

<b>Report on</b>	Sperrins Partnership Project Update Report
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
<b>Reporting Officer</b>	Assistant Director of Economic Development, Tourism & Strategic Programmes

<b>Is this report restricted for confidential business?</b>  If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	<p><b>Sperrins Partnership Project Update</b></p> <p>To provide members with an update on the Sperrins Partnership Project.</p>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Background</b>
2.1	<p>The Sperrins Future Search Conference entitled 'The Sperrins – Reaching New Heights, Realising Our Potential' was held in the Glenavon House Hotel, Cookstown on 27<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> September 2017.</p> <p>The event brought together a group of key stakeholders to draft and agree an action plan for the future development of the Sperrins and in particular the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).</p> <p>The Sperrins Partnership Project is a joint 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.</p>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p>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.</p> <p>Work completed or progressed to date include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approval of the Sperrins Partnership Agreement between Partner Councils. <i>(Existing Partnership Agreement concludes this financial year)</i></li> </ul>

and a new Partnership Agreement requires to be developed and commence on 1 April 2024).

- Governance Structure agreed;
- Formation of a Sperrins Partnership Board;
- Development and launch of a new website dedicated to the project [www.sperrinspartnershipproject.com](http://www.sperrinspartnershipproject.com);
- Development of a communication Newsletter
- Official Launch of the Sperrins Future Search Report and Actions Plans;
- Initiation of the Brand and Tourism Thematic Group;
- Review and update of the Brand and Tourism Action Plan;
- Audit of the Sperrins tourism product offering;
- Engagement and regular meetings with Statutory Agencies;
- Support, assistance and promotion of collaborative projects including, the Sperrins Sculpture Trail and IAT (International Appalachian Trail);
- Review and update of Sperrins Scenic Driving Route Brochure and Signage;
- Review of Sperrins Cycle Route Signage underway;
- Input and support to the update exercise of the latest edition of the Rough Guides Accessible Britain;
- Familiarisation Trips;
- Delivery of Sperrins Walking Programme;
- Source and maximise funding opportunities;
- Raise profile of the Sperrins as a place to visit, live, work and invest;
- The Outdoor Partnership – funding secured through National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) to recruit a Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer. Post commenced Feb 2023.

### **The Outdoor Partnership (TOP)**

The Sperrins Partnership in collaboration and with support from Sport NI secured funding through The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) to appoint an Outdoor Activity Development Officer for the Sperrins for a 4-year funded period. 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 Outdoor Activity Development Officer role is to build capacity, identify training and education needs within outdoor sports and recreation in Sperrins Communities.

The Outdoor Partnership are the main employer and manage the project with input 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. There is also scope to develop existing clubs and create new clubs identified through a needs analysis. The project is very much focused on grass roots and improving outdoor recreation from within communities.

The Officer is currently focused on completing an audit across the region which will identify gaps and opportunities. This exercise is being carried out through effective communication with multiple stakeholders including Council Officials/ Community Groups and National Governing Bodies for sport. Projects are currently being identified across a range of sports and recreational activities.

The Outdoor Partnership Funding Update for the Sperrins:

- **Sport NI funding** for club development. Due in next few months. projects identified are: a need for more paddle sports activities, club start up, a youth development angling program with angling associations and supporting club development/youth development among MTB clubs. (more needs will be identified over the course of gap analysis).
- **ERG Criaggore Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund.** The Grant will go towards utilising the local trail centre by creating a hub for more regular activities aimed at youth and family orientated sessions. TOP will work in partnership with Cycling Ireland on this initiative. Outcome unknown at time of drafting this report.
- **Spar NI funding** application submitted through Charity Support 2gether the fund will go towards a Social Prescribed Health and Well-being program involving the outdoors and cold-water therapy. Outcome unknown at time of drafting this report.
- Updated Outdoor Partnership Sperrin's **Web Page:** <https://outdoorpartnership.co.uk/ayrshire-copy-2>
- **UK lottery Bringing People Together Community Fund.** The idea of this funding will be to work with two community groups supporting people from an under-represented demographic in the outdoors (eg – people from ethnic minority backgrounds, refugees, disabled people, LGBTQI+ groups, etc.) to introduce them to outdoor activities, identify ambassadors two per region to go through a leadership and mentoring programme and then continue to support them to create outdoor activity hubs or clubs within their communities over a two year period, supporting them to gain further qualifications and creating a support network for them to feed into. The Sperrins have been selected as one of the TOP Regions to be included.

**Breakdown of Funding for the post of Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer is as follows:**

<b>Financial Years</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>	
	<b>Feb 23 - Mar 23</b>	<b>Apr 23 - Mar 24</b>	<b>Apr 24 - Mar 25</b>	<b>Apr 25 - Mar 26</b>	<b>Apr 26 - Sep 26</b>	<b>Total (£)</b>
OADO Salary (inc Oncosts)	6,083	36,864	37,601	38,353	19,366	138,267
Administration (Laptop/ phone)	2,625	625	500	500	250	4,500
<b>Total Costs (incurred by TOP)</b>	<b>8,708</b>	<b>37,489</b>	<b>38,101</b>	<b>38,853</b>	<b>19,616</b>	<b>142,767</b>
UK Lottery Funding	6,883	26,430	26,821	27,347	13,806	101,287
<b>Balance of Funding Required</b>	<b>£1,825</b>	<b>£11,059</b>	<b>£11,280</b>	<b>£11,506</b>	<b>£5,810</b>	<b>£41,480</b>

The financial contribution up to 31 March 2024<sup>1</sup> totalling £12,884 has been provided by the Sperrin Partnership budget, this was agreed by Partner Councils due to some underspend during the early stages of the project, mainly due to the pandemic. Consideration to financial contributions for years 3 and 4 is required. It is suggested that partner councils as a key partner, make budget provision for these years to ensure the project can continue for its duration.

Broken down, the financial contribution requested from each Partner Council is £4,000 in Year 3 and £4,000 in Year 4. The funding sought requires the agreement of all Partner Councils to contribute the additional funding. Such funding will allow for some programming costs to be included.

In terms of Mid Ulster District Council, the additional budget sought to fund the Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer in Years 3 and 4, is presently being considered by Council's Communities and Place Directorate and a report will be brought back to Committee on the matter.

Members will be kept updated on project developments. Further information on the project can be found here [Northern Ireland-The Sperrins - The Outdoor Partnership](#).

## Sperrins AONB Management

Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is the only one of 8 AONB in Northern Ireland without a Management Plan. This is a long-standing matter which the Sperrins Partnership Board had supported as a key issue facing the region. The Partnership engaged with NIEA to assess options and to understand the role/ remit of the agency and explore funding opportunities available to write and deliver a management plan. As a result of this, the Sperrins Partnership undertook internal consultation research amongst the Partner Councils to understand if there is an appetite, resource, and commitment to deliver an AONB Management Plan for the Sperrins.

The Sperrins Partnership Board agreed to apply for funding to the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028 in November 2022. The application was successful. The funding will allow a 10-year Management and 5-year Action Plan to be developed for the Sperrins. This is welcome news as following almost 55 years since it was originally Designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, it will now benefit from a multi-agency coordinated approach to protect and promote the unique landscape.

The Letter of Offer sets out the financial allocation for each year of the project and the work plan for each year thereafter will be agreed in advance with NIEA and Councils. The final Letter of Offer is attached at **Appendix 1**. There is no further financial request to Partner Councils. Previous approval to accept the Letter of Offer was sought through the four partner council committees earlier this year.

The funding will allow for recruitment of an AONB Project Officer who will assist with developing the Management Plan and Action Plan. The post will be guaranteed initially for a 2-year period and subject to delivery of the work programme in years 1 and 2, the post will be extended for the remainder of the funding period.

A slight change in the current Sperrins Partnership structure will be required to include the recruitment of the AONB Project Officer and the suggested structure amendments are included in **Appendix 2**. Partner Councils have also requested the Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer post to be shown on the structure, and whilst this officer is not directly employed by Sperrins Partnership, the postholder is delivering projects in the Sperrins region, in association with Councils.

Considering the suggested structural changes, it is anticipated that salary costs for current staff will increase by c.£1,000 per Council, per year. There is enough budget from the existing financial contributions from each Council to cover this slight increase. Members are asked to note this slight increase and the allocation of overall budget to this.

## **Sperrins Partnership Project – Financial Contributions and Invoicing Arrangements**

Current invoicing arrangements for Partner Council contributions to support the Sperrins Partnership cover the period October to October each year which falls in line with staff employment dates.

However, invoicing arrangements for the contributions currently takes place in February/March each year falling in line with Partner Councils' financial years. This current arrangement is proving problematic as essentially invoicing is being carried out retrospectively to account for contributions for the 6 months prior to March each year.

In an attempt to align invoicing arrangements, it is suggested that Partner Councils are not invoiced in October 2023 and instead the next invoices for contributions are issued in March 2024 to align with Councils' financial years.

## **Sperrins Walking Programme**

Council may recall receiving an update on the Sperrins Walking Programme 2022/2023. The Programme was a huge success with a high majority of walks selling out and feedback from Partner Councils and those who took part was extremely positive. Due to the success and in an attempt to build on the event the 4 partner councils are working in collaboration to deliver the Programme again commencing in Autumn 2023 with one element taking place in Spring 2024. Budgets have been identified and the range of walks will include individual Council specifications.

An activity provider has been appointed to oversee the events and Councils have agreed for a single procurement exercise be undertaken (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to act as procuring authority) to plan and deliver a walking weekend in each of the four Council areas in the 2023/2024 financial year on behalf of the Sperrins Partnership. Further information and updates can be found at [Sperrins Walking Festival - Sperrins Partnership Project](#)

## **Council Projects in the context of the Sperrins**

The Partner Councils involved with the project have delivered a number of specific projects that are of significant benefit to the Sperrins. These projects will support the collaborative work of the partnership and enhance the product offering in the region.

## **Sperrins Sculpture Trail Project**

The Sperrins Sculpture Trail Project consists of 3 iconic pieces of artwork positioned in spectacular settings within the Sperrins. The sculpture trail is designed to promote the natural and built heritage of the region and encourage rural tourism and out of state visitors whilst preserving the natural assets of the rural community.

This project is a working partnership between Derry City and Strabane District, Mid Ulster District Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. The Sperrins Giant Sculptures - The Storyteller, The Guardian and The Stargazer have been installed at their respective sites. Works are now complete, and the official launch took place in July 2023. More information on the project can be found at [Sperrins Sculpture Trail - Sperrins Partnership Project](#)

### **International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland**

The International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland links the mountains in West Donegal through to Larne in Co. Antrim along the geological Appalachian trail. The route crosses 6 different Council areas which include the 4 Sperrins Partnership Councils with varying distances in each Council area.

The capital works and marketing programme for the International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland delivered through Rural Development Programme Co-Operation Scheme is now completed.

The Sperrins Partnership Project's four Council Partners all participated in the initiative which delivered significant enhancement to the overall walking experience within the Sperrins region. Key improvements within the Sperrins section of the IAT Ulster Ireland included improved waymarking, signage and interpretation along the entirety of the route as well as upgrades to the Barnes Amenity site, Goles Stone Row.

### **Banagher Glen and Garvagh Mountain Bike Trail**

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council secured external funding for enhancement works at Banagher Glen located in the Southwest of the council area just outside Dungiven in the North Sperrins. The project completed in early Spring and has improved and enhanced the visitor experience at this stunning location. The project will create opportunities for the local community and visitors to enjoy the site on a year-round basis and also create opportunities for visitors to explore the High Sperrins on foot. The Official launch of the enhancement works took place in June 2023.

Garvagh mountain bike trail located on the Sperrins boundary within Causeway Coast and Glens has proved to be a very popular attraction. The project has created a Community Health Hub in Garvagh Forest through the development of a multi-use walk and off-road family cycling trails. The location is also home to the weekly Parkrun which encourages people to get out, get active and stay healthy. Garvagh Forest is also one of the locations for the Picture This Trail as part of Borough wide rural tourism driving trail.

	<p><b>Gortin Glen Forest Park</b></p> <p>In Fermanagh and Omagh District Council the redevelopment of Gortin Glen Forest Park has transformed it into a family friendly outdoor experience and includes a destination Play Park, trim trail, additional parking and the creation of mountain biking trails. Gortin Glen Forest Park continues to develop the product offering at the location which includes the addition of the Sperrins Sculpture Trail giant located at the top of Mullaghcarn within the forest park.</p>
<p><b>4.0</b></p>	<p><b>Other Considerations</b></p>
<p><b>4.1</b></p>	<p><b>Financial, Human Resources &amp; Risk Implications</b></p>
	<p>Financial:</p> <p>The Sperrins Partnership Project is presently funded by 4 Partner Councils at a total annual cost of c£88,000 (£22,000 per Council). Officers are currently looking at options to secure additional funding from external sources for relevant projects. This contribution includes salary and programming costs and concludes in October 2023.</p> <p>Each Council has committed £22,000 to Sperrins Partnership for the current financial year. A similar financial request from Sperrins Partnership will be brought to Committee for consideration early in the new 2024/25 financial year, subject to available budgets, to seek to extend the project to maintain momentum and build on early success and allow for effective forward planning and project management.</p> <p>This funding will be vital to ensure the Sperrins Partnership Project can deliver on its vision as outlined at the Sperrins Future Search Conference, predicated upon the same match funding being agreed by all Partner Councils.</p>
	<p>Human: Officers time</p>
	<p>Risk Management:</p>
<p><b>4.2</b></p>	<p><b>Screening &amp; Impact Assessments</b></p>
	<p>Equality &amp; Good Relations Implications</p>
	<p>Rural Needs Implications</p>



<b>5.0</b>	<b>Recommendation(s)</b>
	<p>It is recommended that Members;</p> <p><b>5.1 Note</b> content of report.</p> <p><b>5.2 Approve</b> in principle that Council continue to provide financial support to Sperrins Partnership when their financial request is made to Committee early in the 2024/25 financial year, subject to confirmation of the reciprocal financial contribution from all Partner Councils. The financial request should be accompanied by a refreshed Partnership Agreement.</p> <p><b>5.3 Approve</b> realignment of Sperrins Partnership financial requests to Partner Councils to mirror financial years (1 April – 31 March).</p> <p><b>5.4 Accept</b> the terms and conditions of the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028. Letter of Offer attached at <b>Appendix 1</b>.</p> <p><b>5.5 Support</b> recruitment of an AONB Project Officer to assist with development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan and Action Plan.</p> <p><b>5.6 Approve</b> the suggested amendment to the current Sperrins Partnership Structure as set out on <b>Appendix 2</b> and budget allocation to salary costs as detailed in the report.</p>
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Documents Attached &amp; References</b>
	<p><b>Appendix 1</b> - Sperrins Partnership – Letter of Offer – July 2023</p> <p><b>Appendix 2</b> – Existing and Proposed Sperrins Partnership Structure</p>