Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council

Title of Report:	**Sperrins Partnership Project**
Committee Report Submitted To:	Leisure & Development Committee
Date of Meeting:	17 November 2026
For Decision or For Information	For Decision
To be discussed In Committee	No

Linkage to Council Strategy (2026-31)	
Strategic Theme	P2 Empowering and supporting our people P4 Sustainability & managing our natural and built environment
Outcome	Citizens with improved physical and mental health and wellbeing, Increased citizens and visitors access to high-quality green spaces, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Designated sites, landscapes, and biodiversity which are protected, enhanced, and managed sustainably.
Lead Officer	Head of Tourism and Recreation Coast and Countryside Manager

Estimated Timescale for Completion	
Date to be Completed	

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	£117,965 over 3 years
Included in Current Year Estimates	**No**
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	Estimated £4,200 1 year

Legal Considerations	
Input of Legal Services Required	**NO**
Legal Opinion Obtained	**NO**

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	**NO**	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	**NO**	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	**NO**	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	**NO**	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	**NO**	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the Sperrins Partnership project activity that has taken place since May 2026 and to seek continued Council support for activities from April 2027 to March 2030.

2.0 Background

2.1 The Sperrins Partnership Project 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 since 2020 have committed to an equal financial contribution towards its delivery.

2.2 Project activity is overseen by a Project Officer and part-time Administrative Support who took up their respective roles in October 2020. Derry City and Strabane District Council agreed to lead on the recruitment and employment of the officers in agreement with the partner councils. The information in this report has been provided by the Partnership. Please see **Annex A** for full details of activities undertaken since May 2026.

2.3 The Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 10-year Management Plan and 5-year Action Plan was approved by Council in May 2026 and subsequently launched at an event in June 2026.

2.4 Sperrins Partnership secured external funding through the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028 to develop a Management Plan for the AONB. The plan is available through this link Sperrin AONB Management Plan - Sperrins Partnership Project Hard copies will be available at the Leisure & Development Committee.

2.5 The Sperrins Partnership provides the delivery model to ensure the Management Plan can be achieved and actions delivered upon. The Partnership continues to increase activity moving forward focusing on the delivery of the first ever Management Plan for Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

2.6 A review of governance and management arrangements for Sperrins Partnership has been previously agreed by all councils. A successful consultant has been appointed to commence this review.

3.0 Future Financial Support for Sperrins Partnership

3.1 The current Council funding contribution cycle for Sperrins Partnership ends in March 2027. The Sperrins Partnership project is equally funded by four partner Councils. Council is asked to provide financial support as set out in the table below for a further three-year period (March 2027 – April 2030).

2027 - 2028	£29k per council	Total contributions sought £116k. Salaries £89k, £27k programming costs
2028 - 2029	£30k per council	Total contributions sought £120k. Salaries £92k, £28k programming costs
2029 - 2030	£31k per council	Total contributions sought £124k. Salaries £95k. £29k programming costs
Total request for 3 years x salaries and programme costs from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council **- £90,000**		

3.2 With a 10-year Management Plan and 5-year Action Plan for Sperrin AONB formally adopted, funding from Council is requested to provide greater stability and allow for

more effective project delivery planning and management. The plan will require extensive engagement with a wide range of key delivery stakeholders.

3.3 Should Councils be supportive of this funding request, The Sperrins Partnership Agreement will be extended from April 2027 to end of March 2030, in line with the contributions.

4.0 Request for Additional Funding

4.1 Sperrins Partnership Project is also asking for further financial support from Council for:

- Sperrins Festival - **£9,000**. (£3,000 per annum for 2027/28, 2028/29 & 2029/30).

  Plus

- Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer - **£18,965** (£6136 for 2027/28; £6320 for 2028/29; £6509 for 2029/30).

4.2 Sperrins Festival

4.3 The inaugural Sperrins Festival was held in March 2026, a three-day celebration of landscape, heritage, and community across the Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

4.4 The festival aims to strengthen connections between people and place, supporting sustainable tourism, creating meaningful opportunities for participants to learn about, explore, and celebrate the region's rich and diverse heritage and culture.

4.5 Participants were able to explore local history, heritage, wildlife, and community narratives through both outdoor and indoor experiences aimed to connect people to the landscape and create a greater awareness of the AONB and the communities within it. The festival outputs align directly with the new the AONB management plan.

4.6 Each partner Council contributed £3,000 to deliver the 2026 festival. Planning for the 2027 Sperrins Festival has been initiated, and it is suggested that this an annual contribution of £3,000 is agreed by each of the partner Councils for 2027, 2028 and 2029.

4.7 Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer

4.8 The Sperrins Partnership in collaboration with Sport NI and four partner Councils secured funding through The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) to appoint an Outdoor Activity Development Officer for the Sperrins for a 4-year funded period in 2023. The current arrangement ends in March 2027. Initially a surplus identified within Sperrins Partnership budget covered costs of the post in years one and two. Each partner Council committed a contribution on £4,000 per annum for 2025/2026 and 2026/2027.

4.9 The Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer works with Sperrins Partnership and Council staff to assist and support delivery of a range of outdoor recreation projects that benefit communities through enhancing lives and connecting people with landscape at grassroots level. This work aligns directly with the objectives of the new AONB management and action plan.

4.10 Council is asked to continue to support the important work of the Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer by continuing to fund the post for a further three-year period. The funding request is set out in the table below and includes salary and inflation costs:

5.0 Funding Request

5.1 The Leisure and Development Committee is asked to consider the three requests relating to funding for the 3-year period April 2027 to end of March 2030 as follows:

Funding Request 1
Sperrins Partnership Project: 3-year salaries and programming - **Total £90,000**

Funding Request 2
Sperrins Festival for 3 years – **Total £9,000**

Funding Request 3
Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer for 3 years – **Total £18,965**

6.0 Recommendation

It is recommended that Leisure & Development Committee gives consideration to the three requests for funding from Sperrins Partnership Project and makes a recommendation to Full Council:

- **Funding Request 1**

  Salaries and programming costs Sperrins Partnership Project – **Total £90,000.**

- **Funding Request 2**

  Sperrins Festival – **Total £9,000**.

- **Funding Request 3**

  Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer – **Total £18,965**.

Any funding from Council will be subject to confirmation of the reciprocal financial contribution of all partner councils.

Committee:	**Date of Meeting:**	**Classification:**	**Director Initials & Date:**
Business & Culture	Click or tap to enter a date.	Open for Decision	

For Confidential reports, please confirm the reason why the information is restricted:	
Please click	**Reason Restricted – Categories of Exempt Information (Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014).** Note any of the following seven categories of information are only deemed to be exempt information when the public interest in maintaining the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.
☐	1. Information relating to an Individual.
☐	2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an Individual.
☐	3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Council holding that information).
☐	4. Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the Council or a government department and employees of, or office holders under the Council.
☒	5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.
☐	6. Information which reveals that the Council proposes (a) to give under any statutory provision a notice by virtue of which requirements are imposed on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction under any statutory provision.
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	Reason Restricted – Confidential Information (s42(3) of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014)
☐	a) Information provided to the Council by a government department upon terms (however expressed) which forbid the disclosure of the information to the public.
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Title of Report:	Officer Presenting: **Author:** Ciara Toner, Lead Project Officer, Sperrins Partnership

1. Purpose of the Report / Recommendations

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the Sperrins Partnership project activity that has taken place since the last update provided to Committee in May 2026.

2. Background

2.1 The Sperrins Partnership Project (previously Sperrins Future Search) is a collaboration between four councils; Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council, who since 2020 have committed to equal financial contribution towards its delivery.

3. Key Issues

3.1 Launch of Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 10-year Management Plan and 5-year Action Plan

Members may recall that the Sperrins Partnership 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) 10-year Management Plan and 5-year Action Plan. The plans were approved by Council in May 2026 before being formally launched at an event held in Ballyness Resort on 24th June 2026. Development of the plans marks a huge milestone for the Sperrins and for the people who live, work and visit the area. It is also a significant achievement for the Councils involved and DAERA.

The event, which took place at Ballyness Resort just outside Dungiven, was extremely well attended including Elected Members, Council CEO's, numerous Council officers, community members and a wide range of key delivery stakeholder partners. Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr. Andrew Muir, MLA formally launched the plan and spoke about the importance of reaching this pivotal milestone for the Sperrins having been designated as a special landscape almost 60 years ago. The plan can be accessed at this link Sperrin AONB Management Plan - Sperrins Partnership Project and hard copies available at request.

3.2 Delivery of Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 10-year Management Plan and 5-year Action Plan

Now that the plan has been formally adopted the Sperrins Partnership will progress with delivery of actions contained within the plan. Successful delivery of many of the actions will rely on excellent partnership working with a wide range of key delivery stakeholders. Current funding provision through the DEARA Environment Fund will assist with delivery of a number of action areas as agreed with the funding Client Officer.

Other funding streams to support delivery of the plan are being considered with conversations progressing with external funders.

3.2 Sperrins Partnership - Staffing

The lead project officer works on a full-time basis in her role to progress project management and oversight and implementation of the new management plan. The part-time administration officer has requested a 1-year career break. Both these posts are funded through equal annual council contributions from the four partner councils. The current AONB Project Officer whose post is funded through the DEARA Environment fund is currently off on maternity leave and not expected to return to early Spring 2027. In light of the huge amount of resource required to deliver this plan it is vitally important that staffing arrangements are adequate to meet the needs of the project delivery. A review of governance and management arrangements for the partnership has been previously agreed by all councils and depending on a successful consultant appointed, it is anticipated that the review will commence in the Autumn.

Outworkings of the review will be brought to the Sperrins Partnership Board initially for consideration before being brought back to Council committee for decision. In the meantime, the lead officer will continue to progress the project as much as possible and within the confines of what can be achieved without additional support. It is hoped that temporary staff can be secured to assist the lead officer in the months ahead. No additional funding is required for any successful temporary staff provision.

3.3 Sperrins Festival 2027

Planning is underway for the next Sperrins Festival which will take place in March 2027. The Sperrins festival is a three-day celebration of landscape, heritage, and community across the Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The festival aims to strengthen connections between people and place, supporting sustainable tourism, and creating meaningful opportunities for participants to learn about, explore, and celebrate the region's rich and diverse heritage and culture.

The festival as per the inaugural event held in March 2026, will offer a diverse and inclusive range of events, including guided walks alongside talks, crafts, storytelling, music and a family fun day and offered participants the opportunity to explore local history, heritage, wildlife, and community narratives through both outdoor and indoor experiences aimed to connect people to the landscape and create a greater awareness of the AONB and the communities within it.

The festival outputs align directly with the new the AONB management plan outputs. Working in partnership with the four councils to deliver, the festival hub will rotate across the wider Sperrins region in future years to help ensure that the social and economic benefits of the festival are shared more broadly, with the overall aim to strengthen communities and connect people with the landscape. The walking element is deliberately programmed to traverse council boundaries to ensure all council areas benefit. In conjunction with the four council officer group, the festival hubs for the first four years have been identified as follows:

- Year 1 - 2026 – Gortin (FODC)
- Year 2 - 2027 – Draperstown (MUDC)
- Year 3 - 2028 – Plumbridge (DCSDC)
- Year 4 - 2029 – Dungiven (CCGBC)

The inaugural Festival took place in March 2026 and Members may recall receiving an update in the report circulated in May 2026. Over 150 participants took part in the five walks delivered over the three days. The festival hub was busy over the entire weekend with people travelling from all over to enjoy the entertainment that was on offer. The family fun day was well received and with lots of families and communities coming out to take part in the day. Feedback gathered on the ground and by way of a survey has been extremely positive. Overall, the festival has laid a strong foundation for future growth and development, and we look forward to building on this success in the years to come.

Members will be kept updated on plans for the 2027 event. With that in mind councils are asked to continue to support the festival and it is suggested that £3,000 per council per year until 2029 be provided to support delivery of the festival going forward.

3.4 Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - Youth Engagement Trips

The Sperrins Partnership continues to engage with youth groups through the delivery of familiarisation trips across the AONB. Youth engagement is recognised as a key priority within the new AONB management plan, cutting across many of its themes and action areas.

Since 2024, the Partnership has offered these trips to a broad range of schools, representing diverse backgrounds and communities. This approach reflects a strong commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

The Partnership intends to continue delivering these valuable experiences, subject to available funding and staff resource. Feedback from participants has been extremely positive, providing a strong foundation to further enhance engagement and raise awareness of the AONB and its unique landscape.

To continue to build on this engagement plans are underway to facilitate more primary school engagement trips in the Autumn. The second ‘Sperrins Youth Voice’ Event aimed at secondary school young people will be delivered in Spring 27.

1.5 Update on events delivered and planned future events

A number of events were delivered throughout the AONB in August and September. The events delivered support the findings of the AONB management plan. Not only do the events empower local communities to become involved in the planning and implementation, they encourage shared learning and knowledge and transferable skills while connecting people from across the AONB.

- A Riverside Walk with focus on Water Quality of the Owenkillew ASSI held at Sams Strahulter Slumber, Newtownstewart 24th August. Facilitated by Foyle River-catchment Outdoor Group (FROG) CIC.

- Fields of Memories: Echoes of the Landscape held at Benedy, Dungiven 25th August. Facilitated by Deaglán O'Doibhlin.

- Dry Stone Walling – Bradkeel Social Farm held 12th September. Facilitated by dry stone walling expert, Frances Farley.

All events were fully booked and extremely positive feedback received.

As stated above, plans are underway to deliver further youth engagement events in the autumn. A youth voice event is in planning for Spring 27.

3.6 Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer – The Outdoor Partnership (TOP)

The Sperrins Partnership in collaboration with Sport NI and four partner Councils secured funding through The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) to appoint an Outdoor Activity Development Officer for the Sperrins for a 4-year funded period back in 2023. The Councils have committed to fund the post to the value of £4,000 per Council for two of the four years up to September 2026. The Sperrins Partnership team works closely with the Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer to assist and support delivery of a range of projects that benefit communities through enhancing lives through outdoor recreation and connecting people with place at grassroots. The outputs of the project aligns directly with the objectives of the new AONB management plan.

Update of Project Delivery from The Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer

2026 has proven to be a successful year to date with various successful projects delivered and further planned sessions and projects into the winter months. Below is an outline of projects delivered of planned for delivery throughout the year:

Sport NI Funded Female Hill Skills Project:

Through Sport NI funding TOP have delivered a series of Hill Skill 1 and 2 courses in Sperrin AONB fast tracking a cohort of female participants through the certifications. Participants were also given branded mountain equipment waterproof trousers and jackets to mark their commitment throughout the 6 training sessions that where delivered during this course.

As part of this funding TOP where also able to deliver a Hike & Sauna session on international woman's day.

PEACEPLUS 6.2 - Adapted Outdoor Education Project (in partnership with Arvalee Special School and Cootehill Holy Family Special School)

Through PEACEPLUS cross border funding TOP have been delivering a cross-border Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) project with two special education schools. So far 20 outdoor activity sessions for participants with additional needs have taken place ranging from bushcraft, paddling and climbing sessions within Sperrin AONB and also in County Cavan at the Holy Family partner school. Staff training and additional bush craft sessions are due to commence soon in the new school term.

PEACEPLUS 1.2 - *Supporting Rural Communities to Access the Great Outdoors* (In Partnership with the Sperrins Partnership)

A variety of sessions have been delivered through this stream of funding including walk and sauna sessions, community archery sessions and also a cross-community project between Omagh High School and Loretto Convent in Omagh where both schools have been taking part in Canoeing and Orienteering sessions. Now the schools are starting their new school term they are due to start working towards their Orienteering GCSE Award which is being funded and coordinated through TOP and this funding stream.

Additional opportunities will be happening through this funding stream also such as EDI opportunities and also Coach Education training.

Trail Volunteer Maintenance Project:

The Trail Volunteer Maintenance Project continues to be an invaluable asset to the local council trail centres. Due to winter storms Davagh and Garvagh trail centres have been less involved with this project but are due to recommence with the volunteer scheme once the sites have been restored from previous extensive storm damage. Meanwhile Gortin trail centre has fully engaged with the project with having four volunteer sessions to date at the site. This has had a huge boost for the site with user satisfaction being significantly higher, which has allowed community relations to thrive at the trail centre.

Sperrins Youth Ambassador Project:

The Sperrins Youth Ambassador Project is a partnership between TOP and the Sperrins Partnership. The inaugural programme was delivered throughout 2025-2026 and was extremely successful, it concluded in May with a camping trip in the Gortin Glen Forest Park with a range of sessions delivered throughout various locations within the AONB. Applications were launched for the 2026-2027 project and delivery started in August 2026 with our new cohort of youth ambassadors. So far they have taken part in two sessions with 14 youth ambassadors at each session with further sessions planned into the winter months. The young people taking part in the programme come from all over Sperrin AONB. This programme connects young people to the natural environment around them and invites them to explore nature, culture and environment on their doorstep while meeting new friends and strengthening the youth connection to the AONB.

The Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer is currently exploring a range of funding opportunities as set out below:

- Third PEACEPLUS Change Maker Application submitted in partnership with Rural Area Partnership Incorporated (RAPID) – Sustainable Cycling Sperrin Outdoor Reaction Project.
- Public Health Agency (PHA) CLEAR Funding applied for the third successful year. 2026-2027 – Focused on a Health & Wellbeing Project.
- Sport NI Community Planning Grant with Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council to deliver Accessible Adventure Programme – Successful application with delivery to commence in early 2027.

- Strategic Grants: The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) have applied for UK lottery funding to help sustain the Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer post for a further 5 years with match funding.

Current Council funding contributions towards the Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer ends in March 2027. The Sperrins Partnership budget covered costs associated during years one and two (due to some surplus budget). The total committed by Councils in Years 3 and 4 are set out in the table below.

Council Contributions	Year 3 24-25	Year 4 25-26
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	£4,000	£4,000
Mid Ulster District Council	£4,000	£4,000
Derry & Strabane District Council	£4,000	£4,000
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	£4,000	£4,000
TOTAL	£16,000	£16,00

4. **Implications**

Council is asked to continue to support the important work of the Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer by continuing to fund the post for a further three-year period. The funding request is set out in the table below and includes salary and inflation costs:

Council Contributions	Apr-27	Apr-28	Apr-29
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	£6,136.15	£6,320.17	£6,509.34
Mid Ulster District Council	£6,136.15	£6,320.17	£6,509.34
Derry & Strabane District Council	£6,136.15	£6,320.17	£6,509.34
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	£6,136.15	£6,320.17	£6,509.34
TOTAL	24,544.60	25,280.68	26037.36

4. **Implications**

Equality, Rural Needs, Climate Change, and Data Protection

4.1 The Sperrin AONB management plan includes provision of increased access, for those in rural areas, through the delivery of education, training, outreach and events which delivers engagement with environment, heritage and culture across the AONB.

Financial, Legal, HR, Improvement and Other

4.2 The Sperrins Partnership project is equally funded by four partner Councils. External funding secured through the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028 has funded the develop the new management plan for the AONB. The Sperrins Partnership provides the delivery model to ensure the new management plan can be delivered upon. The current Council funding contribution cycle ends in March 2027. Councils are asked to fund the Partnership for a further three-year period, from 2027-2030 as set out in the table below. This funding will provide greater staffing stability and allow for more effective project delivery planning and management.

The funding for a further three-year period would also provide reassurance and confidence that the Councils are supportive of, and fully committed to, the Partnership, particularly as we move into delivery of the new AONB management plan and the huge increase in activity associated with this. Should Councils be supportive of this funding request, The Sperrins Partnership Agreement will be extended from 2027 to 2030 in line with the contributions.

Sperrins Partnership Funding Contributions from 2024 – 2027 were:

2024 - 2025	£22k per council	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

Sperrins Partnership Funding Contributions sought for 2027-2030 sought are:

2027 - 2028	£29k per council	Total contributions sought £116k. Salaries £89k, £27k programming costs
2028 - 2029	£30k per council	Total contributions sought £120k. Salaries £92k, £28k programming costs
2029 - 2030	£31k per council	Total contributions sought £124k. Salaries £95k. £29k programming costs

The Sperrins Partnership will continue to increase activity and engagement moving forward on Sperrins AONB with focus on delivery of the first ever management plan the area. At the time of writing, the implications and anticipated timescales for completion of the forthcoming governance review remain unknown. Accordingly, the contribution request outlined above may be subject to revision following the outcome of the review. Any proposed changes to the financial requests to Council that differ from those set out above will be brought back to Council for consideration.

5. **Recommendations**

It is recommended that Council note the content of this report and approve the following:

5.1 The request to support delivery of the Sperrins Festival from 2027 to 2029 at a cost of £3,000 per council.

5.2 The request to continue to provide financial support for a further three-year period towards the salary costs associated with the Sperrin Outdoor Activity Development Officer at The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) as set out above.

5.3 To continue to equally contribute towards the Sperrins Partnership for a further three-year period from April 2027 – March 2030 as per contributions set out above. Noting any variations to the requested contributions as a result of the forthcoming governance review will be brought back to council for approval.

The recommendations are subject to confirmation of the reciprocal financial contribution of all partner councils.

6. Background Papers

(12th May 2026)