

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 26 June 2025 at 5.00pm in Downshire Chamber

In the Chair: Councillor P Campbell

In attendance in Chamber:

Councillor T Andrews
Councillor C Enright
Councillor H Reilly

Councillor W Clarke
Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor G Sharvin

In attendance via Teams:

Councillor C Bowsie
Councillor D McAteer
Councillor M Rice

Councillor K Feehan
Councillor S O'Hare

Officials In attendance in Chamber:

Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Mrs F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance:

NI Water

Ms Rebecca Allen, Catchment Liaison Officer

Mourne Heritage Trust

Mr Martin Carey, Chief Executive

NI Fire & Rescue Service

Mr Alistair McConville, District Commander, Downpatrick
Mr Dermot Rooney, Area Commander Southern Area

National Trust

Mr James Fisher, Lead Mountain Ranger, Murlough & The Mournes

Mr Linus Voksepp, Wildfire Recovery Ranger

Also in attendance Via Teams:

NI Environment Agency

Mr Colum McDaid, Wildfire Officer

SC/004/2025

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Byrne, Devlin, Galbraith, Harte and Mathers.

SC/005/2025

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Clarke declared an interest as an employee of the Mourne Heritage Trust.

The Chairperson welcomed the delegations and invited each of them to make their presentations.

SC/006/2025

NI FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE (NIFRS)

Mr Rooney presented a PowerPoint overview of the detail regarding the NIFRS response to recent incidents, a copy of which is appended to these minutes. He spoke of the resourcing requirements and plans in the run up to the Wildfire Season, noting the acquisition of new wildfire equipment on frontline appliances alongside the renewal of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for all personnel. He also spoke of ongoing partnership working with organisations such as The Mourne Heritage Trust, The Forest Service and NI Water in preparation for and management of wildfires. He stated that while scheduled preparation meetings did not take place this year due to storm Éowyn and the ensuing damage, this had no adverse effect on the response of all statutory bodies to the recent wildfires.

Mr Rooney also commended the collaboration of numerous partners who all played a valuable part during the recent wildfires, reminding those present that there was still considerable remnants of damage from the recent storms followed by a long period of dry weather which exacerbated the wildfires.

Mr Rooney also spoke of community engagement as an effective preventative measure regarding wildfires but stressed that while NIFRS did strive to have a visible presence in potential hot spot areas, their resource was always prioritised to cover risk to life.

SC/007/2025

THE NATIONAL TRUST

Mr Fisher utilised a power point presentation to highlight images of fire damage within the Mournes and also to the considerable recorded data with regard to habitat regrowth and controlled grazing within the Mournes. (Copy appended to the minutes)

Mr Fisher noted that the Mournes were designated both a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and an Area of Specific Scientific Interest (ASSI) and provided an overview of the work that the National Trust had carried out since the devastating wildfires of 2021 where almost a third of their property within the Mournes had been damaged.

Mr Fisher further detailed the plans to help reduce the risk of wildfire, notably the plans to re-wet areas of peatland and the controlled grazing of both sheep and cattle to help manage shrubbery on lower lands to reduce the fire risk. He also detailed the engagement with outdoor event organisers to help plan routes for participants away from certain areas of the Mournes to assist in wildlife and habitat recovery.

Mr Fisher outlined that the National Trust were the leading partner as part of the Forever Mournes alongside the Mourne Heritage Trust, NI Water, the Woodland Trust with Council as an observing party with the aim of working together to enhance cooperation between strategic partners to protect the special landscape.

Councillor Rice joined the meeting during the above presentation – 5.28pm

SC/008/2025

NI WATER

Ms Allen outlined that NI Water owned some 9,000 acres within the Mourne Wall and had their own challenges to oversee, and their main issue was to provide clean drinking water, with Silent Valley being the main strategic catchment for drinking water.

Ms Allen noted that the fires in April that had damaged around 1700 acres around Silent Valley, however she wished to stress that although damage was evident to habitats and foliage the incident did not have any adverse effect on the quality of the drinking water available. She advised that although water run-off into the water courses and reservoirs would likely contain burn damaged foliage, she stressed that treatment works were designed to deal with anything. She caveated this by advising that there may, in time, be additional costs that would arise in the future from this.

Ms Allen advised that NI Water took their responsibility as land owners seriously, confirming that they were not permitted to allow the degradation of designated areas and that NI Water had been working with the Mourne Heritage Trust for some time regarding land management and path restoration. She expressed her opinion that controlled burns were one option with regard to fire preventions but stressed that she was not an expert and that they required a lot of groundwork to prevent them burning out of control. She confirmed that NI Water were also engaging as part of the Forever Mournes group to develop a recovery plan following the most recent fires to help build resilience while waiting on the official NI Wildfire Strategy from the Department.

SC/009/2025

THE MOURNE HERITAGE TRUST

Mr Carey echoed Mr Rooney's comments regarding recent storm damage, further stressing the impact of the previous storm Darragh before Christmas 2024 as the largest storm in terms of damage. He outlined that following storm Darragh, the trails that the Mourne Heritage Trust maintained on behalf of Council had suffered significant damage and that the subsequent impact of storm Éowyn was catastrophic with long lasting implications as they were still clearing damage from this. He confirmed that the recent fires were the third major incident within a five-month period, noting the detrimental impact this had on resource availability.

Mr Carey commended his team for their ability to be on call throughout the recent fires to assist with the delivery of specialist kit to NIFRS such as all terrain vehicles. He confirmed that they also had a grazing ranger on site during the incidents to guide fire crews on the ground as someone familiar with the terrain. He advised that the grazing ranger were employed with funds provided by NI Water.

Mr Carey also noted that the scope of the work of the Mourne Heritage Trust had expanded in relation to maintenance and expansion of trails and as a result of this, they were unable to provide more assistance to NIFRS and landowners within the Mournes with regard to land maintenance and fire prevention. He stressed that Council's contribution to the Mourne Heritage Trust had not increased since 2015 while NIEA's contributions had more than doubled in that time. He stressed that more funding was required to enable them to provide services such as Engagement Ranger services, which acted as a preventative measure and providing education on the ground with those using the Mournes.

Mr Carey also stressed that with the impact of climate change since 2012, the science with regard the NI Wildfire Strategy would need validated regarding the best fire management plan. He further stressed the importance of the NI Wildfire Strategy as all agencies were operating within a vacuum until such time as a framework document was created to work from.

Mr Carey ended by appealing to Members and Council to reconsider their role within the wider management of the Mourne and the funding allocation to the Mourne Heritage Trust as the funding allocation at present was fully utilised and currently subsidised from their own charitable reserves which was solely focused on trail management.

SC/010/2025

NI ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Mr McDaid outlined the support steps that had been put in place since Covid with regard to pre fire season actions, noting that in agreement with NIFRS, four wildfire ATVs has been located in strategic positions with an open use to all emergency personnel. He further outlined the plans to have an onsite presence to advise NIFRS and other strategic partners with regard to ecological areas of importance during a fire season.

Mr McDaid confirmed that the NI Wildfire Strategy was currently undergoing its final draft revision and would be before the Minister within the coming days. He also noted his disappointment that there had been no response to the tender regarding wildfire prevention but outlined the steps that had been taken following feedback from those that had expressed an interest but had not submitted a response. He advised that a new tender process was underway and expressed his hope that the amendments made would encourage a response, with the scope of the tender to include the following:

- Both Mourne specific, but also including some other areas with regard to wildfire prevention
- To deliver 3 wildfire management plans to include a new / updated wildfire management plan for the Eastern Mourne.
- Undertake a scoping exercise across the Western Mourne with regard to wildfire prevention and management
- Undertake research across the Mourne to consider the cause and driver of wildfire
- To work in partnership with NIFRS colleagues with consideration given to fuel modelling and information gathering relating to habitat type

Mr McDaid also advised Members that NIEA was providing support to the Mourne Heritage Trust through grant aid funding to allow for the ongoing maintenance of the Eastern Mourne Wildfire Project that was in place, and the intention for the Forever Mourne partnership to deliver on the new management plan when it was available.

Following the presentations the Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members present.

- Members thanked the delegations for the information presented and the work that had been done to date regarding wildfire prevention.
- Was there a clear timeline for the NI Wildfire Strategy to be signed off by the Minister?
- When the NIFRS were unable to be present onsite in hotspot areas in a preventative stance, what other partnership agencies were available to undertake that role?

- Members noted their disappointment at the lack of response for the wildfire management tender and queried whether the amendments would result in a successful tender.
- How would controlled burns be managed by landowners and how could they be integrated into the wider management plan?
- Members commended the work of the Engagement Ranger and queried how this role could be continued.
- What was an acceptable level of funding that would result in the retention of the Engagement Ranger service?
- The Mourne Heritage Trust fire plan was originally drafted in 2012, what would the cost of a refresh and completion of an updated plan be?
- When was the last time a controlled burn had been carried out on the Mournes?
- NI Water were commended for the introduction of a barbeque ban within Silent Valley, but Members stressed that this should be extended across the Mournes.
- Forever Mournes were encouraged to work with the farming community to encourage cohesive working with regard to land management and fire prevention.
- The Engagement Ranger Service was commended for their preventative role and those present were encouraged to share resources as much as possible to maintain the service.
- Councillor Clarke suggested that an app could be developed for smart phones to report high risk activity as there were times when it was difficult to get through to the 101 number.
- Could the recent fires have been better controlled if the NIFRS had access to a helicopter?
- Members stated that farmers had approached them to raise concerns with regard to the impact of the management techniques that had been forced upon them as a large contributor to the increased wildfire events.
- Engagement and co-operation between the Forever Mournes partners and local farmers was encouraged, especially following the publication of the NI Wildfire Strategy.

The delegations responded as follows:

- The NI Wildfire Strategy Framework document would be finalised in the coming weeks; however, Mr McDaid was unable to give a definitive timeline but advised that the Minister was requesting the document as soon as possible.
- The tender process feedback outlined the concerns that had been raised, with Mr McDaid confirming that they were in regard to the management of the tender and not the tender outputs.
- Mr McDaid confirmed that work had been undertaken with procurement to ensure that the feedback received with regard to the management aspects of the tender were taken on board prior to the new tender process getting underway.
- Mr Rooney from NIFRS advised that they were reliant on PSNI colleagues and the public to raise any concerns with regard to fire, advising that NIFRS would prefer to be called to a smaller fire before it got out of control.
- Ms Allen advised that she was not an expert with regard to controlled burns but outlined how she believed that a trial of introducing controlled burns in areas where vegetation appeared out of control could prevent a fire jumping.
- Controlled burns should only be carried out in conjunction with the landowner and strategic partners to prevent the burn getting out of control as they required significant planning and appropriate training.

- The Engagement Ranger Service a strategic preventative tool and it was difficult to put a limit on the funding that would be required.
- Landscape management was notoriously underfunded however any increase in funding from Council would be spent on wildfire management and visitor engagement.
- A helicopter was one tool for fighting fires, but its deployment was not always appropriate. They had been utilised in the past in partnership with other organisations however the decision was not one taken lightly as it was not always the best resource.
- A helicopter had been considered as part of the recent fire management; however, it was discounted when considered alongside all other actions that were being taken to manage the fires.

During the discussions, Councillor Sharvin noted the significant level of devastation following the recent wildfires and proposed that the Economy, Regeneration & Tourism Committee look at the SLA that was currently in place with the Mourne Heritage Trust to consider whether there were any opportunities that may exist to provide further support. This was seconded by Councillor Andrews.

Mr Mallon advised that the SLA that was in place had been agreed through the rate setting process and would be reconsidered for the 2026/27 rate setting process.

Following a request for clarity from Councillor Hanlon, Councillor Sharvin amended his proposal to reflect the mid financial year position of Council and proposed that officers should engage with the Mourne Heritage Trust to consider ways that Council could develop the partnership, what could be done in year, and how the 2026/27 SLA could reflect the required needs.

Mr Mallon confirmed that he would engage with and discuss options with the Mourne Heritage Trust to scope out positive ways to move forward.

Councillor Campbell clarified that everyone present was in agreement with the proposal.

Members wished Mr Carey well on his upcoming retirement, noting that he would be sorely missed.

AGREED

On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Andrews, it was agreed that officers engage and discuss options with the Mourne Heritage Trust to scope out positive ways to move forward in relation to funding allocation.

Councillor O'Hare left the meeting during the above discussions - 6.21pm

Councillors Enright and Feehan left the meeting during the above discussions – 6.22pm

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 6.23pm.

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 7 July 2025.

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive



**Northern Ireland
Fire & Rescue Service**

WE ARE NIFRS

Safer Together



Area Commander Dermot Rooney

Safer Together

1



Pre Wildfire Season

NIFRS Resourcing

- > New wildfire equipment for all frontline appliances
- > Update of wildfire PPE for all personnel
- > Increased number of Specialist WFOs and equipment


Partnership Working

- > Pre-season meetings and engagement with; Mourne Heritage Trust, National Trust, NIEA, NI Water, Forest Service, land owners and managers.

2 | NMDDC Wildfire Engagement

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NIFRS Response

NIFRS Incidents 3 April – 10 April 2025

- > NIFRS received 2,014 emergency calls
- > Attended 1,112 incidents
- > 296 of these being wildfire related incidents


NMDDC Incidents 1 March - 13 April 2025

- > 58 fires in the Mourne's involving gorse, grass, whins/gorse etc.
- > 15 of these were declared wildfires.

3 | NMDDC Wildfire Engagement

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3



Major Incident Response


NIFRS Response

- > 5 & 6 April 2025 – Major Incident declared at Sandbank / Newtown Road
- > Forest, gorse, heather and grass fire significantly impacted by gusts of over 40mph
- > Occupants evacuated due to significant risk posed
- > NIFRS intervention ensured dwellings and other buildings were protected.

4 | NMDDC Wildfire Engagement

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4



Collaborative Response

- > Forest Service, Skywatch, PSNI and other partners provided invaluable support to NIFRS operations during this incident.
- > Numerous other Government bodies, NGOs and charities supported NIFRS over the extended period of mid March to mid April.
- > Extended dry conditions and remnants of Storm Eowyn impacted all responders.

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Post Wildfire Season

NIFRS

- > NIFRS continues to invest in fleet, new wildfire equipment and PPE
- > Incidents debriefs ensured organisational learning.

Partnership Working

- > End of season engagement with; Mourne Heritage Trust, National Trust, NIEA, NI Water, Forest Service, PSNI, Skywatch

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Community Engagement


- NIFRS continue to engage with wider public with it's Countryside Safety campaign both pre and during the season
- Due to higher concentration of visitors during summer, various sites will be engaged with by local crews



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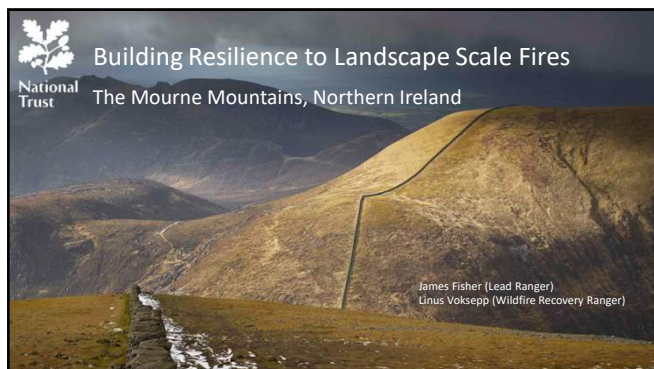
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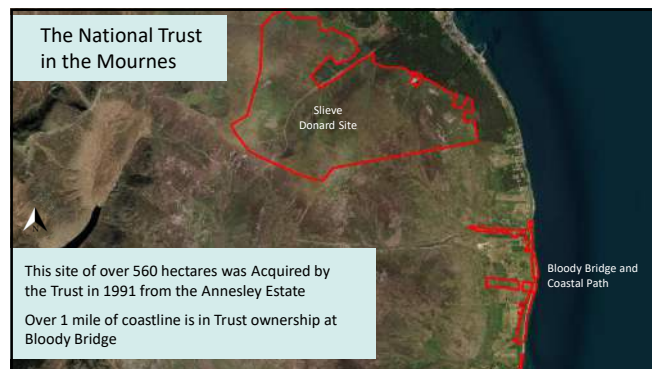
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8



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Designations

The Mourne Mountains are designated as:

- SAC
- ASSI
- AONB

(and most recently as a UNESCO geopark)

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Habitats of European importance are protected under Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive as SAC's.

Annex 1 habitats present include:

- European dry heath
- Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*
- Active blanket bog
- Alpine & Boreal heath
- Siliceous Alpine and boreal grassland
- siliceous scree of the montane to snow level

Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)

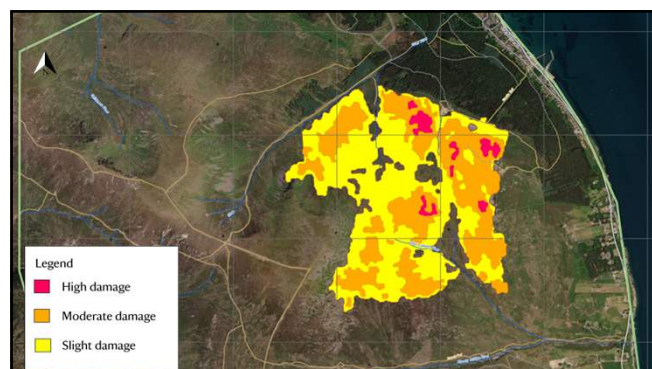
National Designation implemented by NIEA (Northern Ireland Environmental Agency).

Protected by the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002.

Habitats of importance:

- Wet and dry heath
- Montane heath
- Blanket bog
- Inland rock
- Oligotrophic lakes
- Rivers
- The geological series

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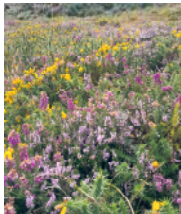
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Monitoring Landscape Scale Fire Recovery

Since the summer of 2021 we have been monitoring all (15) Condition Assessment plots within the area impacted by fire.

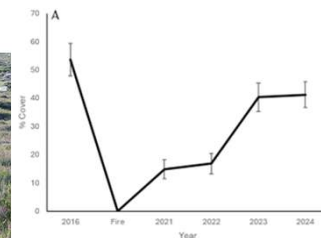


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Dwarf Shrub Cover

The % cover of dwarf shrub has recovered well over the last 3 growing seasons since the wildfire (pre-fire mean cover 53%, current mean cover 40%)

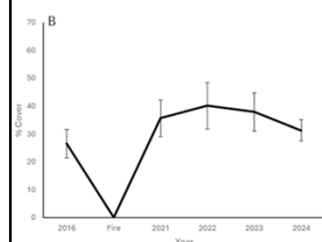
Error bars for all graphs are based on Standard Error of the Mean (SEM).



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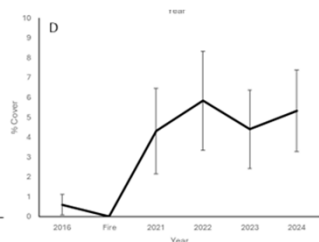
Grass cover

Graminoid cover recovered very quickly following the wildfire and surpassed its previous mean cover, utilising bare ground now unoccupied by dwarf shrub. In 2023 a slight decrease in graminoid cover was recorded.



Purple-moor Grass

Molinia cover increased following the fire however in 2023 a decline in cover was recorded.



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Managing Grazing Pressure

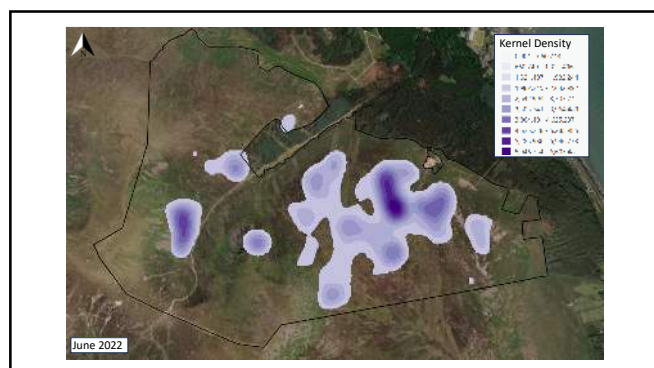
Overgrazing is a well-known problem within the Eastern Mourne SAC, having being noted during all previous Condition Assessment Reports.

With much of the property being burned in 2021 the numbers of sheep the tenant farmer could graze on the property was reduced from 800 to 400.

A portion of the flock has been GPS collared since 2021, this data allowing the farmer to track his flock, and allows us to determine the grazing patterns of the flock.



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Monitoring

'You can't manage what you don't measure'

Monitoring carried out across the proposed grazing area.

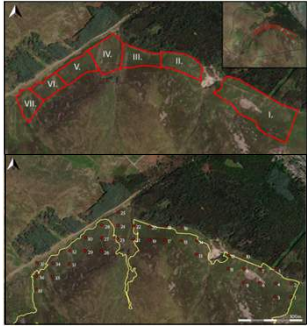
Utilising NIEA Condition Assessment methodology.

With primary additional measure of graminoid height.

All plots surveyed prior to grazing.

Grazing impacts monitored at times of movement and at the end of each month (to gain an understanding of grazing impacts of all grazing species on this area).

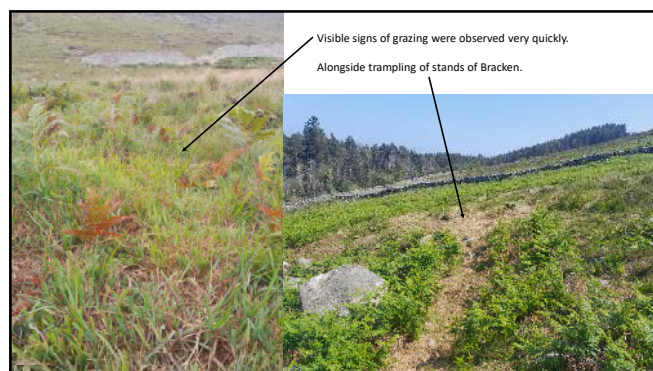
Fixed point photography across the grazing area.



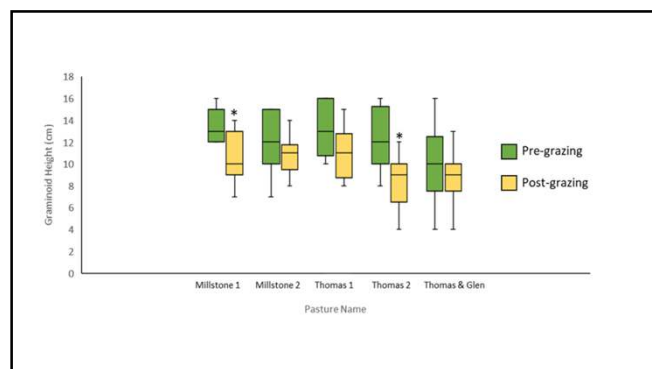
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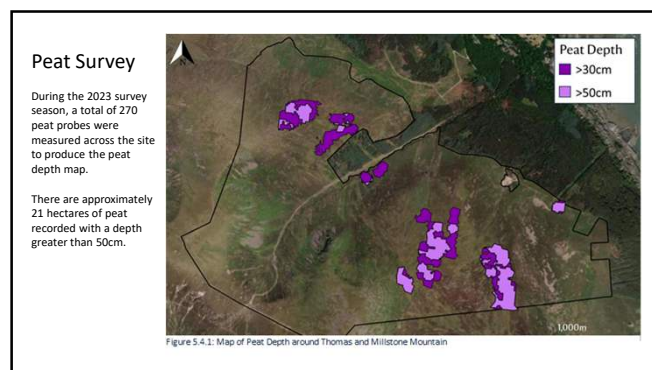
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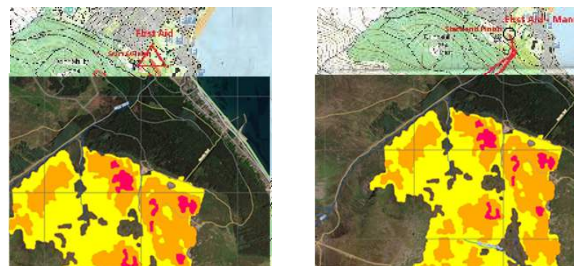


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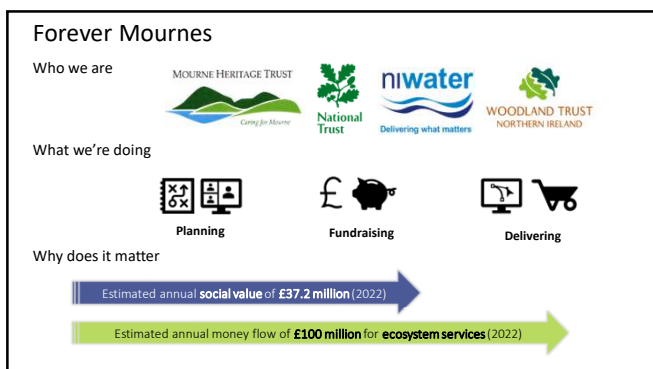


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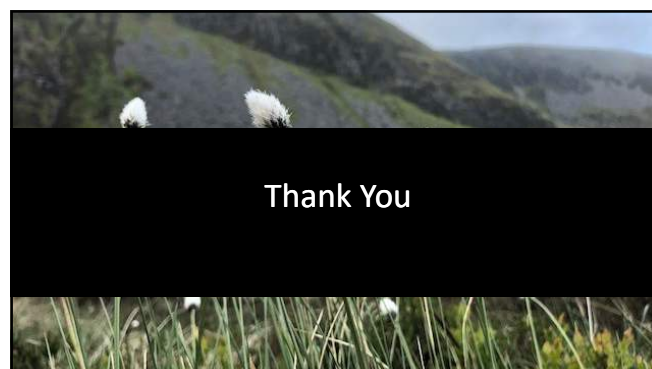
Engagement with Outdoor Event Organisers



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