Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	**Update on the System for Observing Play & Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) Project.**
Date:	5 December 2013
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks & Leisure
Contact Officer:	Caroline Wilson, Neighbourhood and Development Manager Karen Anderson-Gillespie, Policy and Business Development Officer

1	**Relevant Background Information**
	Officers have been working in partnership with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to pilot the use of the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC), approved by Committee in June 2013. This report will provide Members with an overview and update of the SOPARC technique, present data collected from Phase 1 and outline the next steps of the SOPARC project. Using the SOPARC technique (developed by University of California), the department will be able to effectively measure levels of usage and activity in the council parks and open spaces. This will help us to evidence the value that outdoor leisure has for the people of Belfast and how it can contribute to the achievement of local outcomes such as improved health.

2	**Key Issues**
	What is the SOPARC technique? As part of the SOPARC technique an observation survey is carried out. It records the number and characteristics of individuals in an open space in a systematic way. The SOPARC technique requires an observation survey to be carried out in each site for up to 1 week. Each day a survey is conducted 4 times (i.e. 7.30am, 12.30pm, 3.30pm and 7.30pm). The SOPARC technique has been successfully tried and tested by QUB to observe levels of physical activity pre construction of the Connswater Community Greenway (CCG) and will be repeated following completion. **Why evaluate the usage of parks?** As well as measuring value for money, performance and outcomes, by collecting this data we can: • Inform the delivery, marketing and promotion of programmes and

activities
- Contribute to community involvement criterion of Green Flag management plans
- Enable effective resource allocation (i.e antisocial behaviour (ASB), litter and dog fouling)
- Inform local area working and planning.

The SOPARC implementation: 3 phase approach
A 3 phase approach is currently being implemented across the city:

Phase 1: Grove Playing Fields Pilot (June – October 2013).
Grove Playing Fields was chosen as the pilot for Phase 1. This was identified as appropriate for the following reasons:
- It is a Green Flag accredited park (reflective of those parks planned to take part in Phase 2 and 3); and
- It provided the perfect test bed with a variety of facilities including paths, football pitches, outdoor gyms, a cricket pitch, children's playground and dog enclosure.

The surveys carried out at Grove Playing Fields were conducted over 1 week by 4 Park Wardens from Team North. The Wardens were provided with training from QUB to undertake the SOPARC survey.

A detailed analysis including headline figures can be found in Appendix 1. In brief, over the course of the week:
- a total of **805 people** were observed using the park = average of **29 users per hour**.
- **75% of users were male and 25% female**.
- The **largest group of users were adults** who accounted for 70% of those observed in the park. The **smallest user group represented were seniors** who accounted for just 3%.
- 55% of those in the park were engaged in walking activities, 21% engaged in vigorous activities and the remainder sedentary.
- **Pitches were used the most** (52% of users), followed by paths with 29% usage. People used the dog enclosure the least representing 3%.
- **Saturday was the busiest day** of the week accounting for 21% of weekly usage. Friday was the least busy day of the week accounting for just 6%. Differences in uses across the time of day were also observed.
- The busiest time of day was the evening (**54% of total usage**) and morning was the least busy time of day accounting for 7% of total usage.

The enthusiasm and commitment shown by the Parks Wardens who took part was reflected in the high quality and robust data collected. Likewise, the Friends' group have also shown great interest in the pilot.

Phase 2: City-wide pilot (December 2013 – March 2015).
It is proposed that Phase 2 is rolled out to 4 Green Flag standard parks, one from each area of the city. The parks proposed are:
- *Area North*: Waterworks Park;
- *Area South*: Botanic Gardens;
- *Area East:* Knocknagoney Linear Park; and
- *Area West:* Falls Park.

These parks have been proposed based on the following criterion:
- They are either a city or a district park;
- Green Flag standard; and
- Have a variety of facilities.

Orangefield Park and Victoria Park are already being surveyed as part of the CCG development.

The schedule of quarterly SOPARC data collection and analysis can be carried out:
- Quarter 1 (April – June) w/c 12 May 2014.
- Quarter 2 (July – September) w/c 11 August 2014.
- Quarter 3 (October – December) w/c 10 November 2014.
- Quarter 4 (January – March) w/c 9 February 2015.

Phase 3: Green Flag parks project (January 2015 – March 2016)
Following the successful implementation of Phase 2 above the proposal is to mainstream across all the Green Flag accredited parks across the city.

3	**Resource Implications**
	Financial Provision has been made to acquire a number of android based tablets for use as part of Phase 2 of the SOPARC project. Human Resources Ongoing officer time. Asset and Other Implications None

4	**Equality and Good Relations Considerations**
	None

5	**Recommendations**
	Members are asked to note the content of the report, including the proposed pilots for Phase 2 and the ongoing development of the SOPARC project.

6	**Decision Tracking**
	An update will be provided for members in August 2014.

7	**Key to Abbreviations**
	QUB – Queens University Belfast SOPARC – System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities ASB – Antisocial behaviour CCG – Connswater Community Greenway PBDU – Policy and Business Development Unit

8	**Documents Attached**
	Appendix 1: SOPARC Pilot Summary Report