Report

Mike McClure
Outdoor Recreation Development Officer
The Skiffie Worlds took place in the Quoile estuary of Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland from the 24-30th July 2016. The event was managed on shore at Delamont Country Park and access to both the water and to the land was excellent with the installation of a temporary pontoon and a country park roadway down to the shore.

The event was developed and managed by the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership office staff who did an excellent job of event management.

Very extensive support by both Newry Mourne and Down Council along with Ards and North Down Council, not only in terms of funding but also a tremendous commitment from the events team within NM&D council. The staff from NM&D who were involved in the event went well beyond their duties to ensure that the event not only went smoothly but was viewed by all as a tremendous success. Sport NI was also a key partner in the event providing funding for safety requirements and a member of staff for the week to act as on the water safety officer. Staff from Delamont Country Park were also exemplary in their commitment and help for the event.

The St Ayles Skiff is 22ft, with a beam of 5’8”. The standard Crew is four rowers, each with a single oar, and a coxswain. The name of the design comes from the former chapel which now forms the entrance to the Scottish Fisheries Museum. The concept of the community built kit rowing boat came from Alec Jordan of Jordan Boats and the idea was
taken up by the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther which commissioned the design from Iain Oughtred. Jordan Boats manufactures a kit for the skiff and the basic principle is that the boats should be available at as low a price as possible.

In 2014 the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership accessed some funding from the PSNI to support local communities around Strangford Lough and Lecale to engage better with the Maritime environment through the construction of St Ayles skiffs and the formation of community / village based clubs. This has been hugely successful with over 500 people involved in the project. Not only that it has had a very positive effect on both intra and inter community cohesion by creating much stronger links (albeit with some rivalry) between villages and communities and developing strong relationships within communities. The management and support provided by communities to the organisers of the Skiffie Worlds was also important throughout this process.

The event brought 41 teams and over 500 people from Scotland, Northern Ireland, England, The Netherlands, Canada, USA and Tasmania together for six days of racing with heats and/or finals for:

1. Open A & B male, female and mixed crews
2. Under 17 male, female and mixed crews
3. Under 19 male, female and mixed crews
4. Over 40 male, female and mixed crews
5. Over 50 male, female and mixed crews
6. Over 60 male, female and mixed crews

The youngest competitor was 14 while the oldest was 83 and the event therefore had a fantastic family friendly and community atmosphere about it.

The event started with a bang (literally, as La Mouet one of the tall ships set off its canon to mark the start) on Sunday 24th July 2016 with a “row in company” from Strangford and Portaferry round into the Quoile estuary. This flotilla of St Ayles
Skiffs along with safety boats and other boats made a fantastic sight in the Narrows. While conditions were very favourable for this, there had been great support for this from the local yachts clubs and from boat owners in helping to provide safety cover.

On arrival at the Quoile there was a reception and the event was officially opened by the Mayor of Newry, Mourne and Down Council – Councillor Gillian Fitzpatrick.

On Monday 25th July acing started in earnest, commencing each morning following a safety briefing at 10.00 and generally was concluded by 16.00.

It had been agreed with the Maritime Coastguard Agency that the Quoile estuary would effectively closed to boat traffic during racing and a notice to that effect was included in their daily broadcasts.

A risk management document and procedures had been drawn up prior to the event in conjunction with the Coastguard, the local council, the PSNI and the Fire and rescue Service and again this partnership approach to the delivery of the event meant that all went extremely smoothly both on and off the water. The safety plan included having 2 rescue boats (one on each side of the course) and a guard boat stationed on the outside of the course (to the North) to hold back any traffic entering the estuary during racing. The RNLI beach lifeguards also provided a jet ski “Rescue Water Craft” (RWC) and this proved to be extremely useful in holding traffic back that was exiting the Quoile estuary and for chasing other boats that were straying into the course.

The volunteer coastguards also provided manpower on or in the vicinity of the pontoons throughout the week which again was all done voluntarily.

Immediately after the racing finished another “row in company” (flotilla event) saw the skiffs all row together back to their respective launch points of Strangford and Portaferry on Saturday 30th July.
Newry Mourne and Down District Council commissioned Perceptive Insight to undertake visitor surveys during the event on 29th and 30th July in Delamont Country Park and Strangford village respectively. One hundred and twenty-nine face to face interviews were conducted of which 58% were female and 42% male.

The findings from the survey of visitors are very positive, with 37% saying they would speak highly of the event without prompting and another 45% reporting that they would speak positively about the event if asked. The vast majority (90%) also rated the overall event as good or extremely good, and 91% said it met or exceeded their expectations.

The vast majority (86%) rated the organisation of the event as good or extremely good. Similarly the entertainment provided was found to be good or extremely good (84%).

42% of those interviewed indicate that they were staying away from home for the event. The average spend on accommodation, by those who had an overnight stay, was £299.15. Those staying in serviced accommodation spent an average £500.00 on this, while those in self-catering accommodation spent an average of £253.50. The overall estimated number of visitors to the event including participants was 25,966 with an estimated direct spend of approx £973,985.

There were few suggestions as to how the event could be improved. The suggestions provided focused on signage, advertising, car parking and transport to the event. Comments were passed that the food village was too far out for visitors and it was recommended that it should be more localised, along with a wider range of catering facilities provided.

The World Skiffies event was a tremendous success and there was little in the way of safety issues to deal with. This is in no small measure to the combination of extremely good planning with a range of bodies involved and also the competence and professionalism of coxes and crews in complying with the systems instigated.
The atmosphere throughout the event was exceptional with a tremendous sense of camaraderie, mutual support and inclusion. There was huge effort of volunteering from local communities and visitors alike and a great sense of pride in the local area and in NI as a whole. It did no harm that the sun shone for most of the week!

Mike McClure

Outdoor Recreation Development Officer and race safety officer.