



ANNUAL REPORT



April 2023 - March 2024

Partnership Directors

as at 31/03/2024

The Directors on the Board & the bodies to which they belong are as follows:

Independent Chair

David Flinn

Community / Users

Communities

Aidan Crean (Friends of Falls Park)

Niall Enright (Upper Springfield Development Trust)

Recreation Groups

Alan McFarland - co-opted (NI Sports Forum)

Local Conservation Groups

Cormac Hamill (Cave Hill Conservation Campaign)

Maria Morgan (Ligoniel Improvement Association)

Landowning / Management

Farmers

Eugene Cunningham (Ulster Farmers Union)

Neale Fraser (Ulster Farmers Union)

Local Economic

Russell Drew (Belfast Hills Waste Management Operators)

Quarries

Craig Chisholm (Mineral Products Association NI)

Nature Conservation

Jenny Ferguson (National Trust)

Statutory

Cllr. Andrew McAuley (Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council)

Cllr. Micheal Donnelly (Belfast City Council)



Company Information

as at 31/03/2024



Directors

C Chisholm
A Crean
E Cunningham
M Donnelly
R Drew
N Enright
J Ferguson
D Flinn
N Fraser
C Hamill
A McAuley
A McFarland
M Morgan

Independent Chair & Director

D Flinn

Company Secretary

L Pinkerton

Treasurer

P McCloskey - co-opted

Company Number

NI053189

Charity Ref Numbers

XR70288 NIC100859

Auditors

MTS Accountants
1 Lanyon Quay
Belfast
BT1 3LG

Bankers

First Trust Bank
35 University Road
Belfast
BT 7 1ND

Solicitors

Cleaver Fulton Rankin
50 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7FW



Partnership Staff

as of 31/03/2024

Dr Jim Bradley, *Partnership Manager*

Dr Lizzy Pinkerton, *Scheme Manager*

Michelle McClafferty, *Administrative & Finance Manager (PT)*

Sara McCloskey, *Administrative Officer (PT)*

Judy Meharg, *Hills Project Officer (PT)*

Laura Shiels, *Woodland Officer*

Aodhan O'Kane, *Environmental Outreach Officer*

Elaine Armstrong, *Marketing Officer*

Patricia Deeney, *Conservation Officer (PT)*

Geoff Newell, *Conservation Officer (PT)*

Siobhan Thompson, *Conservation Officer (PT)*

Silvia Galli, *Wild Youth Officer (PT)*

Polly Garnett, *New to Nature Engagement Assistant (PT)*

Aaron Kelly, *Woodland Engagement & Volunteer Assistant (PT)*

Lisa Critchley, *Woodland Officer (left 12.04.23)*

Stephen Johnston, *Connectivity Officer (left 31.05.23)*

Clare Jones, *Scheme Manager (left 31.05.23)*

Kevin Moseley, *Group Facilitator (PT) (left 06.02.24)*



Chair's Report

This year has seen a lot of BHP team changes along with preparation for Jim Bradley's retirement and seeking a successor for the role of Partnership Manager. Despite all these changes a lot of great work has been undertaken by the Partnership over the past year.

One of the projects I would like to highlight is the Habitat Connectivity Project. This enabled us to use GIS mapping to examine the existing key habitats within the Belfast Hills and map areas to focus new habitat creation works which enable the creation of nature recovery networks (corridors for wildlife to safely move along).

Our woodland work continues to be very successful with 44,642 trees planted in the wider Belfast Hills area this season alone. This has involved the efforts of various volunteers, school groups, community groups and local landowners/businesses. Our Tree Nursery has continued to flourish, with twelve different species of native trees and shrubs along with thirteen species of wildflowers being propagated and planted in the hills. The Woodland Project is delivered thanks to partnership working and financial support from the Woodland Trust NI and Belfast City Council's One Million Trees programme, along with the hard work of our volunteers.

The BHP team continue to work with our various partners (especially local farmers and community groups along with the PSNI and UFU) on issues such as illegal dumping, scrambling and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Our camera surveillance resulted in the conviction of one fly-tipper in this season, and undoubtedly deterred many more.

A new partnership this year was with the West Belfast GP Federation who approached BHP about running a social prescribing walking programme, whereby they encouraged their patients to join BHP employees on a weekly walk to improve their health and wellbeing. The feedback from this programme was overwhelmingly positive and we hope to work with the GP Federation again in the future.

An ongoing highlight is the contact with the Belfast Health Trust, working with adults with learning difficulties - undertaking both regular walks and

talks. The enthusiasm of these clients along with their support staff make this a very rewarding programme for everyone involved.

I want to take this opportunity to express many thanks to you, the members - farmers, community groups, statutory organisations, commercial organisations and NGOs - for your work in guiding us through a busy year and also our employees who again have managed to deliver across such a wide range of projects and targets. I would like to in particular thank those that have left the Partnership, namely our past Board Observer Elaine Upton and our employees Clare Jones, Stephen Johnston and Kevin Moseley who left for pastures new. We wish them all every success in the future.

David Flinn

Chairperson, Belfast Hills Partnership



Manager's Report

This year has not just been busy for the Belfast Hills Partnership team, but also for our partner organisations in the hills. We have been delighted to support the National Trust as they purchased new lands at Glencairn, which will provide exciting new access opportunities for the residents of Belfast and beyond when open to the public. The National Trust also secured funding from the NLHF for improvements to their Divis and Black Mountain site (BHP employees have been involved with the advisory boards for this work). The BHP team have also supported the Upper Springfield Development Trust in their Black Mountain pathway project and Ligoniel Improvement Association as they acquired new land for biodiversity. In order to help facilitate the various developments with the Belfast Hills area a 'Senior Managers Project Development Group' was set up in February 2024.

Our conservation team have been very hard at work, with new ambitious targets set as part of DAERA's Environmental Fund 2023-2028, which was secured in June 2023. This new funding provides significant financial security for the organisation over the coming years.

Our 'Wild Youth' programme continues to successfully engage with local young people (with a particular focus on people from deprived backgrounds). Taking them out into the Belfast

Hills, helping them connect to nature, increasing their health and wellbeing through the '5 Ways to Wellbeing' framework. This work was also supported by our 'New to Nature Trainee' (a traineeship programme funded through Groundwork), providing a great boost to the employees and young people alike.

Another boost to BHP employees has been the presence of a full time Marketing Officer since July 2022. This has resulted not only in a Marketing Plan for the organisation, but someone to really drive the various social media platforms of the organisation - seeing an overall increase of followers from 9,743 to 13,749. It has enabled various campaigns to occur, focusing on how to behave in the hills, as well as a 'Hidden Heritage of the Hills' series to educate and excite people about the rich heritage of the Belfast Hills. We even had a video of foxes on Cave Hill go viral!

On an operational level we also made great strides - installing a new digital phone system, upgrading the Wi-Fi, overhauling the IT system so the server can be accessed remotely and passing Cyber Essentials Plus (an accreditation that checks the robustness of your IT systems). The BHP website is also in the process of being updated. These steps, although time consuming, have enabled us to operate more efficiently.

As always, a special word of thanks must go to our loyal team of volunteers who together have provided 3,619 hours of work, tackling a wide range of tasks from tree planting and biodiversity surveys to path clearing and litter collection. Without them we would not be able to have such a massive positive impact on the hills area!

The next few years will no doubt bring about a wide range of changes and challenges, but I believe that by working together - employees, volunteers and partners - we can continue to care for the Belfast Hills, their wildlife and people.

Lizzy Pinkerton

Manager, Belfast Hills Partnership



BHP Income & Expenditure

2023 - 2024

	2023-2024 £	2022-2023 £
Gross Income	461,754	466,133
Gross Expenditure	497,739	453,406
Surplus (Deficit)	(-35,985)	12,727
Total year end reserves	518,620	554,605

* This summary is based on the Independent Assessment for 2023-2024 carried out by MTS Accountants. (See full Assessment for details)



Improving

Making positive change on the ground

Woodland Creation: 44,642 trees planted (includes 20.7ha of new native woodland, 1,527m of hedgerow). 0.53ha of woodland restored. This work is supported by Belfast City Council's One Million Trees scheme and The Woodland Trust Northern Ireland

One Million Trees: 10 community planting events, 11 woodland workshops, six woodland walks. Two tree giveaways (200 trees given). Directly engaged with 1,228 members of the local community (not including BHP Volunteers). Engaged with 14 school groups through tree planting or Forest in a Box and 13 Hills farmers/landowners

Wildflowers: Propagation in the BHP Tree Nursery. Over 400 wildflower plugs planted at Cave Hill, Falls Park, Colin Glen, Glencairn Park and Old Colin Wood

Invasive Species: Controlled or removed at least seven invasive species including Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed, Himalayan Balsam, Pheasant Berry, Laurel, Salmonberry, Canadian Pondweed and Snowberry at ten sites

Tree Nursery: With the help of the volunteers we collected & propagated roughly 1,300 tree saplings for planting across 24 different sites. Tree species included hazel, rowan, crab apples, willow, hawthorn, oak, field maple, elm, dog rose, guelder rose, spindle and elder

Path maintenance: Volunteers carried out significant path restoration projects at Hazelwood (behind Belfast Zoo) and at Old Colin Wood. Volunteers also cleared vegetation from paths on Cave Hill, Upper & Lower Colin Glen, Colin Allotments & Ligoniel

Litter lifts & river cleans: Conducted at Carrs Glen, Glencairn, Forthriver, Glas na Braden Glen, Ligoniel Park & Dams, Colin Glen, Old Colin Wood, Ballygomartin Rd, Valley Park and Carnmoney Hill

Fly-tipping: Cameras re-installed on the Ballycolin, Ballyhill & Ballygomartin Roads plus new remote cameras installed at three different locations. Evidence gathered in fly-tipping surveys & reports was passed on to partner Councils for enforcement



Volunteers completed historic path restoration of the Hazelwood path, dating from the early 1900s



Involving

Getting people involved in managing their places

We have engaged directly with a wide range of people to ensure they appreciate, use or help to manage areas in the Hills:

Field Volunteering: 517 full days of volunteering time were gained, an equivalent of £25,825 value was gained. This included 52 new recruits along with a core group of about 30 regular volunteers

Trainee Rangers: 15 young people took part in a 15 week training programme to introduce them to careers in the Environmental Sector. Through this they gained Lantra accreditation, John Muir Explorer Award and the Silver Wild Youth Award

Health: Series of 32 Zoom Wildlife talks and 59 short walks in more local areas, for over 600 adults with learning difficulties, plus other one-off walks for groups

Training: Trained 316 volunteers & members of the public in topics such as tree, fungi, wildflower, moths, butterfly and bee identification, badger, bat and habitat surveying, hedgelaying workshops, bird ID and survey training, seed ID and collection training

**An equivalent value
of £25,825
gained by
dedicated volunteer
work**





Learning

Gathering & spreading info to help engage people & make changes

Young People: 408 11-25 year olds were directly involved with our Wild Youth Scheme. 50% of these young people have participated on a regular basis (three or more sessions). 63% of these young people are from deprived areas. 182 awards were given to young people participating in long-term engagement

Events Programme: We held 16 public events. All events were fully booked, however a number of "no shows" occurred

Online info & campaigns: Over 24k sessions (N.B. stats missing for March-May due to Google Analytics switchover) on our website. 13.7k combined followers across social media platforms

Mapping Wildfires: There were only two wildfires of sufficient size to be mapped in 2023-24; Cave Hill and Divis

Biodiversity Surveys: Our ongoing biodiversity surveys generally showed steady population figures for most key species and habitats. Surveys included badgers, bats, newts, pine martens, riverfly, meadow pipits & skylarks, butterflies, moths and lizards

Fixed Point Photography: We completed four seasons of Fixed Point Photography visits, taking repeat images from six locations to record long term changes & impacts



408 young people were involved with the Wild Youth project



Planning

Working out how best to manage the hills in future

As well as producing and carrying out our more general strategic plans, we have taken part or assisted in forward planning in the following ways:

Local Development Plans: We have been monitoring the ongoing council development plans and assisted planning staff in their reviews of designated sites and access points

Planning Proposals: We looked at 12 applications relating to the Belfast Hills area and responded to 10 of these

BHP Strategic Planning: BHP was awarded funding from NIEA's Environment Fund from 2023-2028 on the basis of prepared major strategic plans, including proposed works in terms of Landscape Management and Connecting with People. Recruitment for a new Partnership Manager to strategically lead the organisation after Jim's retirement was undertaken, with thanks due to the Board Members who dedicated so much of their time to making this happen

Marketing Plan: The Marketing Plan, which covers marketing activities from 2023-2025, was completed in August 2023 with immediate implementation

**Belfast Hills
Partnership were
awarded major
NIEA funding
from 2023 - 2028**



BHP Mission & Objectives

The mission for the Belfast Hills Partnership is to:

- Provide a practical and integrated management mechanism for the Belfast Hills
- Contribute to the conservation, protection and enhancement of its natural, built & cultural heritage and providing for responsible countryside enjoyment
- Contribute to the quality of life of communities on the fringes of the Belfast Hills, rural residents of the area and to the wider urban & rural environment
- Work in partnership with others towards the realisation of the Belfast Hills vision, within a Belfast Hills Integrated Management Plan

The strategic aims of the Partnership are to:

- Conserve, protect and enhance the natural, cultural and built heritage of the Belfast Hills
- Encourage individuals, communities and organisations to care for the Belfast Hills
- Raise awareness of the value of the Belfast Hills and of issues relating to their protection
- Manage existing recreational use of the Belfast Hills
- Support and assist farmers and landowners under pressure from urban development, and from inappropriate forms of countryside recreation
- Contribute to the economic regeneration of communities in the Belfast Hills and adjoining city
- Contribute to a positive image of Belfast, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and Antrim through an attractive, well managed and functioning visual backdrop to these areas



BHP Key Messages

The key messages for the Belfast Hills Partnership marketing are:

**The Hills as a Resource
Partnership Working
Addressing Issues**



**Sustainable Conservation
Get Involved
Health & Wellbeing**



Belfast Hills Partnership

We would like to extend special thanks to our funders



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