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Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

Mourne Mountains Gateway Project

Phase 1 Engagement Summary Report
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Executive Summary

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project (MMGP) is a project promoted by Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council (NMDDC) with an aim to enhance tourism, support local economic growth, and celebrate the unique natural heritage of the Mournes. This report captures the outcomes of Phase 1 of public and stakeholder engagement, a crucial step in shaping the project based on community insights.

Phase 1 engagement reached over 1,000 participants through public events, surveys, school sessions and stakeholder workshops. While the project has sparked interest in the potential benefits of sustainable tourism, it has also encountered significant public objections. This feedback has been instrumental in identifying key themes, allowing NMDDC to refine the proposal and address specific concerns.

One of the most pressing issues raised was the financial credibility of the project's business case. Many participants expressed scepticism about the projected visitor numbers, anticipated revenue, and the transparency of the economic assumptions underpinning the proposal. Addressing this concern through greater financial clarity and more accessible information on the project's feasibility and business case will be critical in building community support.

Environmental concerns also featured prominently, with apprehensions about the project's potential impact on biodiversity and the Mourne landscape. However, participants appeared more receptive to the council's approach of addressing these issues through the statutory planning process, including comprehensive environmental impact assessments and mitigation measures.

The consultation also revealed a perceived lack of transparency in decision-making, with many stakeholders questioning how the project had progressed to this stage. This has underscored the need for more open communication and engagement to rebuild trust and demonstrate how feedback is shaping the project's development.

Despite these concerns, the engagement activities identified opportunities for improvement, such as integrating educational and heritage-focused features, exploring sustainable transport options, and refining trail enhancements to align with local values and priorities.

Moving forward, there must be a focus on refining the engagement strategy for Phase 2 to prioritise community and knowledge group consultations while ensuring targeted and constructive feedback. Increased transparency, particularly around the financial business case, and clearer communication of project benefits and trade-offs will be pivotal in addressing public concerns.

Contents

Appendices

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this Report

This report presents an overview of the public and stakeholder engagement activities undertaken as part of the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project (MMGP), a transformative project aimed at enhancing sustainable tourism, preserving natural heritage, and supporting the local economy. The report outlines the feedback gathered during phase 1 of engagement, explains how this input can shape the project's development, and sets the stage for future engagement. It is structured to provide a chronological account of engagement efforts to date, beginning with the early (pre-phase 1) Information Day in March 2023 which was carried out prior to the appointment of the current Integrated Consultancy Team (ICT). Each section summarises the purpose of these activities, the themes emerging from community feedback, and the actions taken in response. The report concludes with insights into how the feedback will inform Phase 2 engagement and beyond, ensuring the MMGP reflects both community aspirations and sustainable development principles.

1.2 Structure of the Report

The report is laid out in the following structure:

Section 1: Introduction to the project and the engagement strategy

Section 2: Summary of previous engagement data collected

Section 3: Identifying Phase 1 engagement activities

Section 4: Analysis of engagement collected in Phase 1

Section 5: Recommendations and next steps

1.3 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy was developed to provide the guiding principles and processes, as well as supporting tools to support Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council (NMDDC) and the project team in the effective, continuous and inclusive engagement, participation and management of the project stakeholders. It outlines how, when and with whom the project delivery team shall engage with throughout the various stages of the project's lifecycle. The strategy is a living document which will be updated and added to as appropriate.

The programme for developing the MMGP is complex and involves inputs from a variety of stakeholders and design disciplines. Also, the scale of the project aspirations and its wide-ranging scope means that it will impact multiple stakeholders and communities.

The engagement of various stakeholder groups (i.e., institutional, technical, private sector, community organisations and vulnerable groups) through the project is critical to inform the MMGP development process and ensure that it is founded on a strong basis of local knowledge and inputs from all engaged and affected parties.

As noted above, previous engagement activity was undertaken in the early concept development stages of the MMGP, prior to the appointment of the current ICT, and includes The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project Stakeholder Engagement & Communication Strategy (NMDDC, August 2023) and the Report for Environmental and Ecological Review of the Mourne Gateway Project (RSK, June 2022). These documents along with the pre-phase 1 engagement feedback from March 2023 were used to shape the current Stakeholder Engagement Strategy.

The strategy is broken down in 3 main phases:

Phase 1 of active (non-stat) community stakeholder and local business engagement, to draw out broader community and key interest groups responses.

Phase 2 *of active (non-stat) community stakeholder, local business engagement and other key stakeholders, aimed at refining "What We Heard" from Phase 1.*

Phase 3 *Formal Pre-application Community Consultation (PACC), statutory process for Major planning application, to present all engagement and design changes, focus on how engagement has helped the process.*

Activities throughout the engagement phases include business webinars, school workshops, public drop-in events, online surveys, community group meetings, various meetings, calls and email discussions. To support the engagement events, NMDDC have also initiated the formation of a Project Stakeholder Forum, which will be made up of representatives from a broad range of local community groups and organisations.

1.3.1 Stakeholder mapping

Whilst developing the Stakeholder Engagement Strategy, NMDDC and Arup undertook a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise to identify all relevant local stakeholders. These can be summarised as follows:

- Institutions and organisations including government departments, companies, and agencies;

- Community stakeholders including schools, associations, and sports;

- Residents and businesses within Newcastle and surrounding areas;

- Land steward stakeholders; and

- Investors.

The full table including identified stakeholders is included in Appendix A.

Several meetings have since been held with key land stewards, including the National Trust and Mourne Heritage Trust, to introduce the project and project team. These discussions provided an opportunity to outline the planned studies, surveys, and assessments, explain the programme and phases of engagement, and ensure that the process was subject to rigorous scrutiny. The objective was to identify risks, constraints, and potential showstoppers early while offering ample opportunities for ongoing engagement with these organisations and other stakeholders.

Community groups, sports clubs, interest groups, businesses, and other local organisations have also been contacted via email. They were invited to participate in various engagement activities, including a business webinar, public events, an online survey, and the NMDDC Project Stakeholder Forum,. In addition, they were asked if they would like to engage further, with reassurances that follow-up sessions would be arranged during Phase 2. Several groups and individuals have expressed interest in further engagement, which will be explored further as part of Phase 2, particularly once attendees for the stakeholder forum are confirmed.

Specialists within the ICT have also initiated informal pre-application discussions with statutory bodies and consultees. This includes organisations such as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the Department for Infrastructure Roads (DFI Roads), and Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council's Environmental Health Office (EHO). These discussions have been instrumental in informing the scope of required surveys, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) scoping, and other preparatory activities. This proactive approach ensures alignment with regulatory requirements and supports the comprehensive planning of the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project.

2. Previous Feedback Collection

The Information Day held in March 2023 at O'Hare's, Newcastle, served as an early opportunity for NMDDC to gather community feedback on the MMGP. This engagement, conducted before the current engagement strategy was developed, involved collecting a wide range of opinions, concerns, and suggestions from attendees through open discussions, written submissions, and survey responses. The data was subsequently analysed and thematically organised to identify recurring issues and questions raised by the public.

A total of 143 submissions were received between comments on the day and follow-up emails. Digitised data from this feedback collection is included in Appendix B.

2.1.1   Key feedback themes
The March 2023 engagement revealed consistent concerns across several areas:

- Project alternatives: Questions about whether other options, aside from the gondola, should have been pursued.

- Consultation processes: Frustration about a perceived lack of transparency and engagement opportunities prior to this event.

- Traffic and accessibility: Concerns about increased congestion and the importance of creating inclusive infrastructure.

- Environmental and visual impact: Apprehensions about the potential ecological disruption and changes to the Mourne landscape.

- Financial viability: Scepticism surrounding the long-term economic feasibility of the project.

These are explored further below.

2.1.2   Alternatives to the Scheme
Some respondents suggested alternatives to the project. They proposed a project with multiple attractions dispersed around the Mournes, each with a unique theme and capable of absorbing visitors without significant impact. Suggested attractions included an inclined lift at Ben Crom reservoir, a viewpoint structure at Spelga dam, and an elevated walkway trail in Tollymore. These alternatives aimed to provide sustainable and innovative visitor experiences while addressing the environmental and safety concerns associated with the gondola proposal.

2.1.3   Consultation and communications
Submissions highlighted a lack of previous public consultation regarding the proposed development. Many respondents felt that the local population had not been adequately informed or involved in the planning process. There was a strong sentiment that the project appeared to be a 'done deal,' with decisions made without meaningful community input. This perceived lack of transparency and participation was seen as anti-democratic and led to distrust towards the event organisers.

Participants at the information session expressed frustration over the absence of detailed information and the use of 'buzzwords without substance'. They questioned the validity of the projected visitor numbers and the overall feasibility of the project. Concerns were raised about the lack of environmental, community, and heritage impact assessments, which were promised to be conducted later. The timing of the information session on a weekday was also criticised as a deliberate attempt to limit public participation. Attendees noted that the presentation materials suggested that almost all areas of detail were matters for further consideration, which seemed unsuitable given the timeline for planning approval and completion.

Overall, the feedback called for more comprehensive and transparent consultation processes. Respondents requested that plans and updates be published online and in local newspapers, and that any tender processes

be open and independent to avoid bias. There was a clear call for the council to engage more effectively with local residents and other stakeholders to ensure that their concerns and needs were addressed before proceeding with the project. Given the significant potential impacts on landscape value, council finances, environmental sustainability, and community trust, there was a strong demand for a detailed environmental impact assessment to be made available for public consultation.

2.1.4   Cost and business case

Submissions highlighted significant concerns about the financial risks and legitimacy of the business case for the project. Respondents were sceptical about the assumptions underlying the economic appraisal, questioning the projected visitor numbers, admission fees, and overall revenue generation, expressing doubts about the feasibility and sustainability of the project. There were also concerns about the high costs of construction, maintenance, and operation, and whether these expenses would fall on local taxpayers.

Several respondents emphasised the need for a detailed economic appraisal and transparent financial planning to justify the project's viability. There were worries that the gondola might not attract enough visitors to be financially sustainable, leading to a potential financial burden on the local community. The feedback also highlighted concerns about the potential for the project to operate at a loss during periods of low demand, which could further strain local finances. Additionally, respondents noted that the money could be better spent on other projects that would provide more tangible benefits to the community, such as improving existing infrastructure and amenities.

The feedback also raised issues about the impact of the project on local rates and the overall financial health of the community. Respondents were worried that the high costs associated with the gondola could lead to increased rates for local residents, who might not see direct benefits from the project. There were also concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of the gondola, particularly given the potential for high maintenance costs and the impact of adverse weather conditions on its operation.

Additionally, respondents questioned the legitimacy of the business case for the project, suggesting that the money could be better spent on other projects that would provide more tangible benefits to the community.

2.1.5   Environmental impact

The engagement feedback highlighted several key concerns regarding the environmental risks associated with the proposed development. Firstly, there was apprehension about the impact on local wildlife and biodiversity due to the rich native woodland and diverse species within Donard Park, including red squirrels, badgers, pine martens, and various birds. Respondents believed that the development could potentially destroy this habitat, leading to a loss of biodiversity. There was a specific concern about the threat to the red squirrel population, a protected species, due to the disruption caused by the gondola's construction and operation. The feedback also included specific queries about the project's environmental impact assessments, including the proposed transportation routes for construction materials, and the potential effects on nocturnal animals due to lighting.

Concerns regarding the impact of the proposed gondola project on the red squirrel population in Donard Forest were raised. It was noted that red squirrels, a protected species, rely on mature Scots Pine and other native trees for food and shelter, and that the construction and operation of the gondola could disrupt their habitat, potentially driving them away and reducing the size of this precious woodland. Furthermore, it was stated that the gondola's ropeway through Donard Forest could cause considerable disruption to wildlife and the broader natural environment.

Submissions raised concerns about littering and waste management associated with the proposed development. Many respondents worried that the gondola would lead to an increase in litter on the mountains, as visitors might discard waste along the way. There were also concerns about how the council would manage the additional waste generated by the projected increase in visitors, given that they already struggled to keep the town clean during busy periods. Additionally, there were worries about the disposal of waste from the visitor centre and the overall impact of increased footfall on the area's natural beauty and wildlife.

Additionally, there was strong opposition to the aesthetic and environmental impact of the development on the Mourne landscape. The construction and increased footfall could lead to further environmental degradation and disturbance to wildlife. The development was seen by respondents as an eyesore that could ruin the natural beauty and charm of Newcastle. The feedback highlighted the importance of considering the long-term sustainability and environmental impact of the project. Concerns about climate change, increased traffic, and the carbon footprint of the development were prominent.

2.1.6   Operations

Submissions featured general queries over how the development will operate, including:

- Number of operational days per year and Number of closure days due to maintenance, repair and safety inspection

- Opening hours

- Capacity of cable cars per hour

- Ticket pricing

- Spend per visitor

- Average length of stay per out-of-town visitor

- Body responsible for operating the gondola/ visitor centre – NMDDC or outside contractor?

Furthermore, responses queried whether access to trails across the mountain will still be available to frequent users and how frequent high winds will impact operation of the gondola. Many respondents were concerned that the proposed gondola will not allow visitors to exit at the top, limiting their experience to a brief ride and a contained area due to health and safety reasons. This restriction raises doubts about the project's value, as visitors may not be able to fully explore the Mournes or enjoy the views, potentially making the gondola ride less appealing and beneficial.

2.1.7   Safety

Submissions highlighted several general safety concerns and risks associated with the proposed development. Respondents were worried about the need for lights to avoid collisions with helicopters and hang gliders, and the potential noise pollution from a central motor station in Donard Park affecting nearby residents. There were also concerns about the safety of the gondolas passing over Shimna Integrated College and the potential for vandalism at the glass viewing area in the quarry. The disposal of sewage from new toilet facilities and the overall management of waste were also significant concerns. Respondents emphasised the need for comprehensive safety assessments and detailed planning to address these issues.

The engagement feedback highlighted significant concerns about the impact of wind on the proposed gondola project. Respondents questioned the feasibility of operating the gondola year-round, given the strong winds and storms that frequently affect the area. There were worries about the safety of the gondola during high winds, which could lead to frequent closures and maintenance issues. Additionally, the potential for wind to cause noise pollution and affect the structural integrity of the gondola system was a major concern. Overall, the feedback emphasised the need for thorough wind impact assessments and contingency plans to ensure the safety and reliability of the gondola.

Respondents identified concerns about the increased risk of wildfires, noting that current visitor numbers already pose a fire risk to the mountains, and the influx of additional tourists could exacerbate this danger. There were worries that the gondola structure, along with the surrounding wildlife, could be severely damaged by fires. The feedback emphasised the need for effective fire prevention measures and questioned the project's overall feasibility given the heightened fire risk.

2.1.8   Traffic congestion and transport issues

Responses in relation to increased traffic congestion and car parking considerations featured most frequently across the feedback collected. Respondents were generally concerned about the impact of the projected visitor numbers on existing traffic congestion within Newcastle, particularly along the Castlewellan Road

and Dundrum Road. In addition, responses noted the potential for increased congestion through towns such as Ballynahinch and Dundrum on the main route to Newcastle from Belfast and as a result referenced the need for additional road infrastructure improvements such as passing lanes along Belfast Road and the delivery of the Ballynahinch Bypass scheme.

Comments referenced issues with car parking capacity in Newcastle particularly during peak summer months and the impact of the projected visitor numbers on existing car parking capacity, with some of the opinion that there is an inadequate level of parking provision for visitor numbers projected.

In relation to the proposed park and ride facility, comments raised concern over its location and whether it will be far enough out of the town on the outskirts of Newcastle to ease traffic congestion. There was some commentary surrounding the need for incentives to get people to use the service and whether visitors will actually choose to use the service over parking closer to the gondola in the town centre. Concerns were also raised in relation to the potential for park and ride vehicles and emergency service vehicles to become stuck in the traffic congestion caused by the development, resulting in increased delay for road users.

2.1.9 Using the feedback

The insights gathered in March 2023 directly informed the development of materials for future public engagement. The council worked to address key questions raised by the community, which were featured prominently in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), displayed at the November 2024 public event. These FAQs covered critical topics such as:

- The rationale for choosing the gondola through the Strategic Outline Case and Outline Business Case processes.

- Details about environmental mitigation plans and accessibility commitments.

- Financial modelling and the allocation of Belfast Region City Deal funding.

- Plans to manage traffic, parking, and visitor impacts.

As the project progresses, feedback from early engagements, including the March 2023 Information Day, will continue to play a critical role in shaping how NMDDC communicates and consults with stakeholders. Lessons learned from this initial event have reinforced the importance of listening to community voices, thematically analysing feedback, and using it to create targeted and meaningful engagement materials. These principles will remain central as the project moves into Phase 2 and beyond.

3.   Phase 1 Public Engagement Activity

3.1   Public engagement event

The public engagement event held on 7th November 2024 in O'Hare's in Newcastle. Hosted as a full-day session, this event was designed to be accessible to a wide audience, allowing attendees to visit at their convenience. The ICT, alongside council representatives, was present throughout the day to engage with attendees, answer questions, and guide them through the display boards.

The event aimed to build on the feedback gathered during the March 2023 Information Day and other prior feedback collections. To address community concerns identified earlier, the November 2024 event prominently featured updated FAQs, visual materials, and interactive opportunities. These resources aimed to clarify key aspects of the project, including environmental mitigation plans, financial viability, and accessibility features.

There was a total of 367 attendees at the event, between 1pm and 8pm. Attendees were encouraged to actively participate by leaving feedback on dedicated boards or via comment cards. Prompts on certain boards asked for specific suggestions, such as ideas for traffic management, preferences for park-and-ride services, or priorities for visitor centre amenities. This approach was developed to encourage constructive input while addressing previous feedback themes.

Two online campaign groups had actively advertised the event to members and encouraged attendance to oppose/protest the proposals, which likely inflated the number of opposing comments. While the campaigners were respectful and carried out a peaceful protest inside the room for the duration of the day, on occasion they blocked display boards with campaign banners. It was also noted that some other attendees were quoted as feeling "intimidated" and "unable to share true feelings" due to the protesters.

A total of 609 individual comments were collected. Feedback has been analysed and presented in Section 4.3, while all digitised feedback is presented in Appendix C.

3.2   Online engagement and survey

A dedicated webpage was established on the NMDDC website to serve the central hub for information and updates on the MMGP. Accessible at newrymournedown.org/mournes-gateway, the webpage provides regular updates on the project's progress, key milestones, and engagement activities. Alongside the webpage, the Council also utilised its Facebook page to share updates and promote engagement opportunities, ensuring wide accessibility and outreach across the community.

As part of Phase 1 engagement, an online survey was launched to gather public feedback on the project's proposals. The survey ran from 7th November to 28th November 2024 and invited feedback on a range of topics, including the proposed visitor centre, the gondola experience, and the project's environmental and community impacts.

A total of 547 surveys were complete, with 3028 individual comments collected. Feedback has been analysed and presented in Section 4.4, while all digitised feedback is presented in Appendix D.

3.3   Business webinar

A Business Webinar was held on 6 November 2024 to provide a platform for local and district-wide businesses to engage with the MMGP. This online session presented an overview of the project, including plans for a visitor centre, park-and-ride infrastructure, and environmental and cultural sustainability measures. The primary aim was to gather business owners' insights and explore how the project could align with local economic and community priorities.

The webinar featured a live presentation followed by interactive activities, including an online poll on Teams to gauge participants' opinions on key aspects of the project. Attendees were encouraged to join an open discussion and pose questions directly to the project team. This approach allowed for direct conversation in real time and an opportunity to address concerns or suggestions related to design, accessibility, traffic, and community benefits.

Feedback has been analysed and presented in Section 4.5.

3.4 Schools events

Dedicated engagement sessions were held for both primary school and A-Level students in October and November 2024. These events were designed to introduce young people to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) activities while involving them in the early stages of the project's planning and design. By engaging with students, the MMGP team sought to spark their interest in sustainable development and gather fresh perspectives on the project's proposals.

3.4.1 Primary school sessions

Primary school events were hosted at the Newcastle Centre, offering interactive workshops tailored to Key stage 1- and 2-year groups. Workshops included creative activities such as drawing their ideal visitor experiences, constructing models with basic materials, and exploring environmental themes through simple engineering challenges. These interactive sessions encouraged students to think critically about the design of the visitor centre and its potential features, while sparking their curiosity about the natural environment and sustainable development.

3.4.2 A-Level workshops

Held at Greenhill YMCA, A-Level sessions combined outdoor and indoor activities. Outdoor groups examined constraints and opportunities for development, such as environmental impacts, transport, utilities etc. Indoor groups engaged in a hands-on gondola building challenge, applying basic engineering principles to design and test functional models. Both activities emphasised balancing environmental considerations with visitor experience.

Feedback from all school sessions has been analysed and presented in Section 4.6 and Section 4.7, while all digitised feedback is presented in Appendix E.

4. Feedback Received in Phase 1 Public Engagement

4.1 Assessment Methodology

Feedback for the MMGP was collected through a variety of channels during Phase 1 engagement activities. These included post-it notes, comment cards, handwritten submissions, emails, letters, and responses from polls and surveys. To ensure comprehensive analysis, all data, regardless of format, was carefully digitised and collated into spreadsheets, enabling systematic review and categorisation.

The analysis process involved coding each individual comment against a detailed list of recurring themes. These themes were developed based on the content of the feedback and covered topics such as environmental impact, traffic and accessibility, financial viability, and visitor experience. This thematic coding allowed the project team to identify patterns and quantify the frequency of specific concerns and suggestions. The emerging themes were then used to build a broader picture of public sentiment and key areas of interest or opposition.

4.1.1 Constraints of the feedback data

While the feedback analysis provided valuable insights into public sentiment, several limitations were encountered.

Generalised opposition

Comments such as "I don't like it" or "This is a bad idea" were coded as "general opposition." While these sentiments were frequent, they lacked specificity and did not provide actionable insights into the reasons behind the opposition. Consequently, their utility in shaping project refinements was limited.

Rhetorical or indiscernible statements

Comments phrased as rhetorical questions (e.g., "Why a Gondola?") or ambiguous statements that lacked clarity were not assignable to a specific theme. These were categorised as "no specific comment" to ensure transparency in the analysis process while acknowledging their limited interpretative value.

Incomplete or vague input

Some feedback contained incomplete thoughts or lacked context, making it challenging to categorise them within the established themes. While these were noted, their contribution to understanding public sentiment was minimal.

Bias in participation

Certain stakeholder groups were overrepresented in some engagement activities, potentially skewing the frequency of certain themes. Two online campaign groups have actively advertised events to members and encouraged attendance to oppose/protest the proposals, which may inflate the number of opposing comments. It was also noted that some attendees of the business webinar and public event were quoted as feeling "intimidated" and "unable to share true feelings" due to the protesters. Efforts were made to balance this by considering feedback from diverse sources across all events, however it is acknowledged this will need more consideration in Phase 2.

Eliciting suggestive feedback

The Phase 1 Public Engagement Event gathered substantial feedback but struggled to elicit the specific suggestions sought by the project team. For example, when asked for ideas about visitor centre experiences, many participants instead expressed general opposition with comments like "we don't want it" or "stop the project." While reflecting public sentiment, these responses lacked the detail needed to inform design and development decisions.

This highlights the difficulty of guiding discussions toward actionable input, especially in the presence of strong opposition. Future engagement efforts should focus on more structured activities, such as framing discussions around specific trade-offs or options, to encourage constructive and detailed feedback.

4.2 Key issues or concerns raised

Whilst a wide variety of issues were raised in the submissions received during Phase 1 Public Engagement, this section provides a summary of the broad principal issues or main concerns across the project under the following general themes where applicable:

- Alternatives to the location and type of project;

- Consultation and communications;

- Cost and Business Case;

- Environmental impact including visual, climate and wildlife;

- Operations;

- Safety including weather and fire risk; and

- Traffic and transport.

4.3 Feedback from public event

The themes which emerged from the analysis and coding of public event feedback, gave us an initial illustration of the most common comments. Top themes are presented in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1: Public event comment themes

Recurring Theme	Number of Occurrences
Concern: Financial risk / legitimacy of business case / projected visitor numbers / rates	128
Recommend: Alternative location or project (i.e. leisure centre, visitor centre in town, access by bus/funicular)	126
Concern: Generally against (no specifics mentioned)	107
Ineligible / no discernible comment	77
Concern: General environmental risk	49
Concern: Inadequate public consultation / listening to feedback	42
Concern: Increased traffic (not enough parking, gridlock in town)	36
Concern: Impact on wildlife (i.e. red squirrels, birds)	23
Concern: Visual impact	21
Concern: Weather risk to operations (i.e. high winds)	20
Concern: Risk to conservation / restoration areas	18
Concern: Loss of trees	10
Concern: Not allowed out of upper station	7
Concern: Increased littering and increased waste	6
Recommend: Suggest additional features to improve experience (mountain biking, trails etc.)	5

These themes are explored further below, while all feedback is presented in Appendix C.

4.3.1 Cost and Business Case

The feedback highlights significant concerns regarding its financial viability, legitimacy, and projected visitor numbers. Many respondents believe the project is financially risky, with costs likely to exceed initial estimates. They argue that the projected visitor numbers are unrealistic and overly optimistic, suggesting that the actual number of visitors will be much lower. The feedback suggests that the project's success is overly reliant on optimistic assumptions about visitor numbers, which may not materialise.

This discrepancy raises doubts about the project's ability to generate sufficient revenue to cover its costs, leading to fears that ratepayers will be burdened with increased rates to cover any shortfalls.

The legitimacy of the business case was also questioned, pointing out a lack of transparency and detailed cost breakdowns. Submissions questioned whether the business case adequately addresses long-term maintenance costs or provides realistic financial projections.

Overall, the feedback reflects a strong sentiment that the gondola project is a financially risky venture with an unrealistic business case and inflated visitor projections. The perceived lack of transparency of the business case and public engagement to discuss it further exacerbates these concerns.

4.3.2   Environmental impact

Respondents believe the project may cause substantial damage to the fragile ecosystem of the Mournes, including disruption to wildlife habitats and the destruction of ancient trees. There are fears that the construction and operation of the gondola will lead to increased pollution, noise, and traffic, further harming the environment. Submissions stated that the project constitutes environmental vandalism and greenwashing, and they emphasise the need to protect the natural beauty and biodiversity of the area. A lack of a comprehensive environmental impact assessment before progressing with the project is also a major point of contention.

Respondents highlighted the potential harm to local flora and fauna, including the disruption of habitats for red squirrels, birds, and other wildlife. The construction of pylons and other infrastructure was seen as a threat to the delicate ecosystem, with fears that it will cause irreparable damage to the environment. There are also concerns about the impact on Donard Forest, which is home to many protected species.

Many respondents believe that the construction of the gondola and its associated infrastructure will create an eyesore, disrupting the natural beauty and unspoiled appearance of the Mournes. Respondents felt as though the gondola cables, towers, and visitor centre would be intrusive to the landscape, visible from miles away, and likely to degrade the wilderness experience. There was a strong sentiment that the visual impact of the project will be detrimental to the area's aesthetic and natural appeal.

4.3.3   Alternatives

The feedback from the engagement event offered suggestions of alternatives to both the overall project, or individual components of the project. Many participants advocated for placing the centre in Newcastle, emphasising its accessibility and the potential to enhance the town's existing infrastructure. Suggestions also include integrating the centre into existing facilities like Tollymore Park. Alternative modes of transport from Donard Park to the Visitor Centre were also suggested, including shuttle buses and a ground level funicular.

Additionally, alternatives to the overall scheme included developing a walking trail from Newcastle to Kilkeel, extending the steam train in Downpatrick, and investing in environmentally friendly transportation options like electric buses or a shuttle service. Many respondents also highlighted the need for a leisure centre in Newcastle, suggesting that funds would be better spent on such a facility rather than on the gondola project.

4.3.4   Consultation and communications

Respondents were generally dissatisfied with the public consultation process throughout the project to date. Many respondents feel that their views and concerns have been ignored, with some describing the consultation as poorly advertised and inadequately conducted. There is a strong sentiment that the council has not engaged meaningfully with the community, failed to provide transparent information, and disregarded the opinions of local ratepayers. The lack of detailed costings and absence of elected officials at consultation events further exacerbates the perception that the project is being pushed through without proper public input or consideration of alternative options.

4.3.5   Traffic and transport

The feedback highlights significant concerns regarding parking and traffic issues in Newcastle. Many respondents pointed out that the town already struggles with traffic congestion, especially during peak tourist seasons. It was argued that current infrastructure is deemed insufficient to handle the proposed increase in visitors, with parking being a major issue. Residents noted that finding parking is already challenging, and

the addition of a new tourist attraction would exacerbate the problem, potentially leading to gridlock in areas like Donard Park.

Several participants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of proposed solutions such as a park-and-ride scheme. They argued that these schemes are unlikely to work for tourist visitors, who typically prefer the convenience of driving directly to their destination. The feedback suggests that any increase in visitor numbers should be carefully managed to avoid overwhelming the town's existing infrastructure.

Additionally, there were calls for alternative transport solutions that are more sustainable and less disruptive. Suggestions included improving existing roads and parking facilities and introducing electric buses or shuttle services to reduce the reliance on cars. Some respondents also mentioned the need for better traffic management plans and questioned why these were not developed before proposing the project.

4.3.6   Operations

The feedback highlights significant concerns about its operation in windy conditions. Respondents note that the gondola would be unable to operate in winds exceeding 30 mph, which are common in the area. This limitation raises doubts about the gondola's reliability and effectiveness, as it would likely be inoperable for a significant portion of the year due to high winds, fog, and other adverse weather conditions.

Additionally, there were concerns about the visibility and overall experience for visitors during adverse weather conditions. Respondents pointed out that the mountains are often obscured by clouds, making the gondola ride less appealing and potentially unsafe. The frequent occurrence of low visibility days would likely deter visitors, impacting the project's success and financial sustainability. The feedback suggested that the gondola would only be attractive on clear, calm days, which are relatively rare, thus limiting its operational days and effectiveness as a tourist attraction.

4.4   Feedback from the online survey

There were 547 total responses to the online survey across the survey period. Responses have been organised by the questions asked within the survey with graphs provided for each question to display the split in responses. Generally, respondents utilised the free-text 'other' sections of the survey to express their disagreement with the concept of the development and therefore is a common theme throughout the free-text responses. These free-text responses were coded and themed, similarly to the public event feedback. The top themes are presented in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2: Online Survey Comment Themes

Recurring Theme	Number of Occurrences
Concern: Generally against (no specifics mentioned)	801
Recommend: Alternative location or project (i.e. leisure centre, visitor centre in town, access by bus/funicular)	371
Concern: Financial risk / legitimacy of business case / projected visitor numbers / rates	318
Ineligible / no discernible comment	241
Survey Q.7 no benefits	241
Concern: General environmental risk	192
Concern: Visual impact	177
Recommend: Suggest additional features or enhancements to improve experience and the wider environment (mountain biking, trails etc.)	156
Concern: Impact on wildlife (i.e. red squirrels, birds)	94
Concern: Inadequate public consultation / listening to feedback / survey questions inadequate	93
Concern: Increased traffic (not enough parking, gridlock in town)	81
Recommend: Infrastructure and accessibility improvements e.g. path and trail improvements, parking, road, and signage etc	66
Other: Value unspoilt views/ natural landscape	62

Questions and responses are summarised below, while all feedback is presented in Appendix D.

4.4.1   How often do you visit the Mourne Mountains?

In terms of frequency of visit, 47% of respondents stated that they visit weekly, 25% a few times a year, and 24% monthly.

4.4.2   What do you value most about the Mournes?

From the options provided, the results indicate that people selected 'nature and landscapes' as the most important, while 'cultural heritage' was the least important. There were 160 text responses to this question. The feedback of those who selected 'other' highlighted the community's strong appreciation for the natural, unspoilt beauty of the Mournes, emphasising the importance of preserving its untouched landscapes and wildlife habitats. Respondents value the peace, tranquillity, and opportunities for physical and mental well-being that the area provides, and they express concerns about the potential negative impact of new developments on the environment.

4.4.3   Age Group

As indicated in Figure 4-1, the 41–60-year-old age group represented the greatest proportion of submissions, whilst the 16-25 year old age group represent the smallest proportion of submissions.
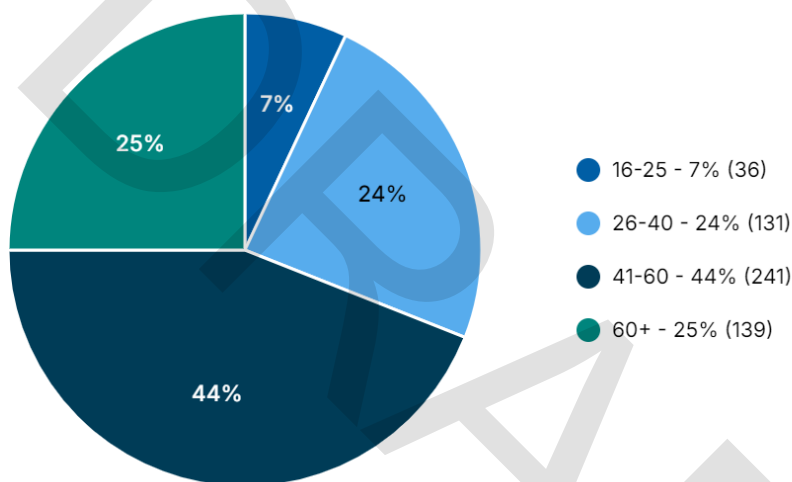

Figure 4-1: Survey Age Group

4.4.4   What aspect of the project interests you the most?

From the options provided, the results indicate that most people selected 'environmental sustainability and habitat protection' as the most important, while 'gondola and transport infrastructure' were the least important. There were 198 text responses to this question. The feedback of those who selected 'other' centred mainly around general opposition to the gondola and visitor centre, with many suggesting alternative uses for the funds, such as improving local infrastructure and amenities like leisure centres and public transport. Additionally, there were concerns about the transparency of the decision-making process and the potential for increased traffic and congestion in Newcastle.

4.4.5   What potential benefits do you think the project could bring to the community?

As indicated in Figure 4-2, of the options provided, the results indicated that 'job opportunities' were most important and 'cultural preservation' least important. However the majority of respondents selected 'other', indicating no potential benefits from the project. Many comments highlight concerns about the project's negative impact on the environment, the natural beauty of the Mournes, and the local community. There was a strong sentiment of opposition, with many believing the project might lead to increased congestion, pollution, and financial burdens on ratepayers. Some respondents mentioned that any perceived benefits, such as job creation or increased tourism, would be minimal and outweighed by the project's detrimental effects.
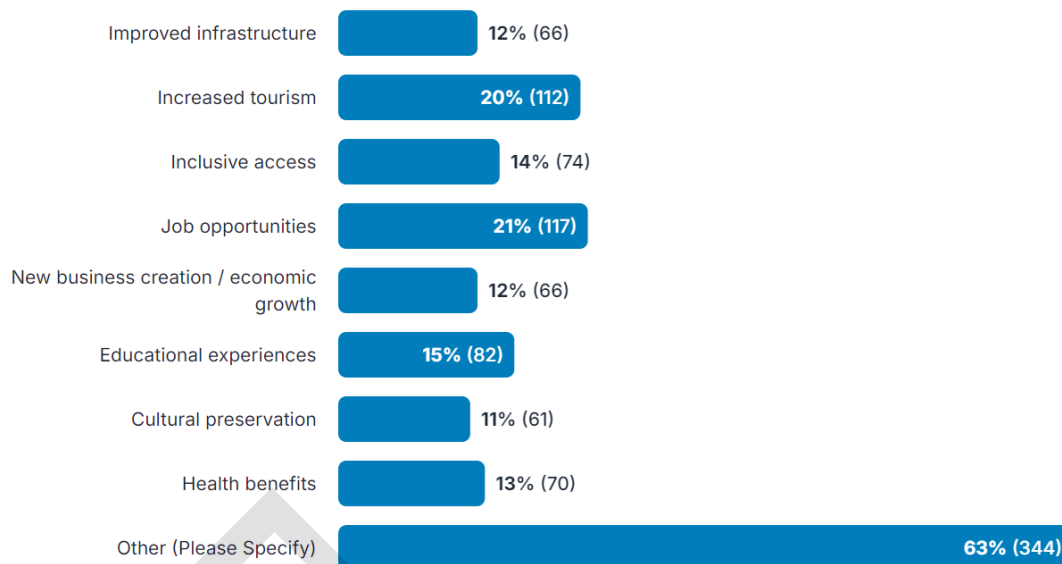
Figure 4-2: Potential benefits

4.4.6   Do you have any concerns about the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project?

Based on the options provided, 'visual impact on the landscape' and 'environmental impact' were both the biggest concerns and 'impact on local communities' the least. The feedback of those who selected 'other' elaborated on the potential environmental damage, including deforestation and disruption of wildlife habitats, as well as the visual impact of the gondola and visitor centre. Financial worries were also prominent, with fears of cost overruns and increased rates for local residents. Many felt there was a lack of genuine public consultation and transparency in the decision-making process.

4.4.7   What is your biggest concern when it comes to conservation in the Mournes?

The results of this question indicate that 'environmental damage' was the biggest concern and 'insufficient infrastructure' the least. The feedback of those who selected 'other' centred around concerns which highlight the risk of habitat destruction for species such as red squirrels, pine martens, deer, foxes, and badgers due to habitat removal at Thomas Quarry and along the gondola route. There are also worries about the project's impact on the area's biodiversity, with increased footfall leading to severe erosion on summits and the deterioration of habitats.

4.4.8   What initiatives would you support for sustainability?

As indicated in Figure 4-3, 'increasing the number of rangers to monitor trails and educate visitors' was most popular and 'installing more education resources' was least. The feedback of those who selected 'other' suggested several alternatives to the proposed gondola uplift, including the use of electric shuttle buses and other sustainable transportation options. They emphasised the need to invest in existing infrastructure by upgrading paths, building footpaths, and improving facilities like toilets and parking areas. Conservation efforts were also highlighted, with calls to restore peatland ecosystems, replant natural forests, and protect the natural environment from further damage. Many respondents stressed the importance of better community consultation and involving local landowners and residents in decision-making processes. Educational initiatives, such as creating visitor centres or information points to promote responsible use and conservation of the Mournes, were also supported. Additionally, there were suggestions to promote sustainable tourism by creating marked hiking routes, improving trail networks, and ensuring that any new developments are environmentally friendly.
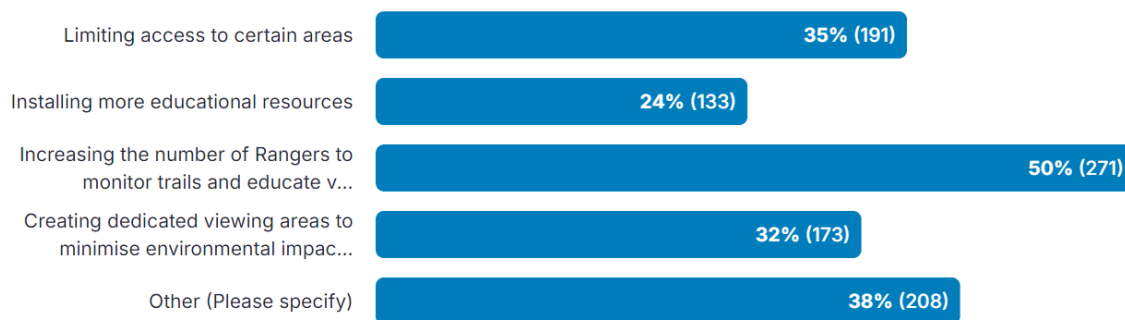
Figure 4-3: Sustainability initiatives

4.4.9 What would enhance your overall visitor experience at the Mourne Mountains Gateway Visitor Centre?

Of the options provided, 'spaces for rest, relaxation and enjoying the view' was most popular and 'sensory experiences such as soundscapes, tactile exhibits or visual displays' were the least selected. The feedback of those who selected 'other' suggested that the visitor centre should be located in Newcastle or at ground level to make it more accessible and less intrusive to the natural environment. They supported involving local businesses to boost the local economy and provide a more authentic experience. There was interest in educational and interactive displays about the history, mythology, and nature of the Mournes, including guided tours and sensory experiences. Suggestions for improved infrastructure included upgrading paths, better parking facilities, and ensuring accessibility for all visitors, including those with disabilities. Activities for children and families, such as outdoor trails and guided walks, were desired. Conservation efforts were emphasised, promoting responsible tourism and educating visitors on environmental protection. Similarly, those who selected 'other' centred mainly around general opposition to the gondola project.

4.4.10 Are there any specific accessibility features that would improve your experience?

As indicated in Figure 4-4, just 17% of respondents felt that there should be additional accessibility features. There were also 137 free-text responses to this question. The feedback of those who selected 'yes' suggested using electric shuttle buses on existing gravel roads as an alternative to improve accessibility. There were numerous requests for better-maintained and more accessible paths, including stone paths, boardwalks, and all-weather paths suitable for wheelchairs and high pedestrian traffic. Additionally, creating accessible trails in Donard Forest and connecting paths between locations like Donard Forest and Tollymore were suggested.

Respondents also highlighted the need for family-friendly features such as pram accessibility, baby changing facilities, and activities for children and families. Improved parking facilities, secure parking, and better toilet facilities were seen as important for enhancing accessibility. Suggestions for sensory aspects and features to accommodate visitors with special needs, such as sensory trails and interactive exhibits, were also made. Better signposting and information about trails and accessibility features, along with ensuring that all facilities and trails are designed to be inclusive and accessible to people of all abilities, were also key.
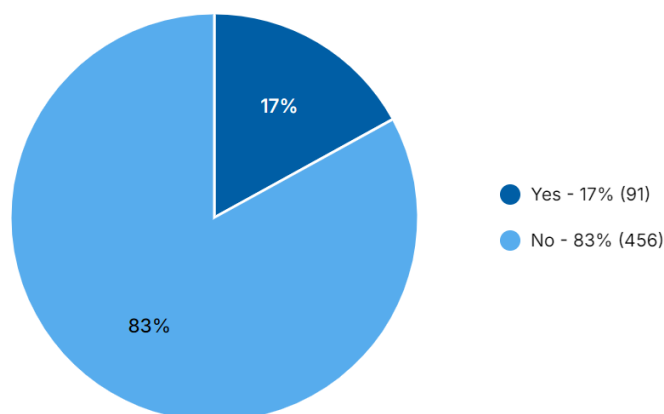

Figure 4-4: Accessibility Features

4.4.11 What would encourage you to use a Park & Ride service in Newcastle?

Based on the options provided, 'affordable pricing' was considered the most popular response and 'frequent shuttle services' the least important. The feedback of those who selected 'other' provided suggestion such as rail services to Belfast. Respondents emphasised the importance of locating the park and ride site outside the town centre, possibly on the Castlewellan Road or Belfast Road, to avoid adding to the existing traffic congestion in Newcastle. Effective traffic management, including reducing on-street parking on the main street and improving the road network, was highlighted as crucial for encouraging the use of park and ride services. The park and ride service should be easily accessible, with frequent and reliable shuttle services, and should be affordable and convenient for users, with clear user guidance and sheltered stops.

Respondents also mentioned that car park charges in Newcastle and the availability of parking spaces would influence their decision to use a park and ride service. There was support for using green buses or electric shuttle buses to reduce the environmental impact of the park and ride service.

Local residents expressed concerns about the impact of park and ride services on their ability to access Newcastle for shopping, school runs, and other daily activities, emphasising the need for solutions that do not inconvenience residents. Suggestions included building multistorey parking facilities, improving existing car parks, and ensuring that all parking spaces have EV charging capabilities. However, there was general scepticism about the effectiveness of park and ride services, with some respondents noting that similar services have been underutilised elsewhere.

4.4.12 What improvements could help guide visitors safely and prevent overcrowding in popular areas?

Of the options provided, 'designated walking paths' was the most popular selection, while 'online booking systems for popular attractions' was the least important. The feedback of those who selected 'other' suggested increasing the number of parking areas around the Mournes to distribute visitors more evenly and reduce congestion in popular spots. Effective traffic management in Newcastle, including turning Shimna Road into a two-way street and implementing park and ride services, was highlighted as important for managing visitor flow. Providing education on how to safely enjoy the Mournes and be a responsible visitor, along with better signage and information about trails and routes, was frequently mentioned. Increasing the number of rangers and guides to help manage visitors, provide information, and ensure safety was also a common suggestion.

4.4.13 How could local heritage be incorporated into the project?

Based on the options provided, 'preservation of historic sites within the project area' was most popular and 'cultural events and festivals' were least. Respondents suggested that heritage activities and displays should be located in Newcastle town to enhance accessibility and minimise environmental impact. They emphasised the importance of involving local storytellers, poets, musicians, and artists to share the area's cultural and historical heritage through live performances, storytelling sessions, and art displays. Additionally, preserving historical sites within the project area, including the industrial heritage of the quarry, was highlighted as crucial.

Educational displays, interpretation panels, and guided tours were recommended to explain the ecology, geology, and history of the Mournes. These could be featured in a visitor centre or through walking tours. Community involvement was also stressed, ensuring that local needs and culture are respected in decisions. Hosting cultural festivals and events that celebrate local heritage, such as traditional music, dance, and craft demonstrations, was another popular suggestion.

To make the visitor centre unique and engaging, incorporating interactive elements was proposed. Promoting the rich cultural heritage of the Mournes through signage, information panels, and educational programmes was seen as essential. Finally, ensuring that the project supports sustainable tourism, avoiding harm to the environment and local community, was a key consideration.

4.4.14 What should the project prioritise to ensure both a high-quality visitor experience and environmental protection?

There were 369 text responses to this question. Aside from cancelling the project, many respondents emphasised the importance of prioritising environmental protection. This includes minimising the visual impact of the project, protecting local flora and fauna, and ensuring that construction and operation do not

harm the natural environment. Prioritising the preservation of the natural beauty of the Mournes and avoiding any developments that could detract from the area's scenic value was a common theme. Using green construction methods and minimising enabling works to reduce the project's environmental footprint were also mentioned as important considerations.

Genuine engagement with local people and prioritising their opinions and needs were frequently mentioned. Respondents stressed the importance of listening to the local community and ensuring that their concerns are addressed.

Improving existing infrastructure, such as trail networks, parking facilities, and public transport, was highlighted as a priority. This would enhance the visitor experience while minimising environmental damage.

To prevent overcrowding and protect the environment, measures such as ticket-only booking systems and designated paths were suggested for visitor management. Educational initiatives, including informational displays, guided tours, and programmes, were deemed crucial for raising conservation awareness. Some respondents recommended relocating the visitor centre to a more accessible ground-level site with less environmental impact. Transparency in planning and decision-making, along with open communication with the public, was emphasised as essential for gaining community support and trust.

4.4.15 Are there any aspects you think the project could incorporate that could enhance the surrounding environment?

There were 317 text responses to this question. Aside from cancelling the project, the feedback mentioned planting native trees, particularly broadleaf species, to enhance the environment and promote biodiversity. In addition, focusing on conservation efforts, such as protecting natural habitats, managing invasive species, and promoting native plant species was provided as a suggestion.

Enhancing and maintaining existing trails, providing clear signage, and creating more marked paths for walkers and hikers were frequently mentioned as potential positive additions. This could be supplemented by providing educational programs and guided tours to raise awareness about the local environment and the importance of conservation.

Using sustainable transportation options, such as electric shuttle buses, instead of building a gondola was suggested to minimise environmental impact. Improving existing infrastructure, such as public toilets, parking facilities, and roads, was suggested to 'better accommodate visitors without harming the environment'.

Sustainable building practices, i.e., using sustainable materials and construction methods, such as living roofs and locally sourced products, to minimise the project's environmental footprint.

4.4.16 Do you have any final thoughts or suggestions on the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project?

There were 421 text responses to this question. Many of the responses stated they were in opposition to the project and called for it to be stopped (without specifics). As was the case with other free-text responses, the majority of feedback focused on environmental concerns, visual impact, financial sustainability, visitor numbers, traffic and congestion.

Suggestions outside of the current project scope were made including investment in other projects such as improving existing infrastructure, building a leisure centre, and relocating the visitor centre. Some feedback suggested focusing on enhancing the visitor experience through less intrusive means, such as guided tours, educational programs, and improved signage and facilities.

Respondents emphasised the need for genuine engagement with the local community, ensuring their opinions and needs are prioritised in the planning process.

4.5 Feedback from the Business Webinar

During the session, an online poll was held to which there were 14 respondents. Responses to the poll have been visualised using graphs and where free text responses were received these have been provided in full.

4.5.1   How do you think the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project will impact your business?

As indicated in Figure 4-5, in terms of the projects anticipated impact on their business, 9 attendees responded 'positively', 2 'negatively', 2 'not sure' and 1 'no impact'.

● Positively	9
● Negatively	2
● No Impact	1
● Not Sure	2

14%
7%
14%
64%

Figure 4-5: Impact on Business

4.5.2   What specific benefits do you foresee for local businesses from the project?

In terms of benefits to local businesses, Figure 4-6 indicated that 'increased tourism' was the most frequent answer with 11 votes, followed by 'increased foot traffic' with 10 votes, 'new business opportunities' with 9 votes, and 'enhanced local infrastructure' with 7 votes.

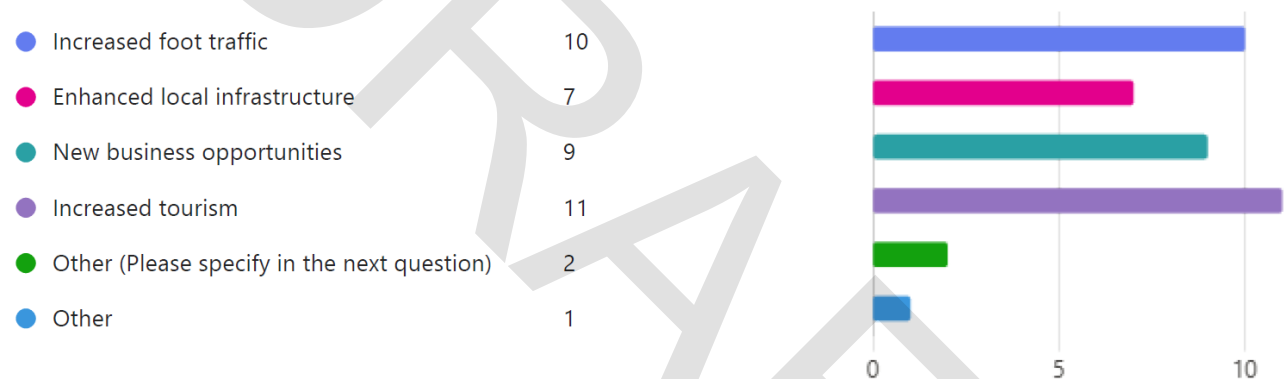|	
● Increased foot traffic	10
● Enhanced local infrastructure	7
● New business opportunities	9
● Increased tourism	11
● Other (Please specify in the next question)	2
● Other	1

Figure 4-6: Benefits for Businesses

There were 3 'other' responses to this question as follows:

- 'May have missed this but where is visitor centre located within district?';

- 'Chances to become associated with something that may be award-winning, increased exposure for your business, possible funding opportunities, marketing opportunities, chances to form cluster groups'; and

- 'None'.

4.5.3   What concerns do you have about the project's impact on your business?

In relation to concerns, 'changes in travel patterns' was the most common response with 10 votes and was followed by 'environmental impact' with 7 votes, as depicted in Figure 4-7.
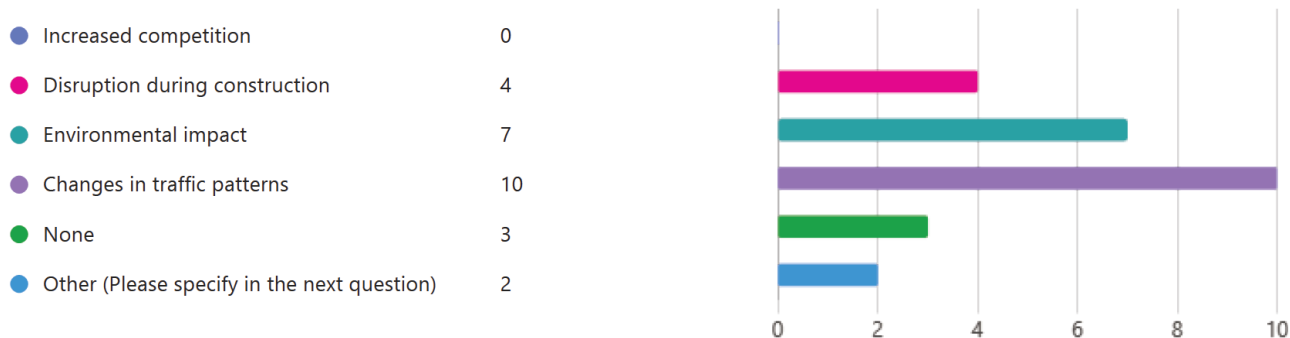
Figure 4-7: Concerns for Businesses

There were 3 'other' responses to this question as follows:

- 'Coaches in and out with singular focus';

- 'Traffic, environmental, winter'; and

- 'Rather than a concern it would be more a curiosity over how it may benefit my business as a substantial tourist offering in the NMDDC area'.

4.5.4 What economic benefits do you think the project will bring to the local community?

As indicated in Figure 4-8, in relation to economic benefits 'increased tourism revenue' was most common with 11 votes, followed by 'improved local services' with 9 votes, and 'job creation' with 8 votes.

Figure 4-8: Economic Benefits for Community

There were 4 'other' responses to this question as follows:

- 'None', received twice;

- 'I cannot see economic benefits other than for those running the project. It should not be just all about money'; and

- 'A better sense of pride for the area, more bed nights, more tours'.

4.5.5 What facilities or services do you think are essential for enhancing the visitor experience?

In terms of facilities required to enhance visitor experience, 'accessible transport options and facilities' was the most common response with 11 votes, closely followed by 'informative signage and maps' with 10 votes, and 'high-quality interpretive visitor centre' and 'recreational facilities' both with 9 votes. This is depicted in Figure 4-9.

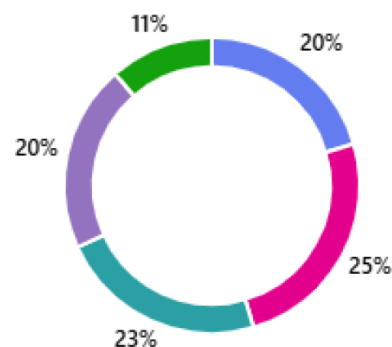|		
🔵 High-quality interpretive visitor centre	9	
🔴 Accessible transport options and facilities	11	
🟢 Informative signage and maps	10	
🟣 Recreational facilities	9	
🟢 Other (Please specify in the next question)	5	

Figure 4-9: Facilities for Visitor Experience

There were 5 'other' responses as follows:

- 'A leisure centre';

- 'Car parking and better public transport';

- 'All the points I have ticked can be achieved without the Mournes Gateway project being built';

- 'Preference for overnight stays';

- 'Additional bolt on features i.e. mountain bike trails, toboggan railway etc'; and

4.5.6 How do you feel Park and Ride stops within the town will impact your business?

Finally, as indicated in Figure 4-10, in relation to responses to the impact of the proposed park-and-ride on local businesses, 4 responded 'not sure', 4 responded 'positively', 3 responded 'negatively' and 3 responded 'no impact'.

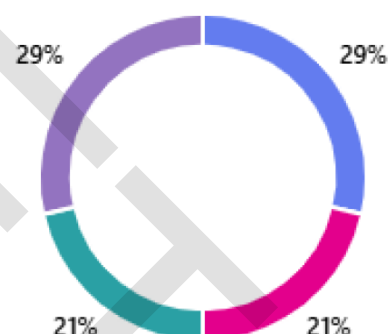|	
🔵 Positively	4
🔴 Negatively	3
🟢 No impact	3
🟣 Not sure	4

Figure 4-10: P&R Impacts on Business

4.6 Feedback from primary school event

Feedback from the primary school engagement sessions was limited but diverse, with the most frequent comments being in relation to retaining trees and protecting animals. Overall, the feedback was optimistic and suggested that the primary school children felt that components of the project would provide enhanced accessibility to the Mournes for all, with someone stating, 'my granny could use it to get up the mountain'.

They also stated that they would like to see particular features within the visitor centre and Donark Park, such as educational features within the visitor centre to learn about local wildlife:

- 'Big and baby slides';

- 'Animal information boards';

- 'Games on iPads';

- 'Virtual Reality (VR) headset';

- 'Plastic animal models and fossils'; and

- 'Somewhere to get snacks up the mountain'.

Other children were more hesitant, stating that they "would like a ride up the Mournes- but mum said it would destroy the animals' homes".

4.7   Feedback from high school events

Similarly to the primary school events, feedback from A-level students revealed diverse opinions, with key themes including environmental impact, aesthetics, economic potential, accessibility, cost concerns, and sustainability.

Environmental concerns focused on habitat destruction, wildlife disruption, and increased carbon emissions. Suggestions included using sustainable materials like granite, solar-powered lighting, and rainwater collection, along with creating paths to reduce trampling and installing signage to promote environmental awareness. Students urged minimising ecological disruption by blending structures with the environment, incorporating biodiversity on roofs, and aligning buildings with the treeline to reduce visual impact. Students suggested measures such as using tinted glass to prevent bird collisions and coloured lights to avoid disrupting bats.

Economic potential was recognised, with benefits such as increased tourism, job creation, and funding for other programs. However, concerns were raised about diverting business from local shops and increased congestion in Newcastle. Students recommended solutions such as ticketing systems to manage visitor flow, discounts for local businesses, and investment in infrastructure improvements. Accessibility was highlighted positively, with support for wheelchair-friendly paths, ramps, and interactive features like VR headsets.

Cost and feasibility emerged as significant concerns, with many doubting the adequacy of the budget. Participants suggested prioritising sustainable, cost-effective solutions and reallocating resources to improve existing infrastructure. Clear budget management and communication were seen as essential to building trust.

Sustainability was a recurring priority, with respondents urging the use of solar panels, renewable materials, and carbon offset programs like local reforestation. The project was seen as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in sustainable tourism.

Traffic and congestion were flagged as challenges, with Newcastle's infrastructure deemed insufficient for increased visitors. Suggestions included improving public transport, implementing park-and-ride systems, and addressing road conditions.

The project's educational potential was widely praised, with ideas for interactive exhibits, scavenger hunts, and wildlife education. These initiatives could enhance visitor experiences while fostering appreciation for the area's heritage.

6.   Recommendations and Next Steps

The Mourne Mountains Gateway Project has reached a critical juncture following the completion of Phase 1 public and stakeholder engagement. A Phase 1 engagement review workshop was held with the ICT, Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council (NMDDC), and Tourism NI to present findings and discuss the next steps. Phase 2 is set to commence in January 2025, informed by the insights and lessons learned from Phase 1.

6.1   Key recommendations and actions

- Improve financial transparency:

  - Provide greater clarity on the assumptions and calculations underpinning the business case, including visitor projections, costs, and financial viability.

  - NMDDC should review what information can be shared with the public and prepare a standalone update specifically addressing the business case.

  - Finalise and approve the draft FAQs at the next project board meeting on 16 January 2025, ensuring these include details on visitor numbers and financial considerations. The FAQs will be released on the project website immediately after approval.

- Balanced communication:

  - To ensure a broader geographic reach, a factual and balanced news piece will be developed. This communication will provide accurate project information and encourage wider participation from regional and non-local stakeholders.

- Establish the Stakeholder Forum:

  - NMDDC has initiated invitations for the inaugural MMGP Stakeholder Forum, set to take place on 27 January 2025. The forum's agenda will focus on guiding future engagement exercises and promoting open discussions among diverse stakeholders.

- Expand and revisit stakeholder mapping:

  - The ICT will revisit and expand the stakeholder list to ensure full and comprehensive mapping, addressing gaps identified in Phase 1.

  - Engagement efforts will prioritise local community groups, knowledge experts, and regional stakeholders, including the tourism and hospitality sectors, to ensure diverse input into project planning.

- Refine stakeholder engagement strategy:

  - Undertake Phase 2 public event once RIBA Stage 2 report has been approved by Council, ensuring more specifics of the proposals can be shared, ensuring a more impactful and informed engagement process.

6.2   Project specific recommendations

The recommendations outlined below provide guidance for various components of the MMGP, ensuring alignment across the project's disciplines and addressing the feedback received during Phase 1 engagement. These efforts should be complemented by ongoing technical studies and expertise being brought into the project to ensure a comprehensive approach to planning and development.

Managing visitor impact is a key priority, particularly in relation to concerns about traffic congestion and parking shortages. Developing sustainable transport options and enhancing parking infrastructure are proposed solutions to support increased visitor numbers and mitigate these issues. These must be considered within the Visitor Management Plan and ongoing transport planning studies.

The visitor centre represents a significant opportunity to engage and educate the public. The interpretive design should integrate interactive and heritage-focused elements, reflecting community interest in wildlife and cultural features. Inclusive and accessible design must remain central to ensure the centre meets the needs of all visitors.

Architectural and landscape plans must be developed to minimise environmental impact, prioritising sustainable materials and designs that harmonise with the natural surroundings. Public feedback, particularly regarding the preservation of natural features and minimising tree loss, should be integrated into the design process. The addition of a gondola consultant further enhances the technical expertise available, ensuring the design and operation of this critical infrastructure meet high environmental and functional standards.

Environmental and ecological considerations must underpin all project components. Biodiversity protection, deforestation mitigation, and habitat conservation measures should be prioritised, with transparent communication of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) results to reinforce the project's commitment to sustainability.

Finally, NMDDC must continue to promote transparency and build trust. Regular updates, clear communication, and collaborative efforts across all project disciplines are essential to ensuring public feedback shapes planning and implementation effectively.

6.3   Next Steps

- Finalise and release the FAQs and OBC information update.

- Prepare the Stakeholder Forum agenda and ensure alignment with project objectives.

- Revisit and expand the stakeholder list to ensure full and gapless mapping for Phase 2.

- Begin outreach to underrepresented groups and regional stakeholders.

- Develop Phase 2 engagement activities focused on delivering clear, actionable, and inclusive outcomes.