



<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Sperrin Partnership Project</b>
<b>Committee Report Submitted To:</b>	<b>Leisure &amp; Development Committee</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>18 March 2025</b>
<b>For Decision or For Information</b>	<b>For Information</b>
<b>To be discussed In Committee YES/NO</b>	<b>NO.</b>

<b>Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)</b>	
Strategic Theme	Resilient, Healthy and Engaged Communities Protecting and enhancing our environment and assets
Outcome	Citizens will have access to Council recreational facilities and protected natural environments which help them to develop their physical, emotional and cognitive health Our natural assets will be carefully managed to generate economic and social returns without compromising their sustainability for future generations.
Lead Officer	Head of Tourism and Recreation Coast and Countryside Manager

<b>Estimated Timescale for Completion</b>	
Date to be Completed	N/A

<b>Budgetary Considerations</b>	
Cost of Proposal	n/a
Included in Current Year Estimates	<b>NO</b>
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	

<b>Legal Considerations</b>	
Input of Legal Services Required	<b>NO</b>
Legal Opinion Obtained	<b>NO</b>

<b>Screening Requirements</b>	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

## **1.0 Purpose of Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide Elected Members with an update on the activities being delivered by the Sperrins Partnership Project.

## **2.0 Background**

The Sperrins Partnership Project (previously Sperrins Future Search) is a collaboration between 4 councils; Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council, who back in 2018 committed to equal financial contribution towards its delivery and have also funded the Sperrins Future Search initiative. The 4 Councils have agreed to equal financial contribution towards the project until 2027.

The Sperrins Partnership Project is presently funded by the four partner Councils. At the June 2024 Leisure and Development Committee Meeting, the following funding was approved: £25,000 for 2025/26 and £28,000 for 2026/27 financial years, for salaries and programming costs, to allow delivery of the project and to provide the mechanism to allow development of the AONB Management Plan for which external funding has been secured and to ensure that the Sperrins Partnership Project can deliver on its vision as outlined at the Sperrins Future Search Conference.

## **3.0 Update Report**

**Appendix 1** provides an update from the Sperrins Partnership Project on their activities.

## **4.0 Recommendation**

**It is recommended** that the Leisure & Development Committee notes the information in this report and Appendix A.

## Appendix A

### Developing a Management Plan for Sperrin AONB

Members may recall receiving an update to October 2024 Committee that the Sperrins Partnership had secured 5-year funding through the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 - 2028 to enable the Partnership to develop the first ever Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan. This is a long-standing matter which the Sperrins Partnership Board had supported as a key issue facing the region.

The consultation to inform the development of the AONB Management Plan is now complete. The consultation exercise was delivered by an external consultant and took place between February and August 2024. The aim of the exercise was to carry out an extensive consultation that would gather the views of all key stakeholders, including members of the community who live and work in the Sperrins. The results of this consultation were presented at a public event held in November 2024 and the report can be accessed via the link – [Sperrin AONB Management Plan - Sperrins Partnership Project](#).

The next important phase in the project delivery will be to convene 2 working groups to develop the 5-year action plan. Expressions of Interest from a board range of sectors and groups have been sought over the last number of months and membership to the working groups is reaching completion. Council Officers from a range of different departments will be fully involved in the action planning phase of the project.

External support has been secured to assist the Sperrins Partnership Team with design and delivery of these important working groups. There will be 3 meetings of each working group with one final meeting to include both groups coming together in October 2025. All meetings will be in person and will be held at various venues around the AONB. This marks another important milestone in the development of the first ever Management Plan for Sperrin AONB and the project is on schedule to produce a draft AONB Management Plan by the end of 2025.

Members will be kept up to date with the outworkings of the action planning working groups periodically by way of a report and can also access information on the Development of the AONB Management Plan by visiting [Sperrin AONB Management Plan - Sperrins Partnership Project](#)

The Sperrins Partnership Team continue to engage and build relationships with a vast range of stakeholders from across various sectors and this engagement will continue for the foreseeable future. The Partnership are also members of the following Groups that help to give a voice to the Sperrins and share learnings, expertise and opportunities:

- Landscapes NI
- Peatland Collaborative Network
- Outscape Land Managers Forum

## **Youth Voice Event**

While the Sperrin AONB consultation yielded a high level of response from a range of stakeholders, one aspect that could be developed further is youth engagement. As future guardians of the landscape, young people's views play a critical role in this process and with that mind The Sperrins Partnership will hold a dedicated event - to ensure the youth voice is heard. This event will be aimed at pupils in Years 11 – 14 and will be held at the Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

## **Landowner and Farmer Engagement**

Similar to youth voice, engagement from landowners and farmers has been limited and could be developed further and the Sperrins Partnership Team have been working hard to gain interest from this sector and will continue to do so throughout the process. A number of farming engagement opportunities have been identified and it is hoped to convene a small farming focused working group with a view to encourage wider engagement and participation with this vital sector.

## **Funding Opportunities**

A number of external funding opportunities are being explored to support the work the Partnership and that will dovetail with developing the AONB management plan, namely:

- National Lottery Heritage Fund – Connected Landscapes
- PEACE PLUS
- DAERA Nature Recovery Challenge Fund 2025-2026

## **Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer – The Outdoor Partnership**

The Sperrins Partnership in collaboration with Sport NI and Partner Councils, secured funding through to The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) to appoint an Outdoor Activity Development Officer for the Sperrins. The post commenced in February 2023 and the 4 partner Councils have confirmed funding support of £4,000 per year per Council for period 2024/ 2025 and 2025/2026.

The Outdoor Partnership is an organisation based in Wales who work to support people across the UK to take up outdoor activities as a life-long pursuit. Their vision is: "*Enhancing people's lives through outdoor activity.*" This means enhancing people's physical and mental health, and wellbeing while improving the economic return and the social value of outdoor activity such as walking, cycling and adventure sports.

The Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer role is to build capacity, identify training and education needs within outdoor sports and recreation across Sperrins Communities.

The Outdoor Partnership is the main employer and manage the project with support from Partner Councils. Other aims of the project include enabling communities through promoting sustainable use of the environment, enhancing partnership working through local delivery and improving coach and education and opportunities for volunteering.

The Sperrins Outdoor Activities Development Officer has been working on a number of projects across the Sperrins, including:

## **Health & Wellbeing**

### *Public Health Agency (PHA) Funding – Men's Outdoor Wellbeing Project Donemana*

Funding was received from the PHA to deliver a winter wellbeing project in the Donemana Area. The project focused on men's mental health. Rural Area Partnership in Derry (RAPID) helped to identify a suitable group for the project and the Men's Shed (part of the Dennett Valley Health Network) were appointed as the lead group for the project. The project consisted of a series of locally delivered outdoor activities which upskilled participants and showed them the opportunities available within the Donemana area with suitable exit pathways through local clubs and support groups. The project is due to complete at the end of February with a total of 8 sessions delivered.

## **Coach Education**

Upskilling participants to encourage future participation is a key focus for allowing outdoor activities to grow within the Sperrin's. Outdoor First Aid courses (REC 2) have been highlighted as a need within the Sperrin's. Due to the low number of these being delivered and the fact that they normally take place at the National Outdoor Centre in Tollymore means there are fewer opportunities within the west of NI to partake in these courses. The courses below have been delivered over the winter months, 2 of which were free for participants (Orienteering Course & Walk Leader Training). An additional x4 free first aid courses have been planned for the Mid Ulster area through Community Planning SportNI Funding.

- Outdoor First Aid Courses (REC 2) – Delivered at Gortin (FODC)
- Mountain Skills Level 1 (2 Day Course) – Delivered at Banagher Glen (CCGBC)
- Orienteering Training for FODC council staff (Community Wellbeing Team)
- Walk Leader Training – Delivered in Donemana (DCSDC)
- 2X 1 day First Aid Courses Delivered at An Carn (MUDC)

## **Community Cohesion**

Carhill Primary School (Garvagh) carried out a local litter pick with the Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer (SOADO) during Environmental Week. The principles of Leave No Trace were discussed with pupils and the importance of looking after our natural environments. The SOADO also encouraged and supported local community groups to deliver similar initiatives. A community organisation within DCSDC also carried out a litter pick with equipment supplied by DCSDC for the pick.

Youth MTB sessions at Davagh – Davagh has been highlighted as an excellent venue to host youth coaching and training days due to easy access to the skills area and pump track. There are also great facilities that are on hand from the trail head; parking, toilets, changing rooms and the OM Observatory café. This has allowed a series of coaching events to take place here where the Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer has highlighted the need and continued to engage and support the National Governing Bodies (NGB) to deliver sessions. Mid Ulster Council have also been extremely supportive of these initiatives and

have actively repaired and maintained the trail head trails and services to allow these sessions to happen on suitable and safe trails.

- SOADO highlighted the potential for turning Davagh into an Off-Road hub for Ulster. This is currently being explored by the NGB.
- Community Planning application submitted of behalf of Mid Ulster District Council to deliver a series of coach education programs; Woman and youth MTB sessions and Disability Bush Craft sessions. Delivery has now commenced for these programs and a total of 17 programs will be delivered before the end of March. Uptake has been very successful so far with every program being fully booked.

### **Volunteering**

*Trail Maintenance Program* - Trail Maintenance and the need for expert volunteers has been highlighted as a need within the trail centers across the Sperrin's. This initiative has been put in place to support the management of the centers and to allow for safer, better maintained and more suitable trails for users. Along with this, the project will support and develop local ownership, better relationships and allow hubs/clubs to rekindle around our dedicated trail centers. Outscape NI and Cycling Ireland have now come on board to support and drive this project. We are currently recruiting volunteers and arranging certified trail inspection and maintenance training to take place in March at Davagh for our volunteers.

### **Organisational Sustainability**

The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) are committed to ensuring continued funding will be in place to allow our work to continue within the Sperrin's. TOP are currently in the process of applying for continued funding from the UK Lottery to expand posts beyond September 2026.

TOP officer continues to source locally available grants and funding both to support the delivery of projects and to support the true costs involved with charity.

## Financial, Equality, Legal, HR, Improvement, Rural Needs and other Implications

The Sperrins Partnership project is presently funded by 4 Councils at a total annual cost of £88,000. External funding has been secured through the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028 to develop a Management Plan for the AONB. The Sperrins Partnership provides the delivery model to ensure the Management Plan can be achieved.

Council have contributed £22,000 annually to the Sperrins Partnership and have done so since October 2020. The total funding provided mostly covers salary costs allowing for a small amount of programming costs.

A report to June committee last year set out a request for a small incremental increase to current contributions up to 2027. These increases will support inflation and rising salary costs. It will allow the Sperrins Partnership to continue to deliver on its vision as outlined at the Sperrins Future Search Conference and provide the mechanism to allow development the AONB Management Plan for which external funding has been secured up to March 2028.

Sperrins Partnership Funding Breakdown:

2024 - 2025	£22k per council (no increase required)	Total contributions sought £88k. Salaries £78k, £10k programming costs
2025 - 2026	£25k per council	Total contributions sought £100k. Salaries £82k, £18k programming costs
2026 - 2027	£28k per council	Total contributions sought £112k. Salaries £86k, £16k programming costs

The increases set out in the above table were agreed by all 4 partner councils in October 2024. The amount requested from council for period 2025 – 2026 is £25,000. The Sperrins Partnership continue to increase activity moving forward on the Sperrins AONB with focus on developing the first ever Management Plan for Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.