree saplings which were planted across sites.

Path maintenance: volunteers cleared vegetation over 1,000 metres of paths on Cave Hill & Ligoniel.

Litter lifts: conducted at Carrs Glen, Glencairn, Whiterock, Ballygomartin, Forth river, Valley Pk, Colin Glen & Ballycolin.

Fly-tipping: several cameras installed at different locations, capturing footage of 23 fly-tipping incidents. All incidents were referred to the local councils for investigation.

**34,177 trees
planted & 1,500
trees given to the
public.**

**Over 1,000m of
paths cleared of
vegetation.**





Involving

Getting people involved in managing their places

Field Volunteering: the equivalent of 454 days of volunteering time were accrued by 55 new recruits in addition to a team of about 30 regular volunteers. An equivalent of £22,950 in value was gained thanks to volunteering efforts.

School Grounds: we engaged with 81 young people from 5 schools, 1 Scout Group & 1 Youth Club; helping them to improve their own local environment & school grounds while developing their understanding of nature.

Trainee Rangers: 8 young people took part in a 16 week training programme, introducing them to Environmental Sector careers whilst gaining a Lantra accreditation, John Muir Explorer Award & 50 hour BHP volunteering certificate.

Health: this was still curtailed significantly due to Covid-19, but we responded by developing a series of 45 virtual wildlife talks & 55 short walks for over 700 adults with learning difficulties plus other one-off walks for groups.

Training: 60 volunteers & members of the public were trained in topics such as wildflower, fungi & tree ID, tree disease recognition & bat surveying.

**Over 3,000 hours
of volunteer time
committed.**

**100 health walks
& talks
conducted.**





Learning

Gathering & disseminating info to help engage people & make changes

Young People: 1,260 11-25 year olds were directly involved with the Our Bright Future Project & Wild Youth Scheme. Our LPS legacy programme saw interaction with 1,719 primary school aged children.

Events Programme: 9 fully booked events focused around wellbeing. Hosted online talks during winter, gaining over 1,000 views to date.

Online info & campaigns: 40k sessions conducted on our website & 9k combined followers across our social media platforms.

Mapping Wildfires: mapped 11 wildfires in 2021 across 30 hectares. A very dry March resulted in a further 8 wildfires in early spring 2022 covering an area of 27 Hectares. Local Wildfire Stakeholders met to consider actions.

Biodiversity Surveys: ongoing biodiversity surveys of 8 priority & protected species & 6 priority habitats have shown steady population figures.

Ash dieback: 4 surveys of ash dieback were conducted in woodlands. It was present in all sites & particularly prevalent in juvenile ash.

Pine Marten: found across Black Mountain by community volunteer.

Fixed Point Photography: 4 seasons of Fixed Point Photography; taking repeat images from 6 locations to record long term changes & impacts.

2,979 young people involved with various projects & events.

New surveys found Pine Marten in Hills.





Planning

Working out how best to manage the hills in future

As well as producing and carrying out our more general strategic plans, we have taken part or assisted in forward planning in the following ways:

Environmental Farming Scheme: we've worked in conjunction with environmental consultants on EFS surveys on two major sites.

Local Development Plans: we have been monitoring the ongoing council development plans & assisted planning staff in their reviews of designated sites & access points.

Planning Proposals: we responded to 7 key planning applications in the Belfast Hills area.

BHP Strategic Planning: we carried out ongoing work on key documents such as our BHP Recreation Action Plan, our Land Acquisition Policy & our updated Strategic Action Plan, all in preparation for our funding bids in 2022-23 & beyond.

Marketing Plan: preparatory work for a Belfast Hills Marketing Plan and staff for 2022-5.

Worked in conjunction with environmental consultants on EFS surveys for 2 major sites.



BHP Income & Expenditure 2021-2022

| | 2021-2022 £ | 2020-2021 £ |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Gross Income | 410,227* | 332,743* |
| Gross Expenditure | 416,743 | 314,488 |
| Surplus (Deficit) | (6,516) | 18,255 |
| Total year end reserves | 541,878 | 548,394 |

* This summary is based on the Independent Assessment for 2021-2022 carried out by MTS Accountants. (See full Assessment for details)

Partnership Staff & Directors

Staff

Dr Jim Bradley, *Partnership Manager*
Dr Lizzy Pinkerton, *Scheme Manager*
Michelle McClafferty, *Administrative & Finance Manager (PT)*
Sara McCloskey, *Administrative Officer (PT)*
Judy Meharg, *Hills Project Officer (PT)*
Laura Shiels, *Environmental Outreach Officer*
Patricia Deeney, *Youth Development Officer*
Noel Rice, *Wildlife Connections Officer*
Lisa Critchley, *Woodland Officer*

Directors

The Directors on the Board & the bodies to which they belong are as follows:

Independent Chair

David Flinn

Community / Users

Communities

Aidan Crean (*Friends of Falls Park*)
Niall Enright (*Upper Springfield Development Trust*)

Recreation Groups

Alan McFarland - co-opted (*NI Sports Forum*)

Local Conservation Groups

Cormac Hamill (*Cave Hill Conservation Campaign*)
Maria Morgan (*Ligoniel Improvement Association*)

Landowning / Management Farmers

Eugene Cunningham (*Ulster Farmers Union*)
Neale Fraser (*Ulster Farmers Union*)

Local Economic

Russell Drew (*Belfast Hills Waste Management Operators*)

Quarries

Craig Chisholm (*Mineral Products Association NI*)

Nature Conservation

Ian McCurley (*Woodland Trust*)

Statutory

Cllr. Victoria McAuley (*Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council*)
Cllr. Micheal Donnelly (*Belfast City Council*)










BHP Mission & Objectives

The mission for the Belfast Hills Partnership is to:

-  Provide a practical and integrated management mechanism for the Belfast Hills
-  Contribute to the conservation, protection and enhancement of its natural, built & cultural heritage and providing for responsible countryside enjoyment
-  Contribute to the quality of life of communities on the fringes of the Belfast Hills, rural residents of the area and to the wider urban & rural environment
-  Work in partnership with others towards the realisation of the Belfast Hills vision, within a Belfast Hills Integrated Management Plan



The strategic aims of the Partnership are to:

-  Conserve, protect and enhance the natural, cultural and built heritage of the Belfast Hills
-  Encourage individuals, communities and organisations to care for the Belfast Hills
-  Raise awareness of the value of the Belfast Hills and of issues relating to their protection
-  Manage existing recreational use of the Belfast Hills
-  Support and assist farmers and landowners under pressure from urban development, and from inappropriate forms of countryside recreation
-  Contribute to the economic regeneration of communities in the Belfast Hills and adjoining city
-  Contribute to a positive image of Belfast, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and Antrim through an attractive, well managed and functioning visual backdrop to these areas



Belfast Hills Partnership

We would like to extend special thanks to our funders

