

Castlewellan Forest Park Public Consultation on Proposals for Built and Natural Heritage

This is the write-up of the Castlewellan Forest Park Consultation that took place on the 20th March 2018. The event was organised by the Newry, Mourne and Down Council Project Task and Finish Board for Castlewellan Forest Park. The event was facilitated by Michael Donnelly and took place in Castlewellan Castle.

Around 50 people attended. The two-hour evening workshop started with an introduction and welcome by Sally Montgomery (Chair of the Council's Task and Finish Board), who outlined briefly the history of the Demesne. This was followed by Clive Mellon and Michael Lear who gave two short presentations on the biodiversity of the Park and the evolution of the Arboretum and the Walled Garden.

The rest of the evening was spent examining four questions on:

1. Biodiversity
2. Traffic Hazards and
3. Pedestrianizing the park
4. The use of the buildings in the Grange and the Bothy Yard.

Each question was preceded by a short introduction by the consultants and participants had maps on the table to consult, when considering the issues.

A general sense of the points received from the participants at the consultation suggested a warmth and a positive regard for the evidence, insights, and proposals of the consultants. They affirmed the insights that were highlighted, regarding risks to biodiversity, to people, and to the heritage of the park. That said the considerable attachment to the Park by local people and users groups was clearly evident. There are a range of questions, concerns, and clarifications that pepper the conversations.

There is an appreciation of the balancing act that has to be achieved between offering a high-class experience including access to wilderness and tranquillity as well as vibrant animation – alongside the need to protect what makes the park special. The magic may be found in finding ways to ensure that public's use of the park is deployed in a way to protect the park and actively engage them in this process, as well as contributing financially to its upkeep. Suitable high quality facilities in the right places will take pressure off the more fragile areas of the park.

The participants created an impressive array of ideas and suggestions for how the park can be improved, ranging from ideas for events, to the partnerships that can encourage the involvement of much wider groupings to sustain the park. There are ideas for education, for protecting biodiversity, for enabling access as well as ideas on how to manage the traffic.

This report sets out the responses that were made to the questions. They have been clustered into lists that are connected.



Question One: Biodiversity

Do you think it is reasonable for access to be restricted to certain areas? E.g. To avoid disturbance to wildlife, e.g. birds nesting. Presented by Clive Mellon (Allen and Mellon)

In general people are supportive of the concept of putting in measures to minimise disturbance to wildlife through forestry and recreational activities, while there were some concerns raised about both the impact on users and the messages it was sending to people.

Some tables highlighted the need for good and thoughtful communication on the reason why this was important ranging from signage to innovative ideas such as setting up hides, cameras – relaying images to an interpretive centre. Others suggested viewing opportunities that would serve as both spectacle and education, as well as an extra protection measure (more eyes on the wildlife minimises chances of vandalism). There were questions about enforcement.

General Agreement with Restricting Access at Specific Times and Locations

Red kite – nesting – divert around these areas

Dogs / people should be kept away from certain areas e.g. badger setts

Yes, definitely – e.g. red kites – and forestry work should also avoid times and places where animals are living / breeding, e.g. red squirrels.

What would people do about walking a terrier round badger setts?

Do not allow activities e.g. Races, mountain bikes, sponsored walks to take place where animals and birds are known to breed / live
Yes needs to be restricted to protect wildlife

Very important depends on species - certain times of the year when birds are nesting, one of bike trails go through red kite breeding area; depends on how 'endangered' a species is; kite surfing found to have no effect on success of wintering / wading birds in Strangford Lough

Dogs off leash cause significant damage to ground nesting birds

Horses (low numbers) are also low impact – stick to paths, tend not to disturb wildlife

Are the red kites adapting to the presence of people?



Communication would be key

Or – “look at the bluebells this month, but walk on the paths, to preserve them”.

Sell the restrictions as a positive thing – e.g. cameras on badger setts? (Or would this attract badger baiters?) Somewhere you could visit the film of badgers?

And if users already know which areas have wildlife, they can plan to avoid that area or hope to see them.

Maps might include sites where restrictions are in place at anytime.

Could volunteers be used to staff wildlife cameras and educational work about restricted areas?

Majority of visitors just go round the lake, so the wildlife restrictions wouldn't affect them anyway.

Signage for wildlife restrictions should be carefully organised. E.g. The Donard Forest nesting buzzards notice said “Protected birds of prey nesting here. Disturbance is a crime” – not enough to say where the track was unusable or that buzzards have attacked runners, so people didn't understand the sign. Need to know where nesting sites are in order to protect them.

Educational Opportunity

It is a good idea to draw attention particular species e.g. Red Kite?

Need for education about why restricted access and generally about wildlife (e.g. Fishing line?)

Ground nesting birds and mammals need protecting more than birds nesting in trees

May encourage extra visitors – birdwatchers, nature people
 Education and tourism = a benefit for visitors, like Springwatch? People would come, attracted by wildlife, if they understood what there was.
 Set up hides to watch and video links for viewing to add to visitor experience
 Website to highlight events to promote the wildlife
 Use to educate schools
 More education on what the biodiversity is: Mountain bike, Horse riding, walkers, schools, information boards

Extra Layer of Protection by Engaging the Public

Traffic of people in area can protect species by deterring egg thieves etc. (in Lake District NP)
 Suggest viewing point to view red kites from a safe distance (or red squirrels) build hides
 Scottish NH approach – increase and improve access to engage public and police ‘eyes and ears’ to protect species.
 Need environmental evidence of what is causing damage
 Possibility of monitoring animals / birds through webcams so people can engage with wildlife from a distance cf. Spring watch. Increasing popularity of park whilst protecting animals. Therefore, cordoning at certain times of year and not making cordons an attractant.



Some Risks with Restrictions

Don't want restrictions to be a negative to visitors
 Risk of excluding the public to the point where they disengage and don't care about the asset we have on our doorstep.
 If restricted would that defeat the purpose of bringing eco prosper to the area.
 And would maybe restrictions bring with curiosity as to why
 Might be hard to police
 How would this put in place and policed

- how would it be policed / managed and communication
- could measure impact through numbers of breeding pairs
- Buzzards can attack people during nesting
- Safety of people

Question Two: Hazards (Map 1)

We have looked at the conflict between Cars and Pedestrians. Do you broadly agree with the map, and is there anything missing? Presented by Mat Ridout. (MRA)

This map highlighted the areas where there is a conflict between the car and pedestrians, cyclists and other users of the park. The general message being that the car has a lot of access to many parts of the park, including places where it seems very incongruent. Participants were asked if they agreed with the hazards outlined on the maps. There was considerable agreement that the interaction of cars and users was unacceptable. The most commented on hazard concerned the exit to the park and how it was both dangerous and also mis-used by drivers. Other interesting hazards included the use of the park for wedding photo parties (several per day in the summer), and also within the camping area. There were several comments about the lakeside car park and how it was unsuitable for general car parking as well as disabled parking. One interesting phenomenon was Sat Nav's directing cars into unsuitable spaces and lanes in the park.

Some solutions were suggested for this section but which may have pre-empted the next section on proposed traffic management solutions.

List of Hazards as experienced by participants

Not great vision out of exit onto Bann Road
Footpath on the way out - disastrous. Nowhere to push a buggy.
Footpath required from exit gate to Bann
Blind corner at exit gate – maybe put a pedestrian walkway in wall.
Exit lane a real problem 2 way very narrow gateway
Exit road between main car park and maze – children running between cars and maze (hard to see)
Cars entering the park from the exit laneway
Bad drivers go in through the exit, especially coaches, even though its one way officially.
Can take up to two hours to get out of car park.
Exit after events is the biggest issue – between police/event managers – local people often stepping in to manage traffic egress

No safe crossing from car park to maze
Blind corner from car park to bike track
Access to peace maze / play park from car park for walkers
Crossing to maze and play area across upper exit road
No protection for walker on the current way in



Number of vehicles growing continually, unplanned.
Caravan / camping park has a pedestrian / car conflict too.
Lucky not to have a fatality so far.
Vehicles and tents mixed. One year a van “ took a fence out and drove down the road”. Cars and people mix there but shouldn’t.
Mountain bikers increased
Present car park used to be kitchen gardens but was tarmacked over - but it has no focus and has too much mixing of pedestrians and vehicles and visitors aiming for various parts of the park.
Lake car park dangerous
Trailers, e.g. for canoeing at lake can mean very tight turning / manoeuvring at the lake side. Not suitable for disable parking (no toilets, uphill) but not suitable for cars with canoes on top, trailers and group parking, ordinary car parking.
Wedding parties drive up the road to the castle from the crossroads and cars coming to the arboretum.

Coaches access?
What about disabled access?
Any data on number of accidents? Between cars / cyclists/ pedestrians

Question Three: Traffic (Map 2)

We have created pedestrian zones. Do you broadly agree with the map, and is there anything missing? Presented by Mat Ridout

The third discussion examined the solutions to the traffic hazards within the park – the removal of the car from large sections of the park. While there was clear support for some of the proposals regarding the new traffic regime in the park, there were many considerations, concerns and suggestions that came forward in this section.

The electric vehicle proposal excited people with some novel ideas about how to manage it as well as some practical suggestions to ensure that it really does enable people with limited mobility to access the walled gardens and indeed some other areas.

The Castlewellan Show and other event days are big traffic moments and the ability to bring in, park, and safely exit all that traffic takes some thinking. Under the concerns, the broad thrust is supportive of more thoughtful management of the traffic on busy days.

Access to the lake for canoes, kayaks, and fishermen is raised as essential. Also, an interesting question about on-going access to the upper camp sites on the Crow Rd which are busy in the summer.

There are some thoughts about the access, barriers, enforcement, and charging. There is an understanding that charging and enforcement of the traffic rules is key to the success of this endeavour and that it is likely that people will try to circumvent the traffic rules. Having it thought through is key.

General Support

Makes sense to have new route for entrance and vehicles

New pedestrian routes welcome

Good plan to have various exits.

Further the vehicles are pushed back from the park, the better – people accept walking.

Solution on map does look workable.

Enough car parking for coaches and cars if lakeside carpark closed

Good idea to reduce traffic and create more pedestrian areas

Yes. General view fantastic solution

Fantastic suggestion. Hard to think who would complain

Great for town people point of view



The Electric Vehicle is Welcomed

Electric vehicle route would be welcome for disabled / elderly access

Would the electric vehicle route be economical – or seasonal?

Electric vehicles like Verrailles! Self drive? Business opportunity?

Pedal car chariots for hire along pedestrian paths, e.g. electric assist ones? To add to motorised transport e.g electric cars?

Wheelchair access to Electric vehicle is very important to improve accessibility

Consider horse and traps (ones specifically for people with poor mobility)

Electric buggy – green good

Electric vehicle would require wheelchair and pram access

Electric vehicle to be used only from car park to Arboretum avoid extending to other destinations – avoid detracting from natural space - interrupting pedestrians, cyclists etc.

Castlewellan show traffic and other event days is a concern

Will town congestion be an issue?

Do we need 2 car park entrances (the new proposed one and the existing one) busy days

Parking for show

Overflow car park – mesh on grass – along entry drive in?

Idea of overspill carpark using field for show is good

Continued use of lakeside carpark for events – maybe gates?

Clear marking of one way system and special clear marking of occasions when its two way via main entrance

2 – way system may prove to be a bottle neck

On busy days the foresters could make roads contraflow.

Build a new road through 'Horse Show' field which would be two way for entrance (could then be made wide enough for all vehicles) and would ease exit congestion at the end of a busy day.

Use the Drumbuck Road to exit (extra alternative at busy times)

Create a designated Parking area for events (big park runs, horse treks, walks etc.) on an ad hoc basis with permission as part of event plan maybe in show overspill field to prevent clash of event with main car park users.

Exit road between main car park and maze - could this section not be two way – especially for large vehicles that cannot enter through the main entrance gates.

A second exit from main car park to alleviate traffic exiting after a busy day when car park has been full – even a new road through the field RHS of entrance drive – would reduce strain on cars congesting town (esp. for events like Castlewellan Show).

Access to the Lake is Important for Users

Canoes on roof racks and trolleys would need to park too far from the lake if only allowed in the main car park. They need access.

Fishing and boating need access so canoe trailers need to be by the lake. Fishers need to get their equipment to the lakeside.

What's going to happen to disabled anglers etc.?

Fishermen parking at lake (accessing via Crow Road) how would they access?



Disability Access

In principle we say reducing vehicles and increasing pedestrian / bike access to park is very good but

disabled cars would need access on a person to person basis – if the electric vehicle can't accommodate them.

If electric buggy not available would it be possible to have vehicle access to arboretum

Disabled facilities – rough terrain wheelchairs available?

Access and Enforcement

Barrier System?

4000 cars on a busy day to 3 or 4 – 2 x minibuses and 2 cars with canoe trailers? Just tell rangers?

Use a key or electronic barrier?

Will there be a barrier at the rangers office for charging? Or could cars be charged on the way out?

People should always be able to get in free as pedestrians

Kilbroney and Gullion don't charge. Delamont does.

How will access be policed (may not be an issue) between cars travelling to castle versus people parking at Lake

Access to youth campsites?

Move rangers hut into the car park

Signs should be clear about who's authorised to park for which amenity – Access is unpoliced.

Cars being sent through Drumbeck gate by Sat Navs

Better Footpaths

Need proper footpaths alongside vehicle routes

Environmental way of footpaths should be explored

Yellow route requires horse, bike and pedestrian access along road

New path to link from exit gate to main road

Footpath along main drive as has now been done at exit lane

Pedestrian areas in carpark

Create a bike crossing at existing old gate between bike track and car park

Clearly delineated walk / cycle paths alongside roads not necessarily fenced off

Lakeside car park – designate as disabled only and enforced – move to no parking apart from disabled.

Clearer demarcation walking / cars - separate trail 200 yards from pump trail down to lake – winding path to keep speed down

Greening up the car park might prevent flooding.

Access for coaches not through main (listed) gate?

Gateway needs to be widened if big coaches are to be allowed

Widen main entrance gates for vehicle access

Question Four: Building In Grange and Walled Garden (Maps 3 and 4)

Do you broadly agree with the map, and is there anything missing? Presented by Graham Ogle (Kriterion/Hamilton Architects).

Participants were asked to consider the proposals for the buildings in the Grange courtyards and the Bothy yard at the walled garden.

1. The Grange Yard

It is clear that people recognise the quality of the atmosphere there and wish to see it enhanced. There were many ideas for the repurposing, animation, and exploitation of the Grange Yard. Most ideas centred on how to make it a vibrant space. There were also ideas for educational opportunities. Some interesting suggestions included hostel accommodation and a restaurant establishment using local produce. There was also a nice suggestion that the volunteers from the Walled Garden could raise funds by selling plants they propagate in a retail space.

There is a very clear demand to improve both the café and visitor facilities at the Grange Yard.

2. The Walled Garden and Bothy

There was a generally positive reception to the proposals for the developments with the Bothy Yard. Excitement (and some queries) about the yard being returned to a working environment. The greenhouses are clearly valued dearly and with some reminiscences of former times and nice ideas about repurposing. There are quite a few points about facilities for visitors – from tea rooms to toilets and enhanced disabled access. There is an appeal to acknowledge and encourage the role of volunteers in the life of the arboretum.

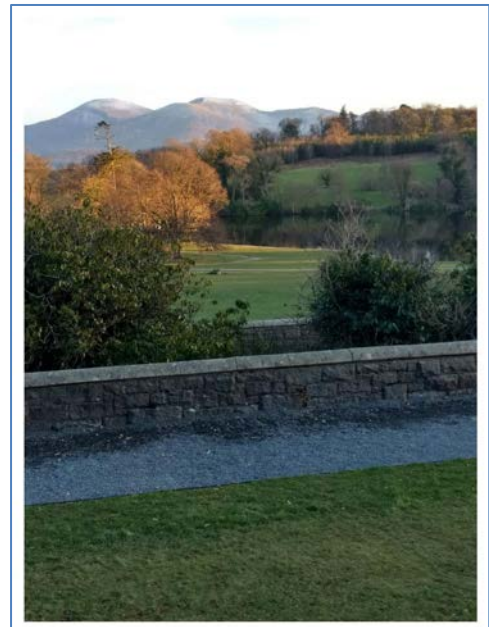
Insights on Grange Yard

Educational visits

Modern technology bringing back old traditions to life
Education centre to demonstrate old skills - farrier etc.
displays of tools, machinery, animals information
Biodiversity education centre
Education Centre – Biodiversity environment etc.

Improve café – extend opening hours

Current catering facilities very poor
Café probably needs to be in a bigger unit (or is it on two floors)
Use covered seating – picnic benches with large / squared canopy picnic area – in courtyard 1 or 2
Fire pits / burners – buy wood on way in and burn it beside your picnic table
Look up Norwegian café (in Aviemore) big glass fronted room to watch birds etc.
Musicians poetry evenings in outside café seating area.
Event space could be larger
Cover / canopy



One-Off Events and Animation

Pop up farmers markets
Craft workshops in Grange? Artists' studios?
Buskers / street performers in this area near café or in larger space?
Rare breeds / petting zoo
Event –space – Christmas / Halloween / Easter etc.
Using Grange area for concerts and events (eg weddings)
At the Grange, is there anywhere to have a wedding or reception – even bringing outside caterers?
That type of function? Champagne reception?
Lets have a brewery – beer festival – speak to Whitewater
Introduction of a working forge in Grange area.
Event space e.g. Barbeques for Castlewellan Show?
Put some of Castlewellan show in these buildings

Long term Tenants

Potential office space – compatible businesses
Function room for hire
Meeting centre of groups and talks
Craft workshops / Community Arts Space - workshops for artists
Possible retail / nursery on top floor in courtyard 2, income for volunteer group – sell cuttings etc.
Top-quality restaurant potential – young trainees – living off the land

Improving Visitor Facilities

Improve toilet and showers
First Aid Stations
Outdoor recreational facilities?
Bike Racks?
Nicest part of park is Grange yard etc. so Life would prefer to keep its trailers elsewhere.
Grange – agree no vehicular access to the Grange courtyard

Possibility for accommodation – hostel?
Youth hostel provision for ramblers / hikers in Courtyard 2 area instead of storage / office space (esp if Forest Service is moving)
Facilities for youth sites / camping and caravanning not fit for purpose – non- existent

Inspiration from other places?

Waterfront Greenway
Kilmacthomas
Tented area with bike hire like at Scarva? Scarva Tearooms?
As in Kylemore Abbey / Letterfrack

Life – where would they be? The storage area for them?
Forestry gone altogether?
Stone store from Environment and Heritage Agency are in the big Grange store?
Council would take over Grange – no tractors / forest service vehicles

Insights on Bothy Yard and Walled Garden

Like plans for gates (Butterfly and new gate at front)
The ideas for refurbishing the bothy yard are very good and would be an asset
Everyone likes the plan on the map.

One group's priorities:

1. Gardeners office
2. Bothy house for classroom
3. Toilets in bothy yard
4. Sole surviving glasshouse
5. Cold frames and propagation house

Another group's priorities:

1. Essential wet weather experience in glass houses – pop up x 3
2. Enlarge and enhance toilet facilities
3. Disabled parking / Electric vehicle recharge
4. Appropriate seating in Bothy Yard etc.

Years ago there was small birds in the glass house this would be a great attraction.
Glasshouses used to be a sort of aviary – excellent! – Was that relic of the Annesleys?
With correct facilities, the glasshouse could operate as a tearoom

The Friends of the Arboretum / Glasshouses are grassroots community groups and this needs to go on – “a park for the people”.

Working area – what does this mean? Is it a community venture, what is the proposal? Who is going to use it? Operate it?

Apprenticeships – retired people volunteering

Introduction of animals to the bothy yard area

Could bits be hired e.g. For parties or private events?

Pop up event space, with bothy house, hireable for events? Poetry readings/ workshops? Wedding parties? (e.g. Irish Garden Plant Society visiting in May 2)

Disabled car park to be retained and considerably improved?

Access for disabled to terrace to be on left hand side of steps

Electric vehicles need to be really available to get to far off bits of the site e.g. The glasshouse area.

Works to arboretum – agree with suggestion to thin back trees to return to original aesthetic.

Quiz in gardens on names of trees etc. Adventure games etc. Wildlife quizzes

Viewing opportunities near the glasshouse are limited as the trees are too high.

Can we keep entrance to wall garden as it is please? Best view and approach – good place for an interpretation centre.

Some Additional Points that were collected on the night

These recommendations and insights connect with the themes of the consultation but are sufficiently off topic to allow them to be categorised as additional insights. They connect with the wider work being carried out by the consultants and are worthy of consideration.

Cyclists and horses – need better management of agreed junctions – cyclists bypassing chicanes etc designed to slow them down

Planting native species favoured trees in balance with exotic and timber trees

General point – would entrance fees / annual pass income be reinvested in park or go into a central funding pot and be lost to the park

Potential pollution to lake with lakeside car park

Control at entrance after 11pm to control and eliminate anti-social behaviour throughout the night

PS. Installation of electric vehicle charge point open to public

Caravan site – allocation of spaces, hedging surrounds. Very very poor facilities

Horse drawn jaunting cars for internal transport not just electric vehicles?

Playpark (Adventure) – near Grange (Rangers Hut) (will only be a pedestrian area therefore not same danger from road as now)

Have a train / tram up to Arboretum instead of electric vehicle – even horse and carriage (as in Annesley times?)

Important to display names of trees in arboretum

Possibility of including a children's' play park and other child friendly activities

Café up at maze where the view is

People off cruise ships and from Belfast want to come on coaches to see the National Arboretum – shuttles to it?

Keen to see income generated by the Park reinvested.