



<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Sperrins Partnership Project</b>
<b>Committee Report Submitted To:</b>	The Leisure & Development Committee
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	21 February 2023
<b>For Decision or For Information</b>	For Decision

<b>Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)</b>	
Strategic Theme	Protecting and Enhancing Our Environments and Assets
Outcome	All environments in the area will benefit from pro-active decision making which protects the natural features, characteristics and integrity of the Borough
Lead Officer	Head of Tourism and Recreation Coast and Countryside Manager

<b>Budgetary Considerations</b>	
Cost of Proposal	£22,000 per annum
Included in Current Year Estimates	<b>YES</b>
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	Officer attendance at meetings

<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 Members with an update on progress of the Sperrins Partnership Project and request consideration for continued support of the project over the next 3 years.

## 2.0 Background

At the Leisure Development Committee Meeting in October 2021, it was recommended to approve the funding of Sperrins Partnership Project until March 2023.

The Sperrins Partnership Project is a collaboration between four Councils across the Sperrin area, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council. Each Council in 2018 committed to equal financial contribution towards the project delivery and have also funded the Sperrins Future Search initiative. The funding was originally intended to be for the financial year 2019/2020 but due to delays in recruiting staff this support was not apportioned until the financial year 2020/2021.

## 3.0 Progress to Date

A Sperrins Partnership Project Officer and part time Administrative Support have been appointed and took up their respective roles in October 2020.

Work completed or progressed since October 2020 includes:

- Approval and sign off of the Sperrins Partnership Agreement between partner Councils;
- 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;
- Formation of the Brand and Tourism Thematic Group;
- Review and update of the Brand and Tourism Action Plan;
- Completed 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) projects;
- Review & Upgrade of Sperrins Scenic Driving Route Brochure and Signage;
- Review & Upgrade of Sperrins Cycle Route Signage;
- Input and support to the update exercise of the latest edition of the Rough Guides Accessible Britain;
- Familiarisation Trip of the Sperrins.

### 3.1 The Outdoor Partnership

The Sperrins Partnership was successful in its application to The Outdoor Partnership (TOP). The Outdoor Partnership is an organisation based in Wales **which works 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 funding equates to £120k guaranteed for the next 4 years through the National Lottery Fund (NLF). The funding will be used to appoint a project officer whose role in broad terms will be to build capacity, identify training and education needs within outdoor sports and recreation in Sperrin's Communities.

Other aims 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.

### 3.2 Management of Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Sperrin 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 has prioritised as a key issue. The Partnership have been engaging with NIEA to assess the options available and understand the role/ remit of the agency and explore funding opportunities available to write and deliver a management plan. In terms of next steps, the Sperrins Partnership will undertake internal consultation research amongst the 4 partner Councils to understand if there is an appetite, resource, and commitment to deliver an AONB Management Plan for the Sperrins.

### 3.3 Sperrins Walking Festival

The 4 partner Councils are working in collaboration to deliver a walking festival programme across the Sperrins. The events commenced in Autumn 2022. An activity provider has been appointed to oversee the events and Councils agreed for a single procurement exercise to 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 2022/2023 financial year on behalf of the Sperrins Partnership. Further information can be found at [Sperrins Walking Festival - Sperrins Partnership Project](#)

### 3.4 Green Spaces Dark Skies

Landscape for Life are the representative association for AONB across the UK and are one of the main partners for an event called Green Spaces Dark Skies. Up to 20 events took place across the UK between April and September 2022 and Sperrin AONB was identified as a location. Sperrins Partnership Project collaborated with Walk the Plank to deliver the event at Gortin Glen Forest Park.

The theme for the event is to reconnect people with their landscapes and respecting the outdoors. Open to all, each mass gathering celebrates nature, the responsibility to protect it and everyone's right to explore the countryside.

A short film was made of 'Luminators' holding small eco-friendly solar lights designed by Siemens on the Gortin Lakes at dusk with possibly a mountain bike element also featuring. The locations remained secret to protect the landscape and were only disclosed to those who signed up to take part.

The footage will be circulated to a wide audience. Mourne, Giants Ring (Lagan Valley) and the Giants Causeway also took part in the initiative.

More information can be found by visiting [Green Space Dark Skies | Events | Sperrin AONB - County Tyrone](#)

The partner Councils involved with the project have delivered several 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.

- 3.5 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 along with wider site works including enhanced car park provision for the Sperrin Heritage Centre site. The Project Board is currently looking at delivering potentially a soft community focused launch followed by a formal launch of the project in advance of the new visitor season in 2023.
- 3.6 The International Appalachian Trail (IAT) 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. 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 4 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.
- 3.7 The OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory located in Davagh Forest opened its doors in 2021 to visitors and is the only one of its kind in Northern Ireland. The park is an initiative by Mid Ulster District Council and sits within Sperrin AONB.

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. Once complete, the project will improve and enhance 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.

Garvagh mountain bike trail located on the Sperrins boundary within Causeway Coast and Glens continues 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. Garvagh Forest is also one of the locations for the Picture This Trail as part of Borough wide rural tourism driving trail.

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 was recently awarded the RTPI Northern Ireland Award for Planning Excellence for Health and Well Being.

#### **4.0 Moving Forward**

The Sperrins Partnership Project has several priorities over the coming months which include:

- Developing options to deliver a management plan for Sperrin AONB.
- Identifying funding opportunities and creating the respective business cases (HLF, RDP, Peace Plus etc).

- Forming strong cross boundary partnerships.
- Formation and development of the remaining Thematic Groups.

The Sperrins Partnership Project is presently funded by 4 Councils at a total annual cost of £88,000. Going forward it is anticipated that the annual operating cost will remain the same. Officers are currently looking at options to secure additional funding from external sources for relevant projects. This contribution includes salary and programming costs and concluded in October 2022. Each Council had committed circa £22,000 for the current financial year and committed to continue to fund each year thereafter annually is requested during the project lifetime, to extend the project to maintain momentum and build on early success and allow for effective forward planning and project management.

## **5.0 Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Leisure & Development Committee recommends to Council:

That consideration is given to provide financial support for the continuation of the Sperrins Partnership Project at a cost of £22,000 annually subject to confirmation of the reciprocal financial contribution of all partner Councils. Funding for 2023/24 is subject to the rates setting process and if agreed Officers would recommend a 3-year term.