

Title of Report:	Sperrins Partnership Project
Committee Report Submitted To:	Leisure & Development Committee
Date of Meeting:	19 September 2023
For Decision or For Information	For Decision
To be discussed In Committee YES/NO	NO

Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
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 Our natural assets will be carefully managed.
Lead Officer	Head of Tourism and Recreation Coast and Countryside Manager

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	£22,000 p/a for Sperrins Partnership £4,000 p/a for Outdoor Partnership (from 2024 for two years)
Included in Current Year Estimates	YES/NO
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	

Legal Considerations	
Input of Legal Services Required	NO
Legal Opinion Obtained	YES/NO

Screening Requirements	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

To provide members with an annual update on the Sperrins Partnership Project and to seek approval for continued support from Council with respect to The Outdoor Partnership and the preparation of the Sperrin AONB Management and Action Plan.

2.0 Background

The Sperrins Partnership Project (previously Sperrins Future Search) 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.

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.

Work completed or progressed to date includes:

- Approval of the Sperrins Partnership Agreement between partner councils (currently under review);
- Governance Structure agreed and formation of a Sperrins Partnership Board;
- Development and launch of a new website dedicated to the project 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;
- Delivery of Sperrins Walking Programme;
- 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.

At the February 2023 meeting of Leisure & Development Committee it was recommended that Council provides 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 was subject to the rates setting process. Officers recommended a 3-year term moving forward a decision ratified by full Council.

3.0 Projects and Proposals

3.1 The Outdoor Partnership (TOP)

The Sperrins Partnership in collaboration with and with support from Sport NI and 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. 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 employs the project officer and manages the project with support from Partner Councils. The project also seeks to include enabling communities through promoting sustainable use of the environment, enhancing partnership working through local delivery and improving coaching, education and opportunities coach and opportunities for volunteering.

The Officer is currently focused on completing an audit across the region which will identify gaps and opportunities. Projects are currently being identified across a range of sports and recreational activities.

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

B: Financial Years	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4		
	Feb 23 - Mar 23	Apr 23 - Mar 24	Apr 24 - Mar 25	Apr 25 - Mar 26	Apr - Sep 26	Total
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
Total Costs (incurred by TOP)	8,708	37,489	38,101	38,853	19,616	142,767
UK Lottery Funding	6,883	26,430	26,821	27,347	13,806	101,287
Balance of Funding Required	1,825	11,059	11,280	11,506	5,810	41,480

The financial contribution up to 31 March 24’ totalling £12,884.00 has been provided by the Sperrin Partnership budget. This was agreed by partner councils due to underspend during the early stages of the project because of the pandemic.

Consideration to financial contributions for years 3 and 4 is required. It is suggested that partner councils make budget provision for these years to ensure the project can continue for its duration.

Broken down, the contribution requested for each year is circa £4000 per Partner Council. This figure will allow for some programming costs to be included.

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

3.2 Sperrin AONB Management Plan

Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is the only one of 8 AONBs 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 amongst the partner councils to confirm 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 **Annex A**. There is no further financial request to Partner Councils.

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 program 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 at **Annex B**.

Considering the suggested structural changes, it is anticipated that salary costs for current staff will increase by c£1k 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.

3.3 Sperrins Walking Festival

The 2022/2023 Sperrins Walking 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 to build on the event the four 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](#)

3.4 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 Council financial year. 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.

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 year. Respective Council finance teams are content with this arrangement which members are asked to note.

3.5 Future Financial Support

The Sperrins Partnership Project is presently funded by 4 councils at a total annual cost of c£88,000. 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.

Each council had committed c£22,000 for the current financial year and commitment 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.

This funding will be vital to ensure that the Sperrins Partnership Project can deliver on its vision as outlined at the Sperrins Future Search Conference subject to matching agreement from all partner councils.

4.0 Recommendation

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

1. To consider making budget provision of approximately £4,000 per year for 2-year period commencing April 2024 up to September 2026 to support continuation of The Outdoor Partnership Project in the Sperrins as outlined.
2. To accept the terms and conditions of the DAERA Environment Fund Strategic Strand 2023 – 2028. Letter of Offer attached at **Annex A**.
3. To commence with the recruitment of an AONB Project Officer to assist with development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan and Action Plan.
4. To agree to the suggested amendment to the current Sperrins Partnership Structure as set out at **Annex B** and budget allocation to salary costs.

Applicant – by email only

██████████ [@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk](mailto:██████████@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk)

Our Ref: EFSS 20

Direct Tel: ██████████

04/07/2023

Dear Ciara

Letter of Offer: The Sperrins - From Future Search to AONB Delivery

Following your application to the Environment Fund I am pleased to inform you that the Department is offering the level of grant outlined below for 2023/24, subject to the Terms and Conditions that are attached to this letter of offer in Appendix 4 and the Additional Terms and Conditions below.

This is to deliver Option 1 within your application and, where appropriate with the amendments outlined below. The Outcomes and Targets to be delivered, monitored and reported on are listed in Appendix 2, alongside the Risk Register that must be maintained and reported on with each grant claim.

Offer:

1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024: Up to £103,660 at up to 62% of eligible costs.

Future years

1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025: Up to £108,487 at up to 62% of eligible costs.

1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026: Up to £122,927 at up to 62% of eligible costs.

1 April 2026 – 31 March 2027: Up to £123,477 at up to 62% of eligible costs.

1 April 2027 – 31 March 2028: Up to £129,884 at up to 62% of eligible costs.

The following elements are excluded from this offer:

- School Engagement
- Funding for Built Heritage Features
- Updates/revision to Driving Routes and Cycle Routes

Client Officer:

The DAERA Client Officer allocated for this project is Michael Gillespie; Tel 02890 569576; e-mail Michael.gillespie2@daera-ni.gov.uk.

Additional Project Specific Terms and Conditions:



1. Final draft Sperrins AONB management plan to be submitted to the NIEA by 30th November 2024.
2. Draft AONB Action plan to be submitted to NIEA by 30th November 2024 and action plan to be finalised by 31st January 2025.
3. NIEA to fully engaged in consultation and development of the management plan and action plan
4. Draft proposals for the establishment of a Sperrins AONB wildfire group including draft terms of reference and proposed membership to be submitted to NIEA within 12mths of project commencement.
5. Sperrins AONB to be represented at the NI Wildfire Stakeholder Forum
6. Wildfire awareness messages to be agreed in advance with NIEA and NIFRS before being released to the public and landowners
7. Only the actions within the “Environment and Heritage” section of the Future Search Conference Report” are eligible for support, the precise actions much be agreed with the cline officer as part of the agreed work plan for the project.
8. Funding for years three, four and five to be dependent on the production of a satisfactory AONB management plan and action plan.
9. HRA on AONB management plan and Action plan must be undertaken by the Council carried out once both documents are complete, this to be shared with the Department in advance of adopting the AONB Management Plan.
10. NIEAs outdoor recreation officer to be invited onto the recreation forum (if not already represented) and to be engaged on all proposed outdoor recreation projects and proposals.
11. Update to the Sperrins Outdoor Recreation Action Plan.
12. Geospatial mapping of working areas and locations of projects delivered will be required as a condition of any offer.
13. once the HRA is developed by the Council for the AONB management plan and any projects to be delivered through EF funding, this must be submitted to the EF Grant Client Officer must agree that they are content with it prior to implementation of any elements that might affect designated sites.
14. The Applicant is responsible for obtaining and complying with statutory approvals in advance of the conduct of any activities that may affect designated sites. In awarding this grant DAERA is not inferring that “as an owner/occupier¹ of the protected site(s) named in the EF Application Form, or as a public body, you may carry out, cause or permit to be carried out, the operation(s) specified in the manner prescribed” and outlined in your grant application and supplementary information. This Letter of Offer is not therefore a Consent/Assent, under the Environment Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 as amended, for any of the operations proposed in your project.

Where you do not have current Consent/Assent in place for the proposed project, and intend to carry out operations within or near ASSIs, you must gain this via your Environment Fund (EF) Client Officer in writing prior to carrying out any operations. You must fill in the appropriate form in Appendix 4.

Competent Authorities (Government, Councils and Statutory Undertakers) intending to carry out projects within or near ASSIs must have the Assent of DAERA in order to proceed, and for European sites are required to carry out their own Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) prior to applying for Assent from their EF Client Officer.

If you propose to amend, or carry out additional operations, or where the period identified in the proposal for the operation to take place has expired, you must provide sufficient information to enable the environmental assessment to be carried out to consider whether the operation(s) can be granted Consent/Assent.

Where any operations also require permission from a local planning or other regulatory authority, separate to a permission under the Environment Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 as amended, you must ensure these permissions are also obtained before any operations take place.

¹ You must have written permission of the owner.

Acceptance of Offer:

If you are accepting this offer you must confirm this using the attached Grant Acceptance Form by **03/08/2023**. This must be signed by 2 authorised representatives.

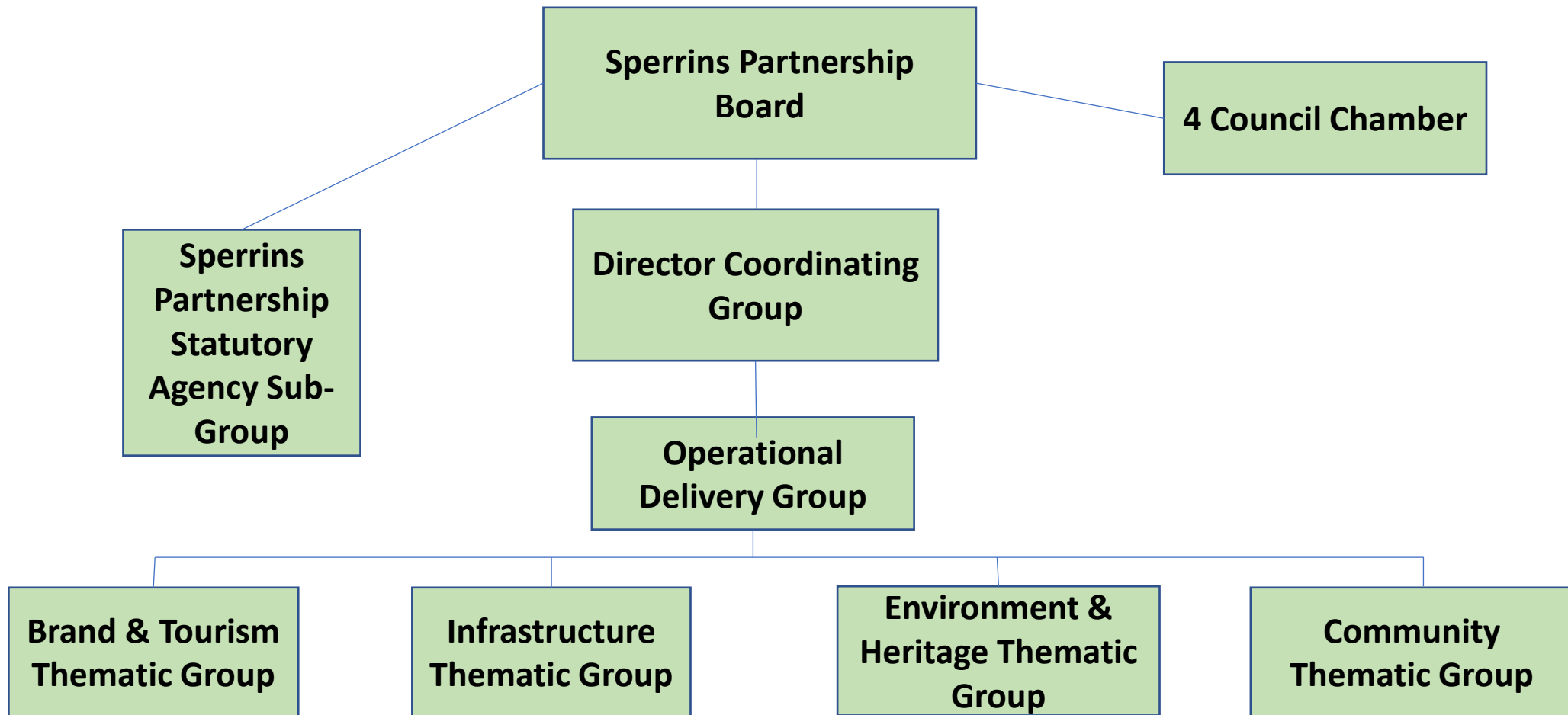
Yours sincerely



Mark Hammond
Director, Natural Environment Division
DAERA

Copy: Michael Gillespie, DAERA Client Officer
efgrants@daera-ni.gov.uk
Katie Birbeck, DAERA

Current Sperrins Partnership Structure



Proposed Sperrins Partnership Structure

