

ADDENDUM TO MOUNTAIN BIKE SITE ASSESSMENTS

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1 DOWNHILL SITES

During the initial study several sites were identified where dedicated downhill facilities could be developed.

These were as follows.

- Binevenagh
- Iniscairn
- Cave Hill
- Rostrevor

Tollymore was added to this list at a later stage and was visited as part of this study.

The assessment of the proposed sites was carried out in the context of the proposed market i.e. Downhillers/Freeriders

1.1 THE MARKET

This is a small, though very significant, group of cyclists that is growing rapidly. Downhillers and Freeriders are very highly skilled though not particularly fit riders who are interested only in the technical aspects of mountain biking.

They are predominantly young males of between 14 and 25 and they are likely to be involved with similar activities such as snowboarding, skateboarding or surfing.

This is a very specialised activity where technical challenge and speed is everything and increasingly the bikes are becoming more and more specialised themselves.

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This has led to Downhillers developing their own trails that can pose a challenge to them and their bikes, but are causing serious problems to landowners and countryside managers.

Free riding is slightly different to Downhill in that it involves riders riding within a small area where there are ramps, jumps and drops.

Where these do not exist naturally Freeriders will build their own, often creating elaborate networks of trails and jumps in a small area.

These are changed and modified on a regular basis with riders often spending as much time digging and building jumps as actually riding.

Both downhill and Freeriding are particularly prevalent in urban fringe areas.

This is most likely due to the fact that most participants are relatively young and therefore less able to travel to other areas.

The fact that both Downhillers and Freeriders are happy to concentrate their activities within a relatively small area indicates that there is also a social aspect to this sort of riding with groups of riders preferring to congregate.

This can cause problems for other countryside users in these areas, particularly where visitor pressure is high.

The development of successful dedicated facilities for downhillers at Fort William and Innerleathen (both in Scotland) indicate that the market is also mobile and prepared to travel for a particular product.

Market profile

- Males 14 - 25
- High disposable income
- Involved in other "extreme" sports such as surfing, skateboarding and BMX
- Prepared to travel
- Small volume but high value

1.2 THE PRODUCT

The Downhill/Freeride product should meet the following criteria.

- Easy access to the top and the bottom
- Significant elevation (200m minimum)
- Challenging though not inherently unsafe riding
- Useable for events
- Flexible though consistent standard
- Uplift to the top
- Rideable in all weather at all times of the year
- Sustainable, both physically and financially
- Variety of downhill courses for different abilities

1.3 OUTPUTS

The development of dedicated facilities for this market is intended to produce the following outputs

- To provide a high quality recreational resource for both the wider and local community.
- To increase local tourism income.
- To create a facility which can be used for high profile events.
- To encourage more short break visitors in addition to increasing day visitor numbers
- To create income generation opportunities at the site.

1.4 MANAGEMENT

Land managers have particular considerations where the development of Downhill/Freeride facilities are concerned

These are

- Managing potential conflict with other recreational users both on the trails and around visitor facilities
- Sustainability of the trail
- The safety of trail users.
- Liability

All of the above issues must be addressed if a successful product, which produces the outputs outlined above, can be developed.

1.5 SITE ASSESSMENT

The assessment of the sites indicated above was carried out within the context of the market, the product, potential outputs and management.

The main criteria for assessment were as follows

- Access - How accessible is the site to the potential market both in terms of the local and tourism markets.
- Uplift - Does suitable uplift already exist and are there viable opportunities to develop it.
- Facilities - What level of visitor facilities are available on site including parking, toilets and refreshments.
- Visitor management - are there any potential visitor management issues at the site that might effect the viability of a downhill/freeride product.
- Constraints and conflicts - What factors might seriously constrain the development of a viable downhill/freeride product and what conflicts or potential conflicts exist between different user groups.
- Existing downhill/freeride activity - Is the site currently used by downhillers/freeriders and in what way.
- Ground Conditions - What is the soil type and how might this effect the feasibility of trail construction.
- Elevation - How much elevation exists and is there sufficient to allow for the development of a viable downhill/freeride product.
- Topography - What is the nature of the topography and does it allow for the development of a viable downhill/freeride product and could it compliment any potential development.
- Estimated costs - What are the estimated costs of creating an effective mountain bike product including estimated trail construction costs per meter, estimated length of trail required and any other costs such as car parks, toilets and signage. Trail construction costs include, clearing the trail corridor, groundwork, and hand finishing, labour and materials.

1.6 BINEVENAGH

This is a large block of mixed woodland of great character with superb coastal views, areas of high ground and dramatic scenery.

1.6.1 Uplift

There is access to the top of the site via a very long forest road, which is also part of the NCN. It is estimated that uplift time would be around 20 - 30 minutes each way

1.6.2 Access

Very good access from main coastal road and around 30 minutes from Londonderry, though access to the ROI markets may be limited by distance.

1.6.3 Facilities

There are no visitor facilities at present, other than a small car park, but there is scope to develop some redundant Forest Service buildings

1.6.4 Visitor Management

Apart from the NCN there appears to be very limited recreational use of the forest. Visitor management would be straightforward but substantial infrastructure development would be needed.

1.6.5 Constraints and Conflicts

The main constraint is likely to be the conservation interest and possibly the stability of the ground on the steeper slopes. Felling may be a constraint on development with some coups programmed for the period up to 2007.

1.6.6 Existing Downhill/Freeride activity

There are a number of unsanctioned downhill courses, which appeared well used. Anecdotal evidence from local riders suggests that the area is already well used by downhillers who would appear to be accessing the area via the NCN and pushing up the courses.

1.6.7 Ground Conditions

Basalt Rankers for the most part, some Glay.

1.6.8 Elevation

Up to 400m

1.6.9 Topography

Steep scarp slope with large crags and cliffs and highly featured side slopes.

1.6.10 Estimated costs

Estimated average cost per meter	£ 10p/m
Estimated length of trail required	8km
Uplift	£ 20K
Toilets, car parking, signage	£ 50K

Total £150k

1.6.11 Comments

The site does show some potential for development, but uplift is not ideal in that it is narrow, steep and would require ongoing maintenance. The uplift route also constrains the development of a viable product in that it would constrain development to one course. Considerable investment would be required to develop appropriate visitor facilities at the site. However, the lack of visitor pressure and potential conflict is a positive factor.

1.7 INISCAIRN

This is a small block of mixed woodland on the side of an isolated hill in a relatively remote rural setting.

1.7.1 Uplift

There is access to the top of the site via a forest road, which is in good condition, but some work such as widening and re-grading would be required. It is estimated that uplift time would be around 10 - 15 minutes each way

1.7.2 Access

Very poor access to the site along a maze of narrow minor roads

1.7.3 Facilities

There are no visitor facilities at present.

1.7.4 Visitor Management

There appears to be little or no recreational use of the forest at present. However considerable investment in suitable infrastructure would be required to ensure successful visitor management here

1.7.5 Constraints and Conflicts

The main constraint here is likely to be the very small size of the forest block and the fact that the only available uplift goes straight through the middle of the block.

1.7.6 Existing Downhill/Freeride activity

There appears to be no activity of this kind at this site.

1.7.7 Ground Conditions

Pelosols and Rankers

1.7.8 Elevation

Approximately 300 m

1.7.9 Topography

One continuous relatively un-featured side slope between 30 and 40%.

1.7.10 Estimated costs

Estimated average cost per meter	£ 12p/m
Estimated length of trail required	4 - 5 km for downhill
Toilets, car parking, signage	£50k
Uplift	£20k
Total	£ 130k

1.7.11 Comments

The elevation and ground conditions could allow for the cost-effective development of a downhill mountain bike product, though this would be of limited extent, due largely to the limited size of the site. The uniform topography would require the construction of challenging features to create a viable product and this would increase the cost. Some significant investment would be required to create workable uplift and further investment would be required to create dedicated visitor facilities. The remote setting of the site means that a facility could be created, which does not conflict with other recreational users. However it is debatable whether a facility of sufficiently high quality could be developed at such a small site, which could attract a large enough market to make it viable.

1.8 ROSTREVOR

Extensive mixed woodland (1695 hectares) with large areas of high open ground.

1.8.1 Uplift

Some opportunities do exist though the forest road network would conflict with any potential route development. It may be possible to make use of a tar road at the eastern end of the site, though some investment would be required to extend this westwards.

1.8.2 Access

Excellent access from main east coast road. Rostrevor is located roughly half way between Dublin and Belfast making this accessible to the ROI markets as well.

1.8.3 Facilities

Excellent and very extensive visitor facilities in Kilbroney Park that include café, children's play area, caravan and camping park and ample car parking.

1.8.4 Visitor Management

The site is well used by other recreational users who seem to confine their activities to the area around the visitor facilities. Great care and considerable investment would be required to ensure effective visitor management at this site.

1.8.5 Constraints and Conflicts

Visitor conflict may be an issue the visitor centre and caravan and camping park. There is also a network of walking and pony trails. Conservation constraints are likely to centre on a PAWS site.

1.8.6 Existing Downhill/Free ride activity

Some unsanctioned trail construction has been carried out by local enthusiasts including several downhill routes. Mountain biking activities seems to be restricted to a few immediate locals using existing trails and developing a few of their own. However the site has been used in the past for organised events both downhill and cross-country.

1.8.7 Ground Conditions

Very rocky with extensive scree slopes with no soil profile or Shale Rankers.

1.8.8 Elevation

Up to 500m

1.8.9 Topography

Very extensive and highly featured side slope forming the south western side of a valley with several large re-entrant gorges and hanging valleys. Also several isolated summits on open ground.

1.8.10 Estimated costs

Estimated average cost per meter	£20p/m
Estimated length of trail required	6km
Uplift	£30k
Visitor management	£20k
Total	£170k

1.8.11 Comments

The elevation, topography and ground conditions at Rostrevor particularly the very rocky nature of the ground and the dramatically steep side slopes make the development of world class downhill courses and freeride opportunities more viable than elsewhere. The steep side slopes and the abundant rock make it possible to create a sustainable product, which meets the needs of the market. However very considerable investment would be required to create viable uplift and to address some particularly difficult visitor Management issues.

1.9 CAVE HILL

Urban fringe Country Park consisting of mixed woodland, parkland, farmland and open mountain.

1.9.1 Uplift

A main "A" road does provide access to a car park near the top of the hill on the eastern side of the park. Opportunities for other means of uplift are very limited, the only option being a track leading from a small car park on Upper Cavehill Road to the eastern car park.

1.9.2 Access

Excellent access from Belfast city centre

1.9.3 Facilities

Limited car parking, high quality restaurant in Belfast castle, quality children's play area and a very extensive network of formal walks. There is also an orienteering area.

1.9.4 Visitor Management

Visitor management is likely to be a major issue due to the constrained nature of the site and the vary high visitor pressure

1.9.5 Constraints and Conflicts

The main constraint is the actual network of existing trails. The topography in places may constrain trail development due to the high cliffs. There are also likely to be some conservation constraints. There are considerable existing conflicts relating to the unsanctioned use of walking trails by mountain bikers and motorcyclists. Other constraints are the limited scope for developing adequate car parking and visitor management systems.

1.9.6 Existing Downhill/Freeride Activity

Very considerable use of walking trails and considerable unsanctioned trail development in particular by downhillers. Many of the walking trails that are used by mountain bikers are becoming seriously eroded and there are serious safety and conflict concerns.

1.9.7 Ground Conditions

The soils are likely to be Podsolis or Brown Earths on basalt and limestone.

1.9.8 Elevation

Up to 300m.

1.9.9 Topography

Very extensive and highly featured side slopes in places featuring areas of complex terrain such as knolls, re-entrants, rock outcrops and old quarries. Gradients range from 20 through to 100 %.

1.9.10 Estimated cost

Estimated average cost per meter	£ 10 p/m
Estimated length of trail required	3km

Visitor management	£50k
Total	£80k

1.9.11 Comments

The nature of the existing trail network at Cavehill virtually acts as a magnet for local mountain bikers. The trails themselves are of high quality and usable in most weather conditions and link together some particularly strong PCP's such as McArts Fort, caves and the crags. However, the design of the trails does not lend itself to them being shared use hence the development of the considerable conflict issues. The existing trail system should be reassessed and possibly redesigned to enable safe multi use by both walkers and cyclists. Although a suitable location, already well used by mountain bikers, the limited size would prevent development of this site as part of a strategic cycle tourism product. It seems clear from anecdotal evidence that there is a great deal of local demand for trails that can be accessed by mountain bikers who live in the immediate Belfast area. Some local provision needs to be considered to cater for this ever-increasing demand and also to manage the considerable conflict issues.

1.10 TOLLYMORE

A medium sized block consisting of mixed conifer species and broadleaves of around 600 ha, close to the coastal resort of Newcastle at the foot of the Mourne Mountains.

1.10.1 Uplift

There are numerous opportunities for uplift using the extensive network of well-maintained forest roads

1.10.2 Access

Excellent access from the main road less than two miles from the centre of Newcastle and around 45 minutes from Belfast.

1.10.3 Facilities

Very high quality visitor facilities consisting of ample car parking, Ranger station and a café, which is currently closed, two toilet blocks, large caravan site and a well-maintained network of waymarked walking and pony trails. The Ulster Way also traverses the whole block along the southern boundary.

1.10.4 Visitor Management

There are major visitor management issues here, in particular areas of conflict around the car parks and the limited number of river crossings. There are also concerns about riders leaving the car parks downhill and moving at speed

1.10.5 Constraints and Conflicts

The main constraint on development would be visitor pressure and visitor management around any trailhead, the existing trails and limited river crossing points are also a constraint. Conflicts between local residents, walkers, horse riders and mountain bikers seem to be increasing. The

number of forest roads would also constrain the development of downhill courses in that high speed crossings of forest roads should be avoided.

1.10.6 Existing Downhill/Free ride activity

Very extensive use of existing trails and also considerable unsanctioned trail development by downhillers. The forest has played host to national downhill championship events. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Tollymore is in fact a day visit destination for mountain bikers from all parts of the region.

1.10.7 Ground Conditions

Brown Earths on Granite and Shale Till and Glay on Shale Till.

1.10.8 Elevation

Average 160 m

1.10.9 Topography

Narrow river valley with very extensive and highly featured side slope of up to 100%, but averaging between 25 - 50% to the south. Gentler and slightly less extensive side slope of around 20 - 30 % to the North, Two distinct summits are the main feature of the whole block.

1.10.10 Estimated costs

Estimated average cost per meter	£ 12p/m
Estimated length of trail required	5 km
Car parking, signage and visitor management	£30k
Uplift	£ 10k
Total	£ 100k

1.10.11 Comments

Excellent ground conditions and elevation could allow for the development of a downhill/freeride product, but development would be constrained by visitor pressure and management issues both in the development of downhill courses, but also in and around the visitor facilities. The relatively un-featured nature of the side slopes would require the construction of more challenging features into the courses, which would increase costs. The layout of the site would require that totally separate facilities such as parking and toilets would be required along with access from the main road in an area well away from the existing visitor facilities.

2 CONCLUSION

In the context of the market, the product required and some of the management issues, all of the sites that were assessed fall short of providing perfect sites for the development of a viable downhill/freeride product.

Binevenagh has good elevation and ground conditions, also very few visitor management issues, but uplift is far from ideal.

It is also a long way from the potential markets and the nature of the site would make it very difficult to create a product of sufficient quality to attract the market to that location.

Forest Service should address the existing downhill activity, by engaging with whoever is developing the unsanctioned trails and working with them.

It may well be that a local club could develop a local facility here, which could be managed in partnership.

Iniscairn has no visitor management issues but the site is very small and the only uplift option does constrain the development of downhill tracks.

It is more that possible to develop a good product here, but great care with design would be required and the ground conditions and topography mean that work would be needed to design in challenging features into tracks.

There is also a need to develop all new visitor facilities at the site.

Whilst this site is a blank canvas, so to speak, and that it is possible to develop a product, which would meet the needs of the market and would not cause undue management issues, access is so poor that this would affect the long-term viability.

Having said that if the facility developed here were to be of sufficiently high quality it may still draw the market in.

Tollymore is a very complex site with major conflict and liability issues.

The site is currently used by downhillers and the downhill tracks themselves do not cause the landowner undue concern in their present form.

But the landowner does have grave concerns about visitor management around the parking areas and the river crossings.

Whilst downhill activity here is confined to relatively few riders, it may be possible to manage the conflict issues by creating alternative access for downhillers.

If however a formal downhill product were to be developed here, very considerable investment would be needed to prevent conflicts with other users.

Any downhill product here would be fairly limited in scope and size, due to the limitations of the site, such as potential for conflict and safety concerns, but it would probably be very popular with the market.

If dedicated facilities were not developed here, there would still be a need to address the current situation of unsanctioned use.

It may be possible for a more low key local facility to be developed here, or for some element of downhill provision to be made as part of a cross-country product.

Rostrevor is the site with the greatest potential for the development of a viable downhill product.

The ground conditions and topography allow for the development of a sustainable, robust and very high quality riding product, which would meet the needs of the market.

However there are issues relating to the viability of uplift, which could be addressed, but only by considerable investment.

There are also major concerns relating to visitor management and conflict around the car parks, café and caravan park area.

These could be addressed, but again only after very considerable investment in additional car parking and other dedicated facilities.

The quality of any downhill/freeride product at Rostrevor could be such that potential outputs could justify the need for investment in visitor management systems.

It is likely that any product developed here would be very popular, due largely to easy access to the market.

Cavehill has major management issues, which must be addressed on a broad scale.

It would be almost impossible to develop a dedicated downhill product here without re-designing the wider trail network.

Any dedicated downhill facility here would conflict with current use if the existing trail network remains the same, but there is also a need to meet the obvious demand for downhill/freeride opportunities locally.

The unsanctioned downhill track towards the western end of the site seems to only be used by a fairly hard core local element, and this in itself does not cause a problem.

The issue for the land manager is riders conflicting with other users whilst accessing and leaving the site.

If the existing downhill route could be consolidated and some management systems introduced, in partnership with local rides, this may help resolve this issue.

This site though is not appropriate for the development of a dedicated downhill/freeride product.

PROPOSED DOWNHILL SITES SCORING

SITE	UPLIFT	ACCESS	FACILITIES	CONSTRAINTS/ CONFLICTS	VISITOR MANAGEMENT	GROUND CONDITIONS	TOPOGRAPHY	ELEVATION	COST	SCORE
Binevenagh	2	3	1	3	4	4	4	5	3	28
Iniscairn	3	1	0	4	4	4	3	4	2	25
Rostrevor	2	5	5	3	2	5	5	5	2	34
Cavehill	1	5	2	1	1	4	4	4	2	24
Tollymore	3	5	5	1	1	5	4	4	2	30