



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Parks and Leisure Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Mountain Biking
<b>Date:</b>	15 April 2010
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Anne Reid, Countryside Officer

### Relevant Background Information

The Committee is reminded that in recent years it has received a number of reports regarding mountain biking in parks; the problems and issues associated with this activity and possible ways of addressing the problems. A brief review of these reports is outlined below.

The Committee received a report on 10 April 2008 which highlighted that:

- mountain biking is an increasingly popular sport,
- there are currently no off-road facilities in Belfast, a situation that has contributed to unauthorised trails being established by the bikers themselves at Cave Hill Country Park, Barnett Demesne and Mary Peters Track.
- the Council's response up to that time had been to remove potentially dangerous trails and jumps.

The report further brought to the committee's attention the possibility of funding from the Sports Lottery to build a purpose designed down-hill mountain biking facility; at that time it was suggested that the facility be located at Cave Hill.

However, following consultation with the Countryside Activities and Access Network (CAAN) and local residents represented through the Cave Hill Conservation Group it was concluded that a facility at that location would attract unsustainable numbers of mountain bikers to the area and cause nuisance and possible risk to other park users such as walkers.

Following the decision of the Committee, in August 2008 a report was commissioned from a professional off-road cycling trail designer, Dafydd Davis. Following site visits, it was concluded that the existing path system at Cave Hill could not accommodate sustainable dual use for both mountain bikers and

pedestrians and that conflict between users would be a continuing problem. It was recommended in the report that Mary Peters Track/Barnett Demesne would be a more suitable option for a purpose built off-road biking facility.

A further report on mountain biking was again brought to the Committee's attention on 14 May 2009, this report

- reinforced the growing popularity of the sport and the continued lack of authorised facilities;
- reminded Members of the main issues around the continuing unauthorised construction of mountain bike jumps and trails in the parks mentioned above and the associated costs and risks; and
- informed Members that officers had been liaising closely with those involved in mountain biking making them aware of the issues, and as a result there had been a significant reduction in the unauthorised use of Cave Hill Country Park.

At that meeting it was agreed that officers should further explore the option of creating a purpose built biking trail. It was agreed that the preferred location would be at Mary Peters Track/Barnett Demesne. The facility would include a jump and skills area that would meet local need and reduce the amount of unsanctioned jumps being built, both in the South and the North of the city.

In the intervening period since the report the number of people participating in mountain biking has continued to increase, and the problems have re-emerged at Cave Hill in particular. This is illustrated by the number of vehicles with specially fitted bike carriers on site in the evenings and at weekends and by feedback from other park users.

Cave Hill Country Park is a very important recreation resource for the people of the city of Belfast, but it is also clear that mountain bikers are having significant impacts on the site and the people who use it and that this is to some extent devaluing the site for the majority of users.

The conflict of interest between the mountain bikers and other park users is due to:

- near misses
- the speed at which the bikers travel
- damage to paths and the forest floor
- the building of dangerous jumps which other children not involved in the sport might be tempted to try out
- cutting of fences for easier access
- the attitude of some bikers towards other park users

Due to the potential risk to the public from the bikers and upon receipt of numerous complaints, officers have sought to engage continually with the bikers, looking for an accommodation that would be to everyone's benefit. Signs displaying the current bye-laws have been displayed at all entrances. Park rangers have tried to be on site as often as possible, but due to having to deal

with issues across North Belfast this resource is stretched. Meanwhile the bikers have taken ownership of the hill.

## **Key Issues**

The main issues for the Council can be summarised as follows:

- Mountain biking is now an official Olympic Sport, and is becoming increasingly popular within the Belfast area.
- There is a lack of provision of suitable authorised facilities;
- Unauthorised trails continue to be constructed by bikers at both Cave Hill Country Park and at Mary Peters Track and Barnett Demesne.
- Officers have been meeting regularly with local bikers and clubs to try and proactively discourage the building of unauthorised trails. This has resulted in a reduction in the trails being built at Mary Peters, but unfortunately at Cave Hill, possibly due to the scale of the site, the unauthorised construction and use has continued and in some areas is worse than before.
- There is no authorised official governing body for the sport in NI which makes consultation and engagement difficult and therefore reaching an agreed position is also difficult.
- Officers have also been addressing local need and trying to accommodate organised events within the parks where ever possible and very successful events have been held at Sir Thomas & Lady Dixon Park and Ormeau Park.

It is proposed to take steps to address the issues created by mountain biking with a two fold approach:

1. Initiating steps to tackle the problems at Cave Hill and to deter mountain bikers from using this park
2. Working with external partners to explore the possibilities of providing a purpose built off-road biking facility in Barnett Demesne/Mary Peters Track.

Officers have been working with the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), which has a remit for providing countryside recreation such as mountain biking. CAAN has submitted an application for funding to develop a mountain bike trail to the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP). In line with the previous off-road cycling report (2008) their preferred site for this would be Barnett Demesne/Mary Peters. They have applied for approximately £221,000 and would hope to hear by the end of March 2010 whether they have been successful. The cost of providing a mountain biking facility however would be greater than this, and additional funding is being sought via the BIFFA Landfill Communities Fund and Belfast City Council Capital Fund which would be subject to the Council's normal approval processes for capital schemes. There have been approximately 230 letters of support from mountain bikers, all over Ireland, in support of this project.

The development of such a facility would

- help to meet a growing demand, not only among young people but users of a wide age range,
- attract 'out-of-state' users
- enhance the value of the Mary Peters Track/Barnett Demesne property
- link in with the Lagan Valley Regional Park's Management Plan
- link with Belfast Activity Centre and Belfast Urban Sports in their Sports Development Programme and youth programmes
- help to alleviate the problem of unauthorised jumps and mountain biking courses being built in our parks in south Belfast, and would hopefully reduce the unauthorised use of Cave Hill Country park. However, it would need to go hand in hand with other measures listed below to deter mountain biking on Cave Hill

Any design would have to comply with any current management plans for the sites, and would be sited and constructed in such a way as not to conflict with other users of the park or the biodiversity within the area.

The facility would also be designed for low maintenance, along the lines of the family oriented mountain biking/cycle track at Craigavon.

Members are asked to note that this project is all subject to being able to attract the necessary funding.

## **Resource Implications**

### Financial

The total estimated cost of a purpose designed and built mountain biking course is approximately £340,000.00.

This would be met from various sources (all figures are approximate)

NI Rural Development Programme	£221,000
Landfill Communities Fund	£48,000
Belfast City Council, Capital Fund	£71,000

The annual maintenance for such a project would include spraying, cutting back, strimming and recording inspections. During the winter there will also be work on path maintenance including stoning etc. Based on the Craigavon it is estimated that this would be in the region of £8,000.

### Human Resources

Tackling unauthorised use would require a dedicated staff presence, this would cost in the region of £16,500 p.a.; alternatively staff could be relocated from other sites. This option would need to be explored further.

### Asset and Other Implications

A reduction in the use of Cave Hill by mountain bikers would improve the

physical conditions in the park and also make it more attractive to other users, hence increasing its inherent value to residents and tourists

A dedicated trail system would enhance provision in the city and would support the promotion of Mary Peters Track/Barnett Demesne. It would encourage mountain bikers into Belfast, in particular from across the province and from the mainland, therefore adding to the economy of the area.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that

- Members note the report;
- The Committee agree in principle to support the application by CAAN's application;
- Authorise officers to continue to work in partnership with CAAN;
- Support the forwarding of the proposal to the Asset Management Group for inclusion on the list of potential capital schemes, subject to Gates;
- Agree to deploying extra resources to enforce the bye-laws at CHCP. This would include employing Park Rangers at the weekends and summer evenings.

### **Decision Tracking**

A further report will be brought by the Director of Parks and Leisure in respect of this matter no later than September 2010.

### **Key to Abbreviations**

CHCP – Cave Hill Country Park  
CAAN – Countryside Access and Activities Forum  
NIRD – Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme

### **Documents Attached**

None.