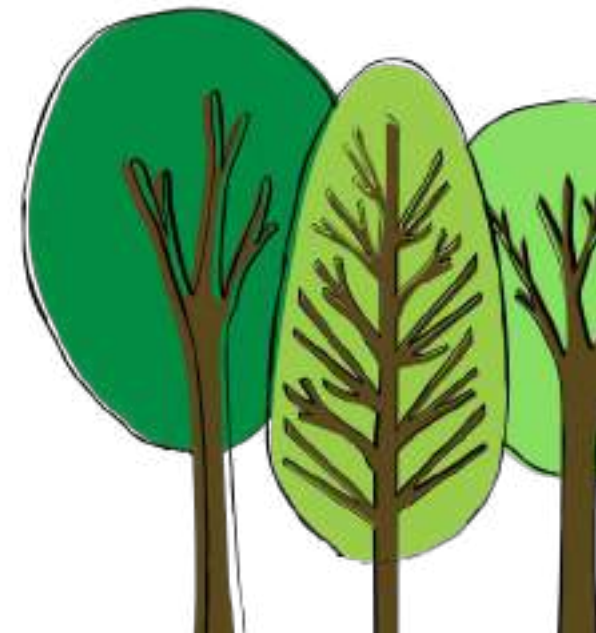


Outdoor Recreation: People, Nature and Health

March 2021



Introduction

Background

Outdoor recreation plays a vital role in Northern Ireland, **bringing benefits to society by contributing to a wide range of areas**, including improving health and well-being, protecting the environment, tackling inequality, growing and greening the economy, increasing active travel, and enhancing education and learning. These benefits are delivered by a range of organisations from government departments, local authorities to organisations in the voluntary sector, farmers and businesses.

Evidence-base

There is a vast library of peer-reviewed evidence on the benefits of being active outdoors. This includes [Space to Thrive \(2019\)](#), covering 385 studies on the benefits of parks and green spaces for people and communities [1], and the [Benefits of Outdoor Sports for Society \(2017\)](#), (with input from SportNI), covering 133 studies [2].

Research objective

Although the benefits of outdoor recreation are widely evidenced, until now there was no systematic population-wide research on how people in Northern Ireland engage with the natural environment, the benefits they gain from it, and the barriers they face trying to access it, and; how this aligns with current and future policy development and implementation. **The data collected as part of this research will help to address this information gap.**

A new survey of the Northern Ireland adult population

Scoping studies were first undertaken to determine what population data already exists in Northern Ireland related to engagement with the outdoors [3] and mining and analysing this data [4]. Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) then commissioned this new survey part funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to support the work of the cross-government Strategic Outdoor Recreation Group (SORG). ORNI partnered with 56 Degree Insight to design and undertake a survey of the Northern Ireland adult population in late 2020 to fill the information gaps identified. The survey approach is explained on page 15 and the full report is available from www.outdoorrecreationni.com. Results from this survey include periods with varying levels of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (outlined on page 15) and these will have impacted upon levels of participation in outdoor recreation.

This report

This is a summary document that draws on the November and December 2020 population research as the primary source, and this is supplemented by other sources of Government data, such as the Continuous Household Survey (CHS), Health Survey Northern Ireland, and the Travel Survey for Northern Ireland, to bring together the full body of evidence relating to people, nature and health.



Delivering PfG outcomes by connecting people to nature

Alignment with the outcomes of the Programme for Government

The proven benefits of being active outdoors **contributes to many government priorities and outcomes outlined in the new (2021) draft Programme for Government (PfG) [5]**. As we build back stronger and greener from the pandemic, these synergies can be harnessed to the betterment of all in society, as illustrated in the adjacent diagram.

Elevating outdoor recreation in the Programme for Government and other strategies

The research in this report is an **incentive for government to enable more people to be active outdoors, more often**. This will require increasing people's access to, participation in, and connection with sustainable green and blue spaces.

Further survey waves could provide for measurement of future policies and interventions. There is also the need for consistent mapping of accessible green and blue spaces, and off-road trails across Northern Ireland to enable planning and monitoring by government and other bodies. ORNI is undertaking initial scoping on behalf of SORG and this will sit alongside the research work.



Proposed targets for future strategies

90% of the population within a 5-minute walk of quality green/blue space

90% of the population visiting the outdoors at least once a week

Annual increase in % of journeys made by walking/cycling (current PfG indicator)



Key findings

Over 2 in 3 residents of Northern Ireland visit the outdoors for leisure every week but levels of participation are lower amongst some population groups and have changed during the pandemic. More needs to be done to increase participation and access to the outdoors for these demographic groups, so that everyone can reap the benefits.

70% took outdoor visits at least once a week during 2020. This may sound good...

But 37% took no visits during November and December

44% got out less due to lockdown rules and worries about catching or spreading the virus.

There are some winners. 22% increased their time outdoors – especially younger age groups, people with children, full-time workers and more affluent socio-economic groups.

Motivations for spending more time outdoors:

- increased free time
- desire to maintain physical and mental health and wellbeing

COVID-19 lockdown restrictions worsened participation inequalities for some demographic groups

Access to trails and greenspace is a problem. 29% do not have greenspace within easy walking distance of their home.

Groups who visit less:

- unemployed people
- people with no car
- people in the least affluent socio-economic groups
- people with disabilities

Particularly true for:

- unemployed people
- people with a disability
- women
- residents of rural areas

More needs to be done to reach targets:

- 90% of the population within 5-minute walk of quality green/blue space
- 90% of the population visiting the outdoors at least once a week
- Annual increase in % of journeys made by walking/cycling (current PfG indicator)

Key findings

There are clear benefits from taking part in outdoor visits. If the barriers to participation and access to the outdoors can be tackled, then there are many benefits for the whole of society.

If these targets are achieved, more people would benefit:

- 90% of the population within 5-minute walk of quality green/blue space
- 90% of the population visiting the outdoors at least once a week
- Annual increase in % of journeys made by walking/cycling (current PfG indicator)

22 million outdoor visits taken in November and December during COVID 19 restrictions with £4.40 spent on average per visit = £95 million

73% of outdoor visits are taken for exercise and to improve health

56% took visits to relax and unwind. Those who walk most, have higher levels of life satisfaction.

32% felt closer to nature. Evidence shows that connectedness to nature leads to increased desire to protect the environment.



32% stated that their children had learnt something new about the natural world during outdoors visit.



27% of the population are meeting the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) physical activity targets through leisure time spent outdoors (150+ mins per week or 75+ mins at a vigorous level)

A vision for future targets for all relevant policies and strategies

This research clearly shows the many benefits of outdoor recreation to Northern Ireland, its society and economy – and most importantly, the health and wellbeing of its people. To ensure that more of the population can avail of these benefits, targets must be placed in the PfG that monitor people’s access to, participation in, and connection with nature. This needs to be addressed in future government and local government strategies, policies, funding packages and delivery along with partners.

What should we aim to achieve?



Key results: Physical activity

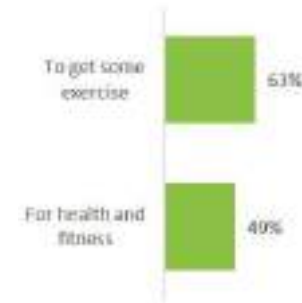


The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) recommends adults do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week. CHS data [6] shows that walking contributes significantly towards this target and is the number ONE physical activity/sport undertaken in Northern Ireland. The most recent data shows that concern for **physical health was the primary motivation for visiting the outdoors**.

- Concern for physical health was the primary motivation for taking part in outdoor recreation during November and December 2020. Almost three quarters (73%) of visits to the outdoors were taken either 'to get some exercise' (63%) and/or 'for health and fitness'.
- Around 1 in 5 outdoor visits taken involved physical activity at an intensity which made the participant feel out of breath or healthy.
- The survey results have been applied to estimate the percentage of the population who met the CMO physical activity guidelines through outdoor recreation. During November and December 2020, an estimated 27% of the population took part in outdoor activities for enough time and at a sufficient level of intensity, to meet the recommended targets.
- Frequency of participation in outdoor activities increases as levels of deprivation decrease meaning that the benefits of the outdoors are not enjoyed equally.

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Physical health as a motivation for visits to the outdoors:



Source: Population survey November/December 2020

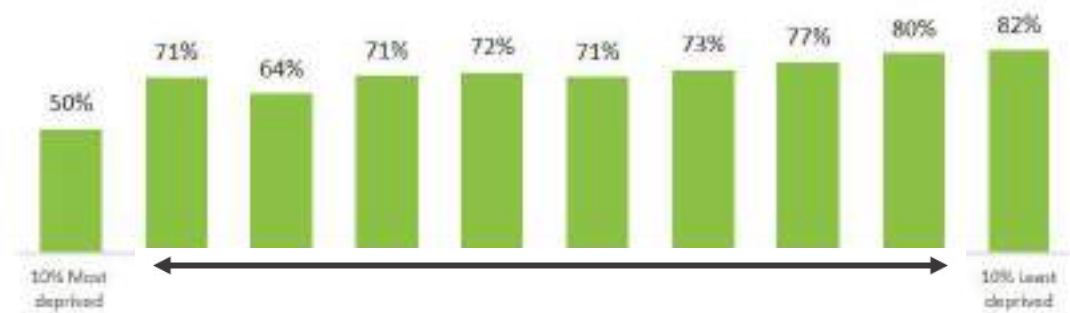
% meeting Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guideline for adults during outdoor visits:



The CMO recommends adults do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity every week.

Source: Population survey November/December 2020

% of those who normally visit the outdoors at least once a week by Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017/18



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18



Key results: Mental health and wellbeing

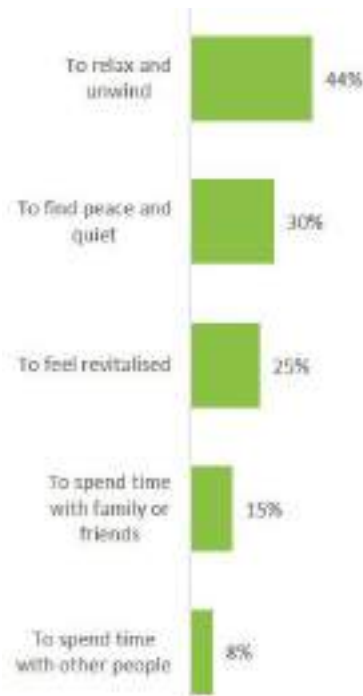


There is a clear relationship between engagement with the outdoors and mental health and wellbeing. People in Northern Ireland who are very satisfied with their life walk more frequently. This has been evident during lockdown restrictions, with people who spent more time outdoors reporting the greatest mental health and wellbeing benefits [7].

- Just over half of visits taken to the outdoors during November and December (56%) were motivated by one or more factors which can be related to improving mental health or wellbeing. Over 4 in 5 participants (86%) reported that visits made them feel calm and relaxed and/or refreshed and revitalised.
- A relationship between frequency of outdoor recreation and wellbeing was also recorded in the 2013/14 Health Survey for Northern Ireland [8]. As shown on the right, this survey found that those people who walked most frequently in the last 4 weeks on average also recorded the highest levels of life satisfaction.

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Mental health and wellbeing as a motivation for visits to the outdoors:



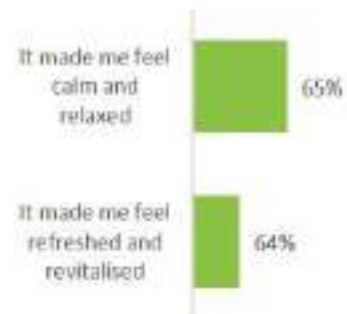
Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Walking participation in last 4 weeks – by life satisfaction (% of population in each group)



Source: Health Survey Northern Ireland, 2013/14

Claimed positive outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing:



Source: Population survey November/December 2020



Key results: Environment



Being connected with nature is also a key motivator for people visiting the outdoors and the evidence shows that **those who visit the outdoors more have greater concern for the environment.**

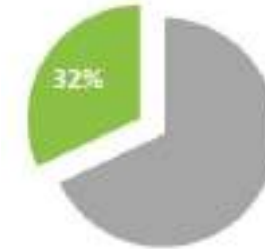
- Around 2 in 5 visits to the outdoors taken during November and December 2020 (41%) were motivated by opportunities to spend time in nature (31%) and/or enjoy scenery and wildlife (29%).
- In around a third of visits, participants reported feeling closer to nature as a result of this experience. This was especially true amongst those visiting with younger children and those who had spent time in woodland or country parks.
- The CHS (2017/18) data shows that those who visit the outdoors more express greater concern for the natural environment. There is evidence that increased appreciation and connection with nature during time spent outdoors is aligned with greater care and concern for the environment and increased pro-nature conservation behaviours [9].

Nature as a motivation for visits to the outdoors:



Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Proportion of visits where participants reported feeling closer to nature

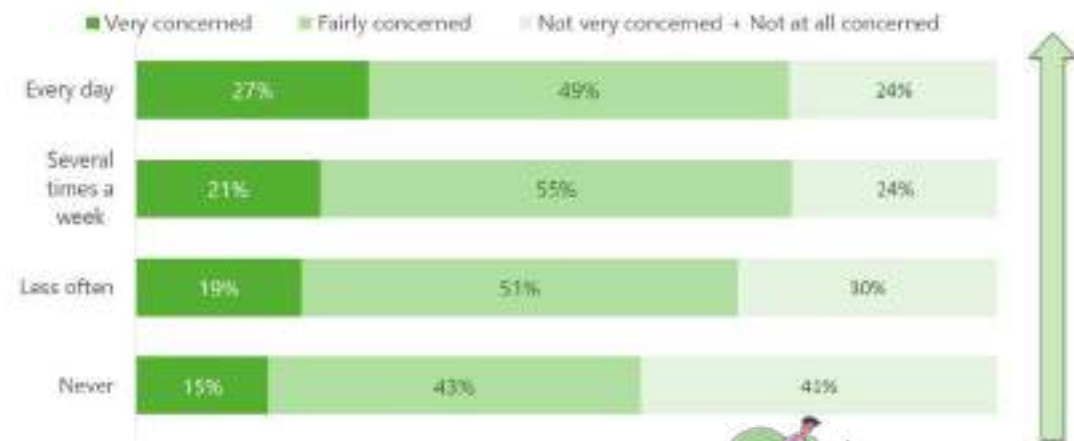


Participants more likely to feel closer to nature when:

- Visiting country parks (50%)
- Visiting woodland (47%).
- Pre-school or primary age children in group (70%)

Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Level of concern for the natural environment by frequency of participation in outdoor recreation by Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017/18



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18



Key results: Tackling inequality



The benefits of being active in nature are not enjoyed equally, with the **frequency of participation in outdoor recreation activities decreasing as levels of deprivation increase**. This disparity across population groups has been exacerbated during COVID-19.

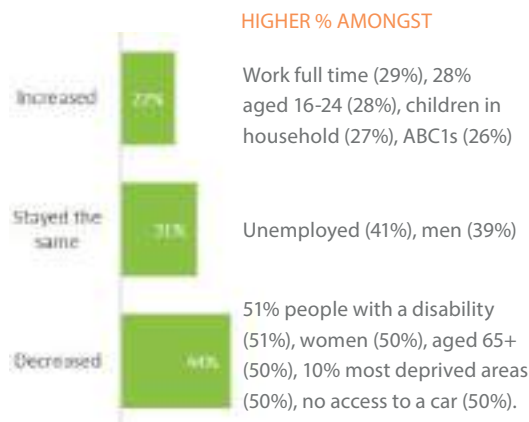
- The 2017-18 CHS recorded a clear relationship between levels of deprivation and frequency of taking part in outdoor recreation. Only half of residents of the 10% most deprived areas typically took visits at least once a week compared to 82% of those in the 10% least deprived areas.
- During November and December (as noted on page 3), **70%** took outdoor visits at least once a week during the last 12 months - similar to levels recorded in the 2017-18 CHS. However, **37%** took **no visits** – unemployed people, people with no car, people in the least affluent socio-economic groups, and people with disabilities took the fewest visits.
- As shown on the right, COVID-19 has also impacted, with some groups decreasing their time outdoors, including those with a disability, women, older people, residents of the most deprived areas and those with no car access.

Frequency of participation in outdoor recreation by Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017/18



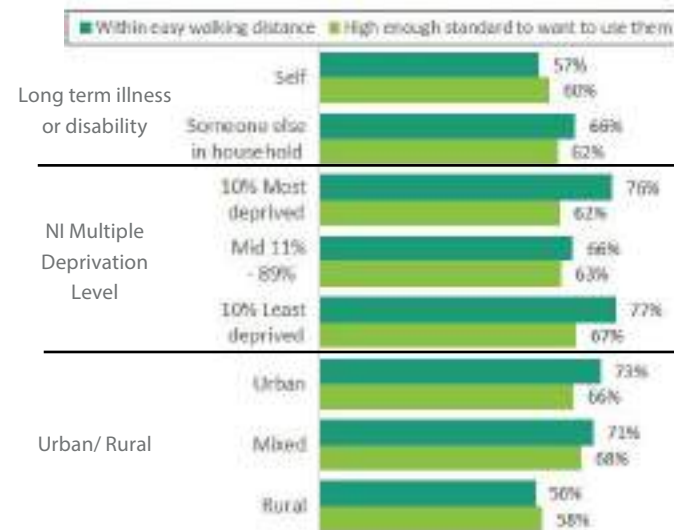
Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18

Frequency of visits to outdoors compared to this time last year:



Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Rating of local paths and trails by key demographics % agreeing with statements



Source: Population survey November/December 2020

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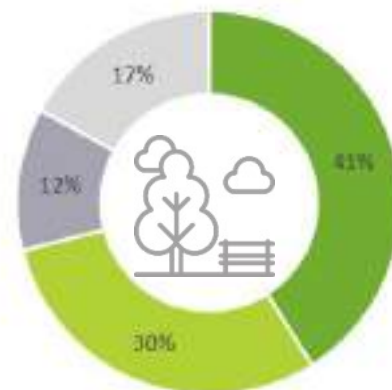
Key results: Tackling inequality



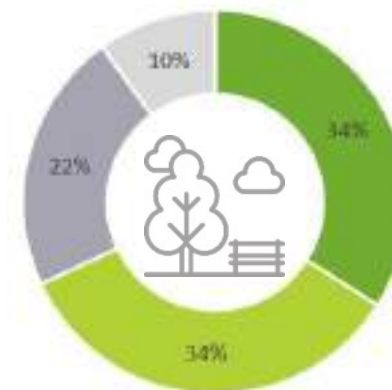
The provision of greenspace and off-road trails is not equal across Northern Ireland, with many people reporting that they do not have green space and off-road trails within easy walking distance of their home.

- 29% of the population stated that they do not have greenspaces within easy walking distance. Women, unemployed people, people with a disability, parents with pre-primary age children, and residents of rural areas provide the lowest ratings for their local greenspaces and paths and trails.
- While most of the population agreed that their local greenspaces were within easy walking distance (71%) and had suitable facilities (68%), less than half agreed strongly with these statements and a significant minority disagreed.
- In relation to paths and trails, few agreed strongly that they had quality trails within easy walking distance of their homes.
- The perception of quality and accessibility of local paths and trails varied across the Northern Ireland population, tending to be lower amongst women, younger age groups, unemployed people, people with a disability and residents of rural areas.

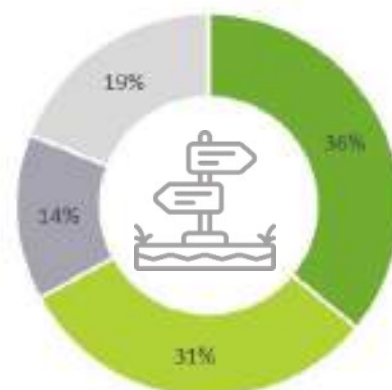
Availability and ratings of greenspace and trails



My local greenspaces are within easy walking distance

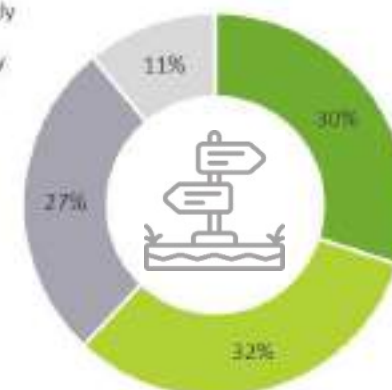


The facilities at my local greenspaces meet my needs



My local paths and trails are within easy walking distance

■ Agree strongly
 ■ Agree slightly
 ■ Neither Nor
 ■ Disagree



My local paths and trails are of a high enough standard to want to use them

Source: Population survey November/December 2020

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Key results: Active travel



The 2019 Travel Survey for Northern Ireland [10] showed that overall, 19% of journeys were taken on foot (18%) or bicycle (1%), a similar level to that recorded over the previous 5 years. A **future increase in Active Travel would lead directly to environmental benefits** such as reduced traffic emissions as well as health benefits for participants.

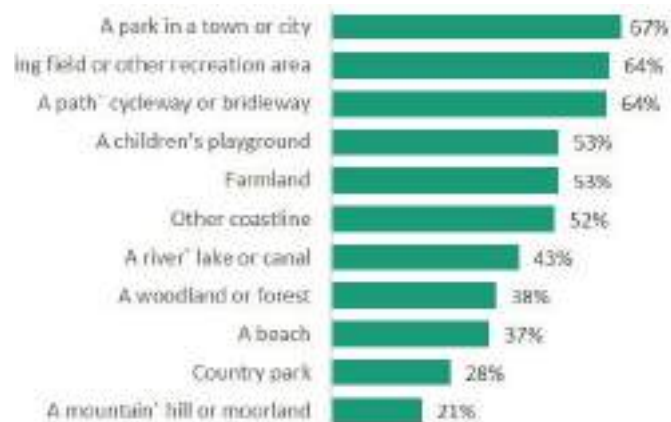
- Just over half of outdoor visits taken in November and December 2020 involved walking to the place visited (55%), while most of the remaining visits involved a journey by car or another private vehicle.
- Potentially reflecting the COVID-19 restrictions on travel and transport, a very small percentage of visits involved public transport.
- The percentage of visits taken on foot was highest when the place visited was more likely to be close to home (e.g., urban parks, playing fields).
- Whether or not someone had access to a car impacted on the transport mode used. 78% of visits taken by people with no car were on foot and 12% used public transport. However, amongst those with a car, 46% drove to the place they visited.

% of all journeys made by walking or cycling:



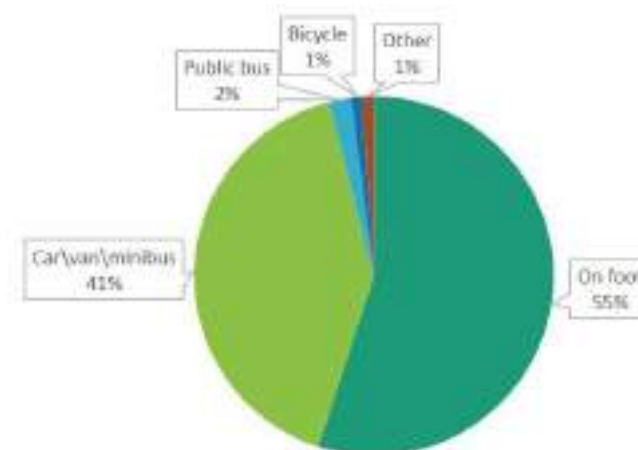
Source: Travel survey for Northern Ireland 2019

Visits taken on foot by type of place visited:



Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Transport used to reach place visited during visits taken in November and December 2020



Source: Population survey November/December 2020



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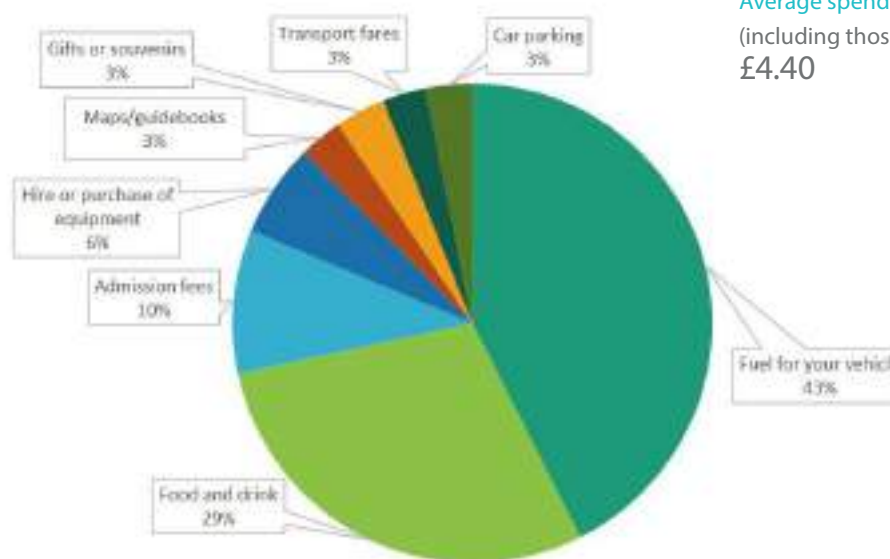
Key results: Economic



Visits to the outdoors make a **significant contribution to the economy**, although more local provision of greenspace and trails is needed to reduce car reliance.

- During November and December 2020 an estimated 22 million visits were taken to the outdoors by adults living in Northern Ireland.
- With an average spend per visit spend of around £4.40 it can be extrapolated that around £97m was spent in total during outdoor visits taken during the months of November and December during COVID-19 restrictions, with the largest proportions of this spend being on fuel, food and drink.
- As this was during COVID-19 restrictions it is considered likely that this is well below normal figures and a repeat would be required to use this to estimate future expenditure.
- A broader SportNI 2019 study estimated that total generated GVA for outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland is £131.2m and associated with 4,804 full time equivalent employees [11]. This study showed economic impact of outdoor recreation has increased significantly from the previous study in 2011, with higher levels of consumer spending, an increased number of operators and increased employment in the sector.

Distribution of total spend by items purchased:



Average spend across all visits taken (including those with no money spent) **£4.40**

Applied to estimated 22.1 million visits taken during November and December:

~ £97 million
total expenditure during visits

Source: Population survey November/December 2020

Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland 2017 and changes since 2011



Source: Assessing the Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland 2011 and 2019

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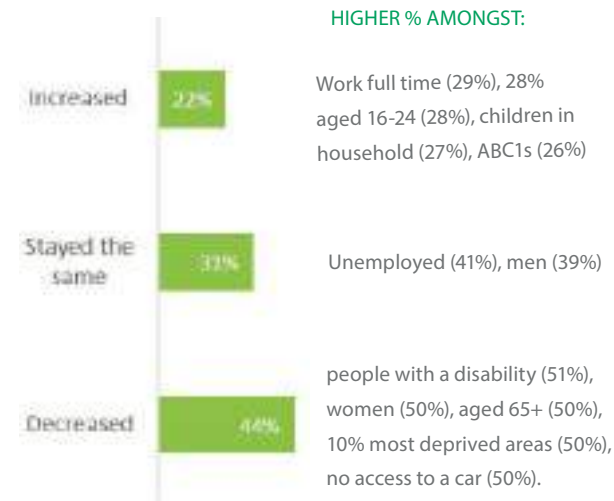
Key results: Post-COVID recovery

Covid-19 and the related restrictions have had a significant impact on the amount of time people are spending outdoors, with some population groups increasing their time being active outdoors while others decreased their time overall. **The challenges emerging from lockdown are also an opportunity to benefit everyone in Northern Ireland.** Improving access to, participation in, and connection to quality green and blue spaces will be key to this.

- Most of the population in November and December stated that they had changed the amount of time they were spending outdoors compared to a year ago. 22% were spending more time outdoors. Younger age groups and more affluent socio-economic groups were more likely to say this was the case.
- However, double this percentage (44%) had decreased their time outdoors with older people, women, those with disabilities, people who live in the most deprived areas, residents of the most deprived areas and people with no car access most likely to state this was the case.
- **The top five improvements that the population in Northern Ireland would like to see to greenspace and off-road trails include:**
 - more control of dogs/dog fouling
 - more paths and trails away from roads
 - improved access
 - better facilities and maintenance of paths.

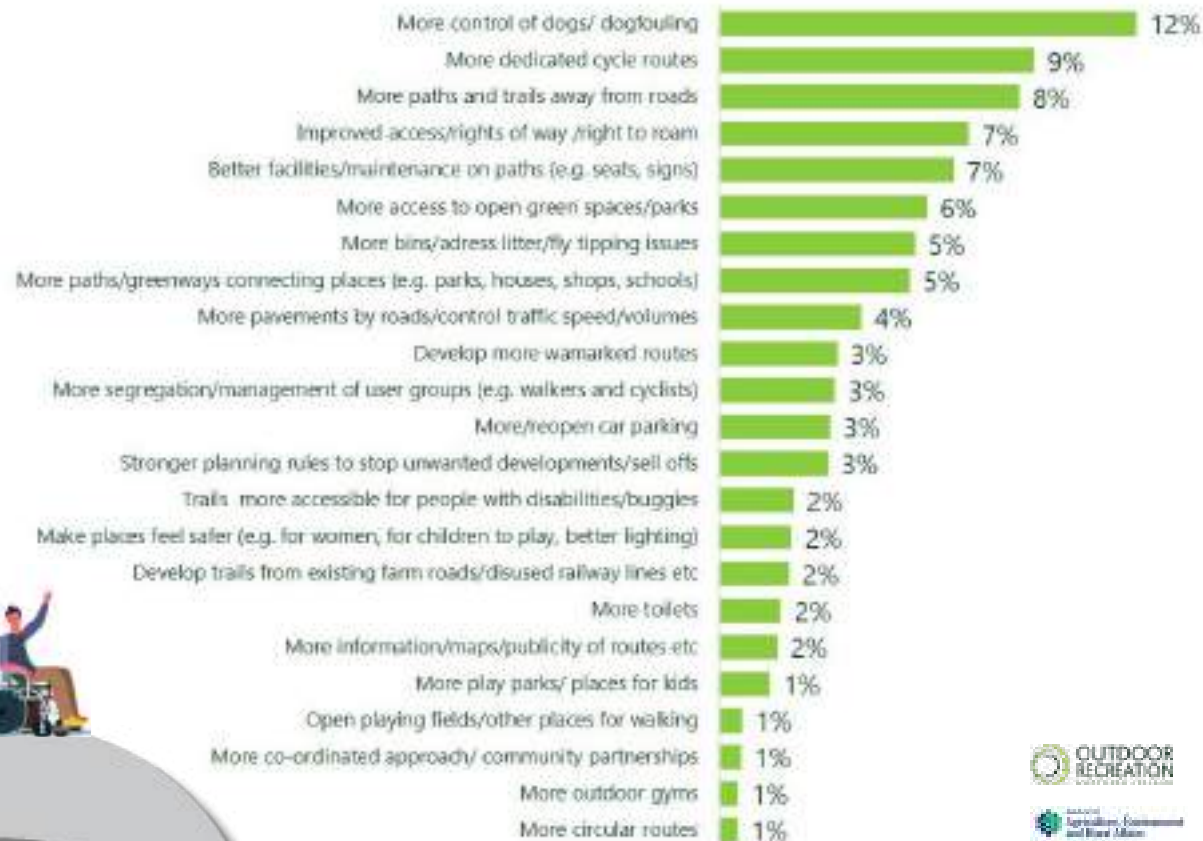
Frequency of visits to outdoors compared to this time last year – overall and by key demographics

Source: Population survey November/December 2020



What, if anything, could be done by organisations responsible for developing outdoor recreation to improve the opportunities for you to use greenspaces and trails in your local area?

Source: COVID-19 Lockdown Research May 2020



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COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions

As the survey fieldwork was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, patterns of outdoor recreation participation during this period were different from normal. The online survey was undertaken from early November to late December 2020 with respondents asked about their visits to the outdoors during the 4 weeks before completing the questionnaire (i.e., from around mid October). During this timescale, the following restrictions were in place in Northern Ireland with implications on how much people were able to take part in outdoor exercise:

- **16 October – 20 November** – Four-week ‘circuit breaker’ lockdown begins, later extended by a week to 20 November. Advice that no unnecessary travel should be undertaken.
- **20 – 27 November** – Restrictions eased for a week.
- **27 November – 11 December** – Two-week lockdown period. Strong stay at home message, travel only for essential purposes but parks and outdoor play areas remain open.
- **17 December** – NI Executive agree to commence another lockdown from 26 December.

Also, during much of this period many businesses in the retail and hospitality sector and visitor attractions were closed or had restricted opening (e.g. take away sales only). This is likely to have further impacted upon the types of places visited and the nature of visits, particularly expenditure made during visits.

Survey approach

The survey aimed to reach a representative sample of adults living in Northern Ireland to measure their levels of participation in outdoor recreation, details of recent visits taken, and the benefits gained from these where experiences. A copy of the questionnaire used is available separately.

An online approach was used with questions included in the monthly online omnibus survey undertaken by Cognisense. This approach involved contact being made with members of existing online consumer panels and target quotas applied to ensure that the sample interviewed was as representative of the population as possible in terms of gender, age, socio economic groups and region of residence. Following this approach, a total of 2,009 interviews were undertaken between 5th November and 18th December 2020.

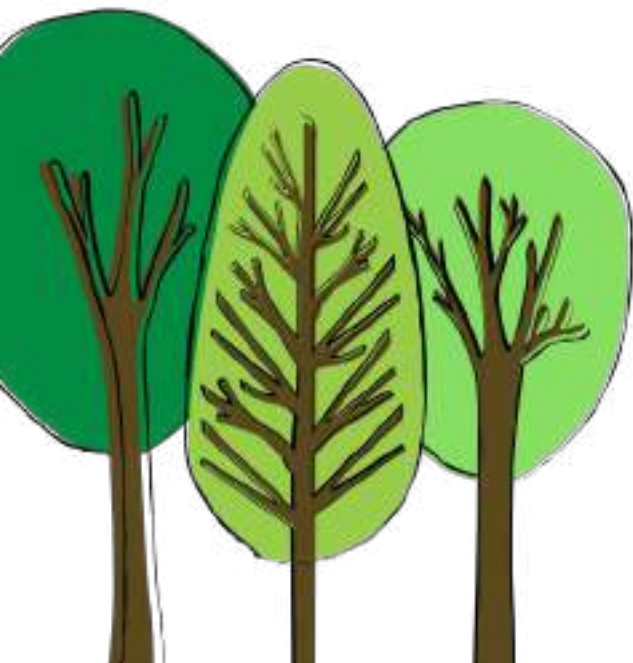
Given this large sample size it has been possible to analyse results by month and on the basis of a number of different demographic and geographic classifications. This includes the application of geographic profiles available from NISRA including the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure and the Urban – Rural classification. While the online approach aimed to ensure inclusion of key demographic groups and good geographical spread of respondents, weights were also applied to the data to further improve representivity.

Two different levels of weights have been applied as follows:

- **Demographic weighting** – applied to results where findings relate to the percentages of the Northern Ireland adult population. Weights ‘correct’ for any differences between the survey sample profile and population (gender, age and socio-economic group).
- **Visit weighting** – applied to results where finding relate to percentages of the visits taken by the Northern Ireland population during the survey period. This weight incorporates the above Demographic Weighting and the number of visits taken by each respondent during the 4 week recall period.

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