

# Happy Healthy Connected Communities

How a Walking Strategy can deliver  
on wellbeing and green recovery



# Improving people's engagement with the outdoors is crucial to a green recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to live and work differently, to behave more sustainably, and to envisage a better, greener future. Now is the time to stride towards a Green Recovery and create a future that is characterised by happy, healthy, connected communities.

The challenges emerging from lockdown are also an opportunity to benefit everyone in Northern Ireland. Improving access to, participation in, and connection to nature is key to achieving targets outlined in the Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework[1]. These include:

- Delivering measurable and population-wide **improvements in wellbeing**, focusing on educational, social and economic benefits associated with the connection between people and their environment.
- Developing **natural green connectors and corridors** across cities, towns and landscapes, **connecting people and their environment**.

These targets have public backing, with 74% of people supporting a Green Recovery and 3 out of 4 appreciating access to local greenspaces during lockdown [2].

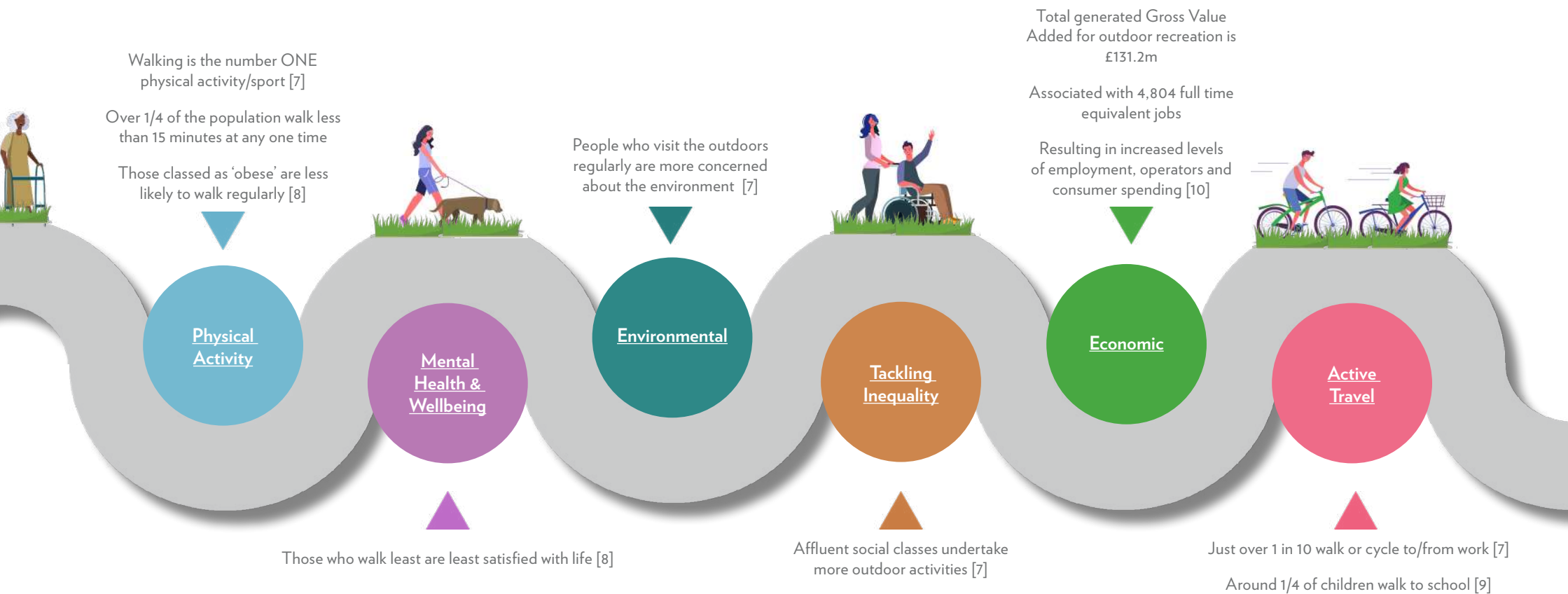
The benefits of outdoor recreation are clearly evidenced [3, 4] and align with many of the Outcomes in the current Programme for Government [5] and New Decade, New Approach [6], which prioritises health and wellbeing, environmental protection, tackling climate change and the economy.



# What we knew pre-COVID-19

There is a growing body of evidence (from government-led national population surveys) which identifies how **people living in Northern Ireland benefit from engaging with the natural environment.**

Key statistics are illustrated below. Click the circles below for more information on each benefit.



# What we learnt from COVID-19 lockdown

23% before 63% during

More people got outdoors and experienced the benefits



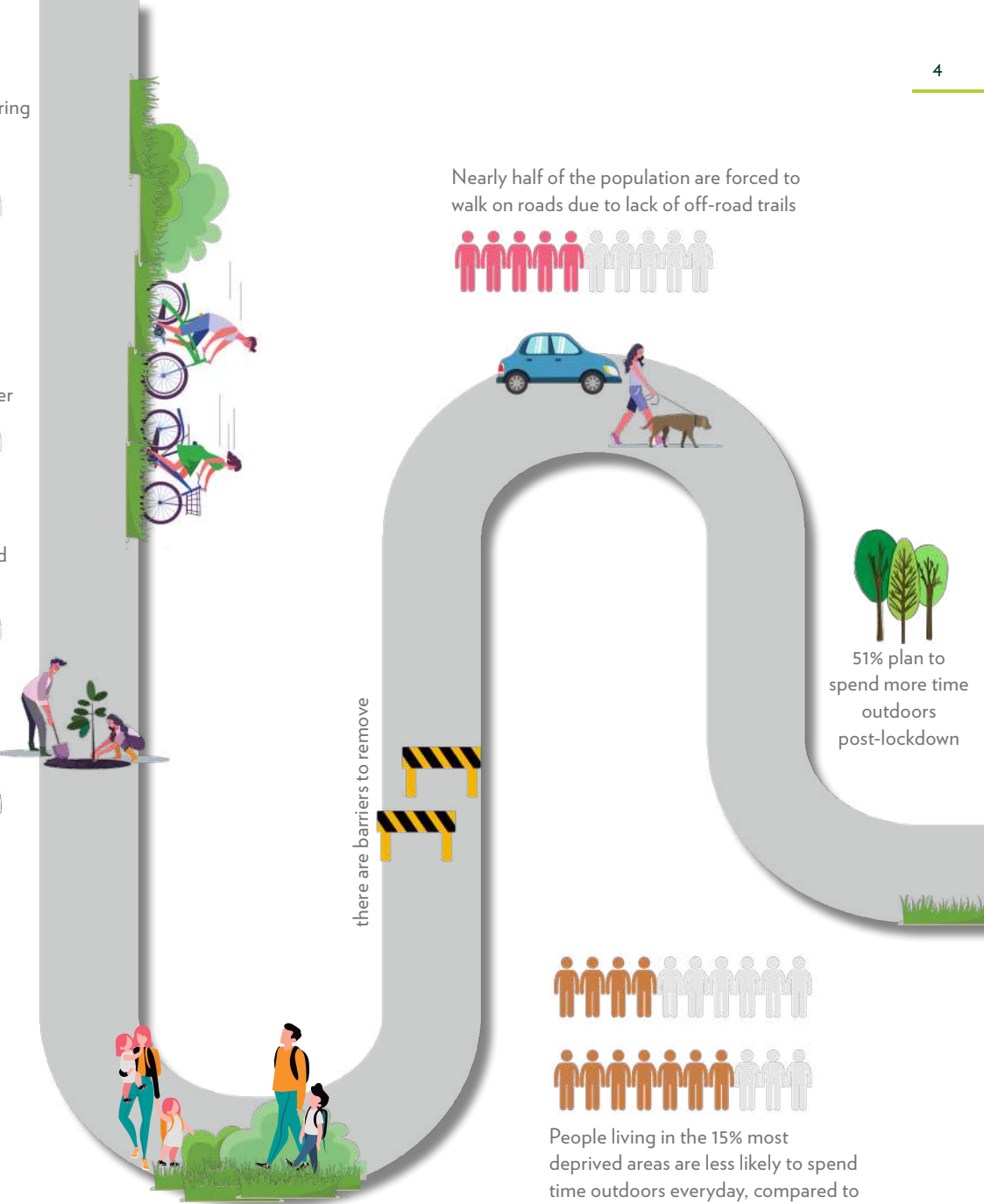
84% felt physically healthier/fitter



89% felt calm, relaxed, refreshed and revitalised



79% felt closer to nature



Nearly half of the population are forced to walk on roads due to lack of off-road trails



51% plan to spend more time outdoors post-lockdown

there are barriers to remove



People living in the 15% most deprived areas are less likely to spend time outdoors everyday, compared to those living in more affluent areas

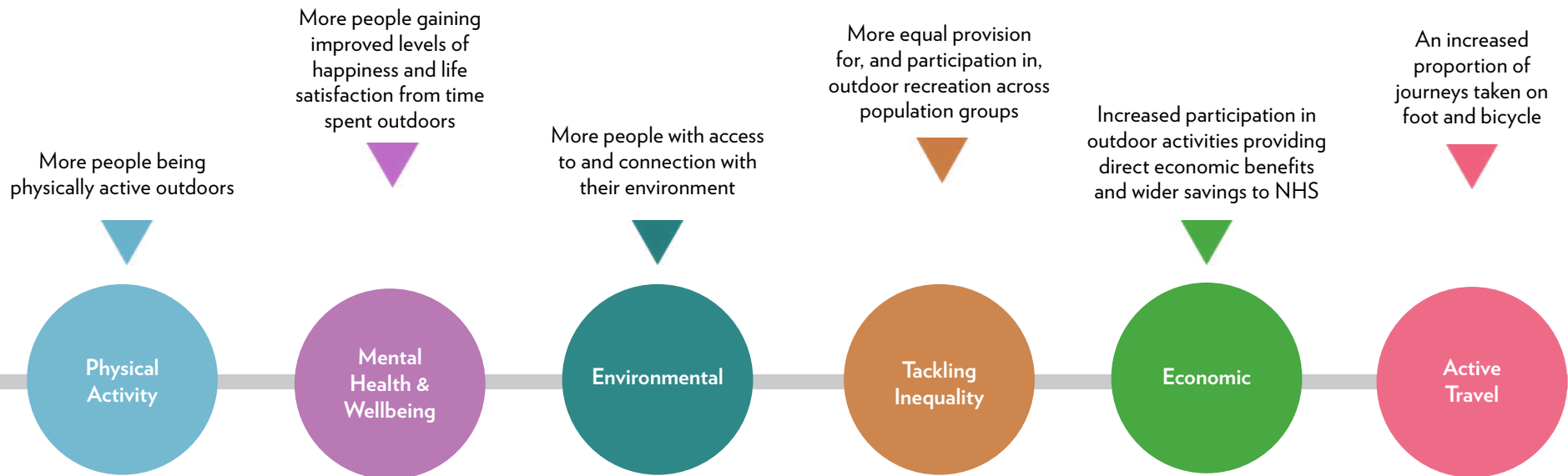
The value of the outdoors particularly to the population’s health and wellbeing has never been so apparent than over the COVID-19 lockdown period. Northern Ireland-wide research conducted by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland [11] highlighted an **unprecedented rise in the use of the outdoors** during lockdown. Nearly half (47%) the population spent more of their free time outdoors than they did this time last year and over half expect to do more after lockdown.

Lockdown illustrated the importance of greenspace and trails to people’s health, wellbeing and connection with nature. Conversely, it also **highlighted barriers to people getting outdoors, such as deprivation and insufficient off-road trails for walking and cycling.**



# Enabling happy, healthy, connected communities

## what we should aim to achieve



Annual increase in % of population visiting the outdoors at least once a week

Annual increase in % of population with greenspace and off-road trails within easy walking distance of their home

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

## metrics required



# The key enabler: a Walking Strategy for Northern Ireland

The post-COVID-19 Green Recovery is an unparalleled opportunity to increase the number of people who are physically active outdoors. Northern Ireland has outstanding potential for walking both in urban and rural areas, however there are **long-standing barriers that need to be tackled, such as the lack of opportunities within the most deprived areas and a lack of accessible off-road trails.**

Walking is **highly cost-effective** and demonstrates that prevention really is better than cure. The challenge now for the Northern Ireland Executive is to put this into practice by developing and implementing a cross-departmental Walking Strategy. This vision of this Strategy would be to enable a society where everyone benefits from walking as part of their everyday journeys, enjoys walking in the outdoors and which has easy access to places well designed to encourage walking.

## 3 Strategic Outputs of a Walking Strategy

### Council-wide Community Trail Plans

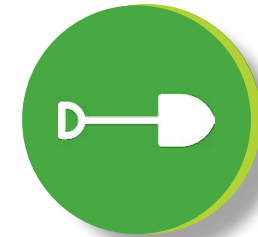
Develop and implement a plan for natural green connectors and corridors across cities, towns and landscapes, connecting communities and people to green spaces. All Councils to be mandated to develop and implement a Community Trail Plan.

### A NI-wide 'Walking for All' initiative

The Walking For All programme is 'shovel-ready'. The Greenbook Economic Appraisal concluded that 'there is strong evidence to indicate a need for a flagship NI-wide led-walking programme with sufficient scale and scope to contribute to addressing a number of issues facing society, such as levels of physical inactivity and social isolation' [12].

### A new Outdoor Recreation Bill for NI

The development of a new, fit-for-purpose legal framework for access to the countryside that would provide and expand access for the purpose of recreation.



# Evidence behind the vision

## Data confirming the benefits of outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland:

Physical Activity	<a href="#">p. 8</a>
Mental Health & Wellbeing	<a href="#">p. 9</a>
Environmental	<a href="#">p.10</a>
Tackling Inequality	<a href="#">p.11</a>
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[How to measure progress](#) [p.14](#)

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## Case studies

Community Trails [p.16](#)

parkwalk [p.17](#)

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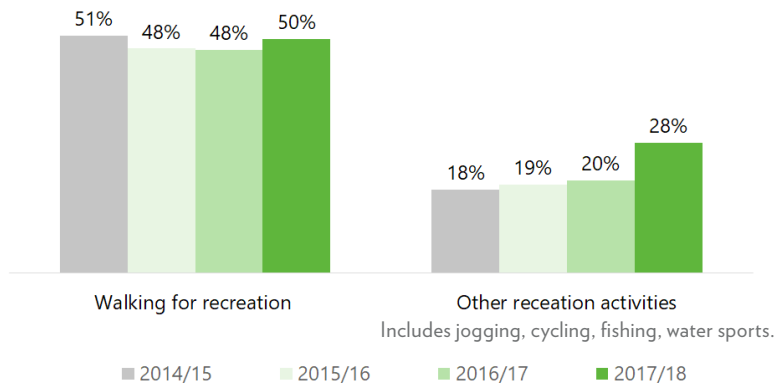


# Physical Activity

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) recommends adults do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week [14], such as brisk walking or cycling. [Walking contributes significantly towards physical activity targets](#) – it is the number ONE physical activity/sport undertaken in Northern Ireland.

## 1 Walking is the number ONE physical activity/sport in Northern Ireland

Activities undertaken in last 12 months – adults resident in Northern Ireland 2014/15 to 2017/18



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2014/15 to 2017/18

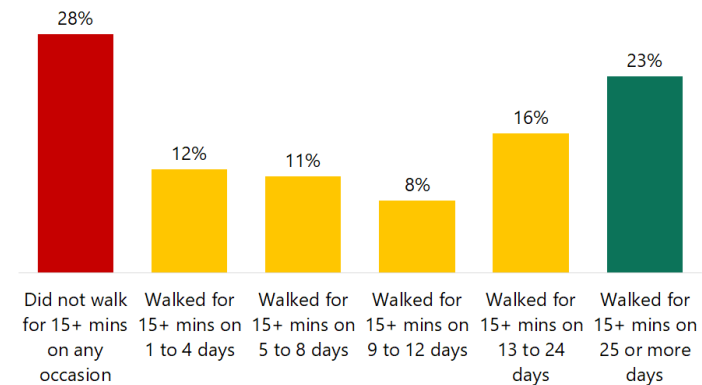


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## 2 However, over a quarter of the population walk less than 15 minutes at any one time.

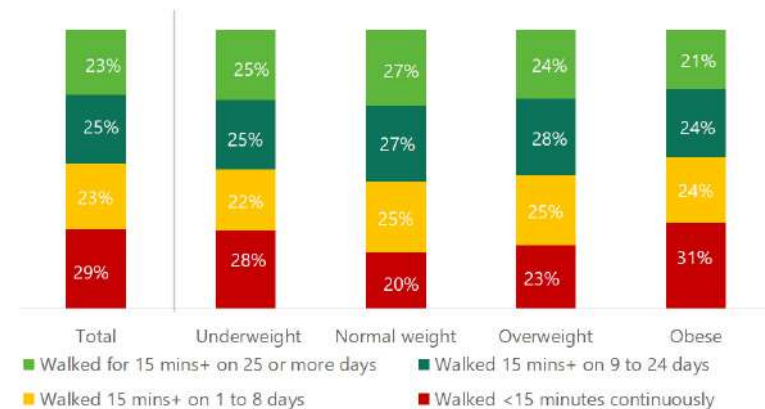
Frequency of 15 minutes + walking participation in last 4 weeks



Source: Health Survey Northern Ireland, 2013/14

## 3 Those classed as 'obese' are less likely to walk on a regular basis

Walking participation in last 4 weeks – by Body Mass Index (% of population in each group)



Source: Health Survey Northern Ireland, 2013/14





# Mental Health & Wellbeing

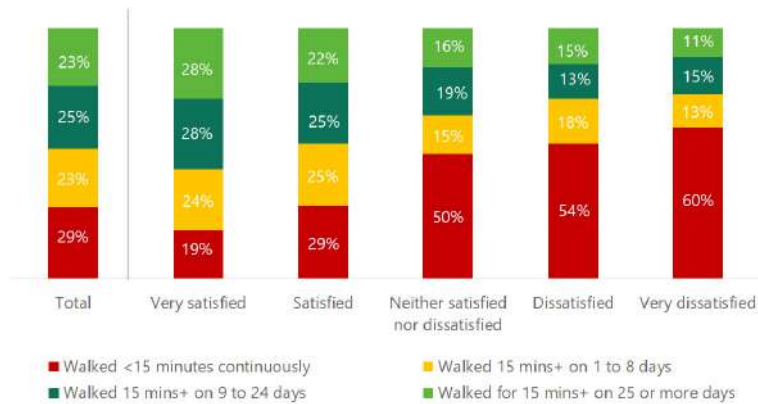
There is a clear relationship between engagement with the outdoors and wellbeing. In Northern Ireland, people who are very satisfied with their life walk more frequently.

This was evident during lockdown, with people who spent the most time outdoors reporting the greatest mental health and wellbeing benefits.

## 1 Those who walk least in Northern Ireland, are least satisfied with life

Walking participation in last 4 weeks – by life satisfaction

(“overall, how satisfied are you with life nowadays?”) (% of population in each group)



Source: Health Survey Northern Ireland, 2013/14

## 2 9 in 10 people reported that being outdoors helped their mental health and wellbeing during lockdown

Mental Health and Wellbeing benefits of being outdoors during lockdown



Source: Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland, May 2020, Outdoor Recreation NI



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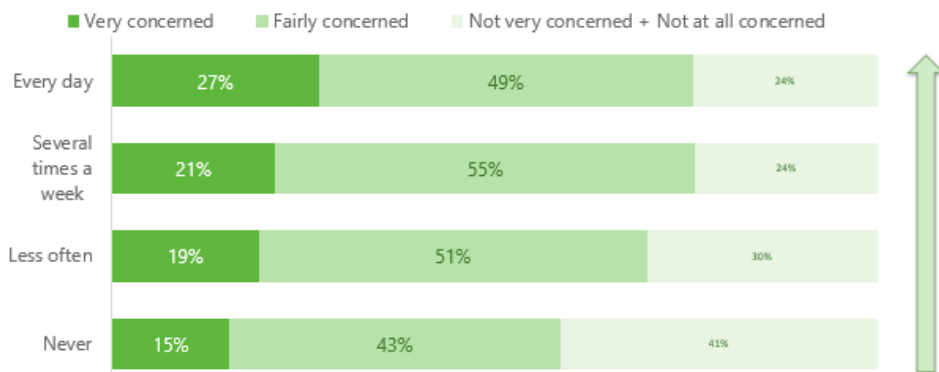


# Environmental

Improving people's engagement with the outdoors is crucial to a green recovery as being outdoors gives people a greater connection to nature. However **many people do not have green space and off-road trails within easy walking distance of their home**, particularly those living in rural areas and those from the most deprived areas.

## 1 Those who visit the outdoors more have greater concern for the natural environment

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

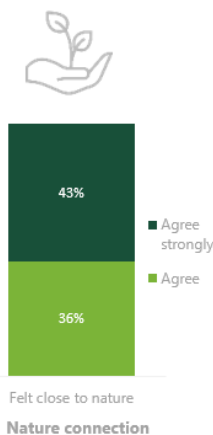


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## 2 During lockdown, over three quarters of the population said they felt close to nature when undertaking outdoor activities

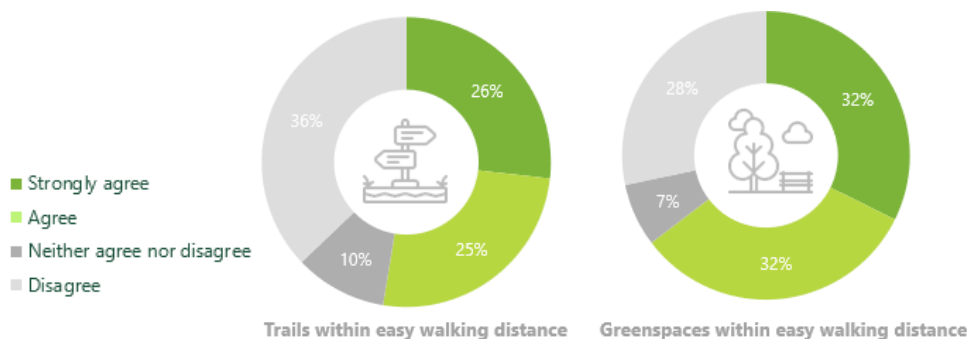
Source: Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland, May 2020, Outdoor Recreation NI



■ Strongly agree  
■ Agree  
■ Neither agree nor disagree  
■ Disagree

## 3 Nearly half the population do not live within easy walking distance of local off-road trails

Accessibility of local off-road trails and greenspaces



Source: Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland, May 2020, Outdoor Recreation NI



# Tackling Inequality

The benefits of the outdoors are not equally shared by all. **Those from deprived areas spend less time in the natural environment** and together with **those from rural areas, are more likely to walk on roads, due to a lack of off-road trails.**

## 1 Frequency of participating in outdoor activities increases as levels of deprivation decrease

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



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18

## 2 The less affluent, unemployed and those from an ethnic minority community take part in outdoor recreation less often.

Frequency of participation in outdoor recreation by ethnicity and social class



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18

## 3 Residents of the most deprived areas, together with those from rural areas are more likely to walk on roads that on off-road trails

Percentage of walking on or off-road during lockdown by place of residence



Source: Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland, May 2020, Outdoor Recreation NI



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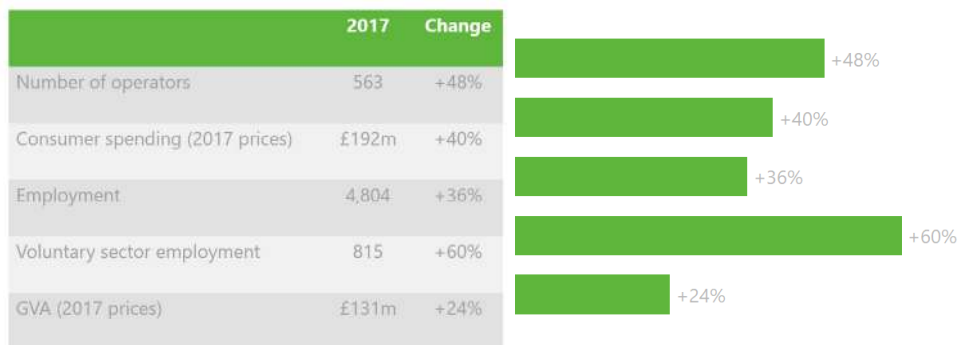
# Economic

A 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** [10]. The economic impact of outdoor recreation has increased significantly since 2011, with higher levels of consumer spending, an increased number of operators and increased employment in the sector.

Furthermore, research conducted during lockdown shows that demand for visits to outdoor spaces will increase as lockdown measures ease with **51% of people in Northern Ireland expecting to undertake more outdoor activities going forward**. Population groups with greatest appetite to increase their time outdoors include those aged under 70, residents of urban areas, and people who do not have access to off-road trails.

## 1 The economic impact of outdoor recreation has increased significantly since 2011

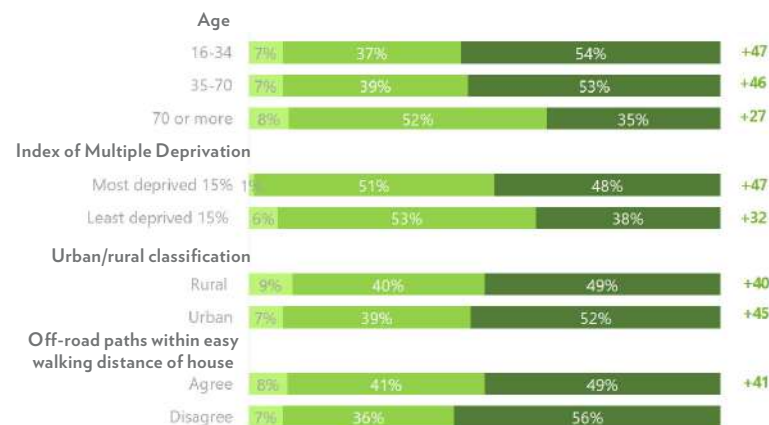
Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland 2017 and change since 2011



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

## 2 Half of people expect to undertake more outdoor activities when lockdown measures are eased – therefore demand for visits will increase

Amount of time expected to spend outdoors after lockdown compared to before by population group



Source: Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland, May 2020, Outdoor Recreation NI



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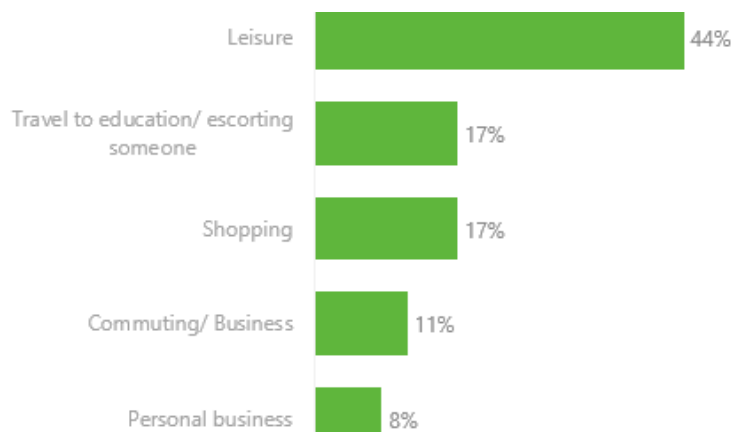
# Active Travel

While the largest share of walks are taken for leisure purposes, other walks were taken for routine purposes such as walking to school or work, shopping and getting to places. The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (2017) shows that overall **20% of journeys were taken on foot, an increase from 15% in 2010** [9].

The Continuous Household Survey also recorded the incidence of walking and cycling as a mode of transport to travel to and from work. 12% of adults normally walked to work but this proportion was much **higher amongst people with no car access (49%) and residents of urban areas (16%)**. Cycling to work was also higher amongst those with no car (6%) and urban residents (2%).

## 1 The proportion of journeys involving walking has increased

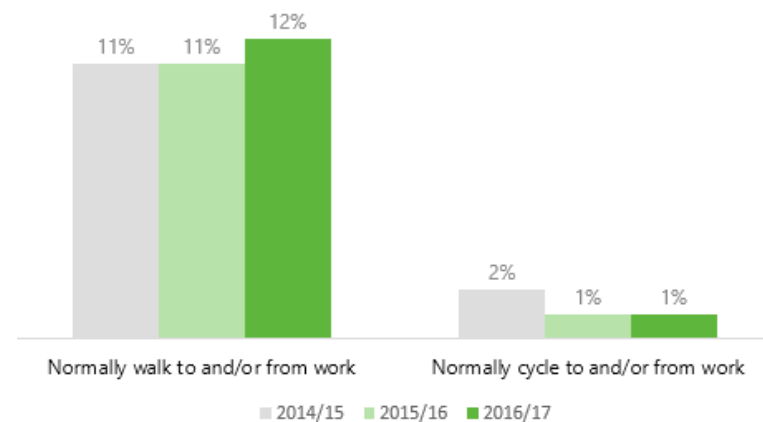
Purpose of walking journeys taken in Northern Ireland during 2017



Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland, 2017

## 2 More people are walking to work, representing by far the biggest opportunity for modal shift

Walking and cycling to work – adults resident in Northern Ireland 2014/15 to 2016/17



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2017/18



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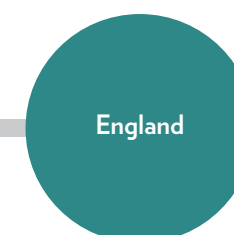
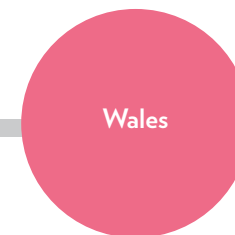
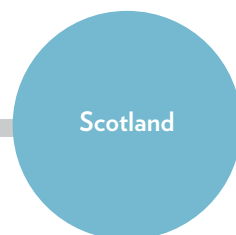


## How should we measure progress

Indicators are used in Great Britain to measure progress in increasing engagement with the natural environment and obtaining benefits from it, with the aim of achieving year-on-year increases. Data used from these indicators comes from national population surveys and outdoor recreation surveys and includes vital information about people's enjoyment, access and attitudes to the natural environment, its contributions to health and wellbeing and actions taken to protect it.

Metrics required to measure progress in Northern Ireland:

- Annual increase in % of population visiting the outdoors at least once a week
- Annual increase in % of population with greenspace and off-road trails within easy walking distance of their home
- Annual increase in % of journeys made by walking/cycling (current PfG indicator) [13]



- Proximity to accessible greenspace
- Physical activity in the outdoors and its link to physical and mental health
- People's understanding and value of the benefits received from natural resources

- % of adults visiting the outdoors at least once a week
- Proximity to greenspace within 5 minutes

- % of people taking visits to outdoors for exercise



# Accessibility greenspace standards

Evidence has highlighted the importance of accessible off-road trails and greenspace within easy walking distance of people's homes [11]. Accessibility greenspace standards that could be applied to Northern Ireland include Natural England's Accessibly Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGst) [15] and Fields in Trust [16].

## Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard

ANGst recommends that everyone, wherever they live, should have accessible natural greenspace:

- of at least 2 hectares in size, no more than 300 metres 5 minutes walk from home
- at least one accesible 20 hectare site within two kilometres of home
- one accessible 100 hectare site within five kilometres of home; and
- one accesible 500 hectare site within ten kilometres of home; plus
- a mínimu of one hectare of statutory Local Nature Reserve per thousand population

## Fields in Trust Standards

Fields in Trust Standards recommends the following walk distance from dwellings:

- Amenity Greenspace - 480 metres (0.60 hectares per 1,000 population)
- Parks and gardens - 710 metres (0.80 hectares per 1,000 population)
- Natural and semi-natural open space - 720 metres (1.80 hectares per 1,000 population)





## Case Study - Community Trail Plan

Despite Northern Ireland having an abundance of greenspace, there is a lack of infrastructure to allow local communities to get outdoors, close to their home and to connect with their local environment/nature. Community trails give people an opportunity to access the outdoors safely and with confidence.

### Newry Mourne and Down District Council

#### Community Trail Plan

- Prepared by Outdoor Recreation NI - completed in 2018
- First and only Council-wide Community Trail Plan
- Community trail opportunities identified through extensive community consultation
- By March 2021 - 9 trails delivered on the ground through partnership approach between Council and landowners (public and private)
- Investment of over £1.5million to date on trail network
- 7 trails have counters installed, with a total of 122,252 visits in 2019 - equivalent to 5556 football matches!



## Case Study - parkwalk

Parkwalk, an initiative of ORNI under its Walking in Your Community project, was established in 2017 in association with parkrun UK.

It encourages local people to get out walking for their physical and mental wellbeing. Parkwalk currently has 371 registered participants taking part in 10 venues across Northern Ireland.

The Walking in Your Community project encourages people to get walking in their local area and offers training to volunteers to deliver successful walking programmes

### Key outcomes:

#### Physical Health

- Before parkwalk, 26% of respondents met CMO guidelines of 150 minutes of physical activity per week. Through parkwalk this increased to 58%.

#### Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Before parkwalk, the average mental wellbeing score of respondents was 37.4 using the World Health Organisation's Wellbeing Index. Through parkrun this increased to 68.9.

#### Community

- 63% stated that they had developed relationships with those from different communities and backgrounds.
- 82% of respondents said they felt a strong sense of community.



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**Vision**  
To create a happier, healthier society where enjoyment and appreciation of the outdoors improves wellbeing.

**For more information:**

Outdoor Recreation NI  
The Stableyard  
Barnett Demesne  
Malone Road  
Belfast  
BT9 5PB

028 9030 3930  
info@outdoorrecreationni.com  
www.outdoorrecreationni.com

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undertaken with  
support from 56 Degree  
Insight:

07717 868 770  
www.56degreeinsight.com

