



SPERRINS PARTNERSHIP

**Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Management Plan 2026 - 2036**

Foreword

Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a very special place and a bit of a well-kept secret in terms of Northern Ireland's landscape. Originally designated back in 1968, it has never until now benefited from having a management plan in place. It gives me great pleasure to welcome this important plan that will undoubtedly help to raise the profile of this very special landscape and celebrate the rich natural and cultural heritage that makes this area unique.

What makes the Sperrins unique is the range of landscape within it; moors, glens, valleys, rivers and lakes. The development of this plan, facilitated by the staff of the Sperrins Partnership, is a key step forward in how the many and varied interests interact with the Sperrins landscape. The management plan aims to better conserve the region by promoting policies, practices, partnerships and projects which will enhance the AONB.

The Sperrins Partnership provides a sounding board for these interests. This first ever management plan and subsequent action plan is the result of an extensive consultation, but the process is far from over at this point. These are the first steps in realising the potential sustainable management of this landscape as a place where people live, work and visit. A working landscape that provides us with food, acts as our playground, classroom, home and a place to engage the outdoors. Steeped in cultural and natural heritage it is different things to different people, and this reflects in the plan. It is a visionary document which hopes to inspire those involved in the AONB to work in partnership to deliver for the AONB and not one individual or organisation.

AONBs in Northern Ireland differ from elsewhere, as there is no statutory requirement to prepare a Management Plan. However, the absence of such a requirement does not diminish its value. Indeed, perhaps this challenges us to make the Plan work because we believe it is the right thing to do.

The Sperrins Partnership would like to thank its funders and partners for their continued support including Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Mid Ulster District Council and the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). My sincere thanks go to everyone who has contributed to the process thus far. The Sperrins is a landscape that deserves to be protected, celebrated and carefully managed for future generations. Management and action plans are only effective if they are implemented and supported by those who have a stake in the area and I encourage everyone to become involved, whether you live, work or visit this remarkable landscape.

I trust that you will find this document informative and helpful and, more importantly, that it inspires you to take the time to experience and appreciate what makes the Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty such a special place.

Sincerely,

CLlr Sean Clarke,
Chair of Sperrins Partnership



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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter will provide a brief introduction to Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and consider the wider environment in which it operates. It will explore the role of AONBs within Northern Ireland, including their legal context and furthermore the role of AONB management plans.

1.1 What is an AONB?

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is an area designated for its exceptional landscape character and its nationally significant scenic value. The landscape is considered so special that it is within national interest to protect it via designation. There is a total of eight AONBs within Northern Ireland, designated under two pieces of legislation:

- The Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965
- The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (Northern Ireland) 1985 (NCALO)

The Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965 was primarily concerned with planning controls, however NCALO provides a legal basis for a much more comprehensive approach to landscape management considering both conservation and recreation purposes.

Article 14 of the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order, 1985 sets out the objectives of designation for AONBs:

- **Conserving or enhancing the natural beauty or amenities of that area;**
- **Conserving wildlife, historic objects or natural phenomena within it;**
- **Promoting its enjoyment by the public;**
- **Providing or maintaining public access to it.**

Although legal responsibility for the designation of AONBs lies with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), through the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), in practice a range of statutory agencies, local authorities, non-government organisations (NGOs), communities and landowners contribute to the successful management and conservation of AONBs.

The map below shows all eight AONBs in Northern Ireland, each designated individually following a thorough research process.



Map of AONBs in Northern Ireland

SPERRIN AONB

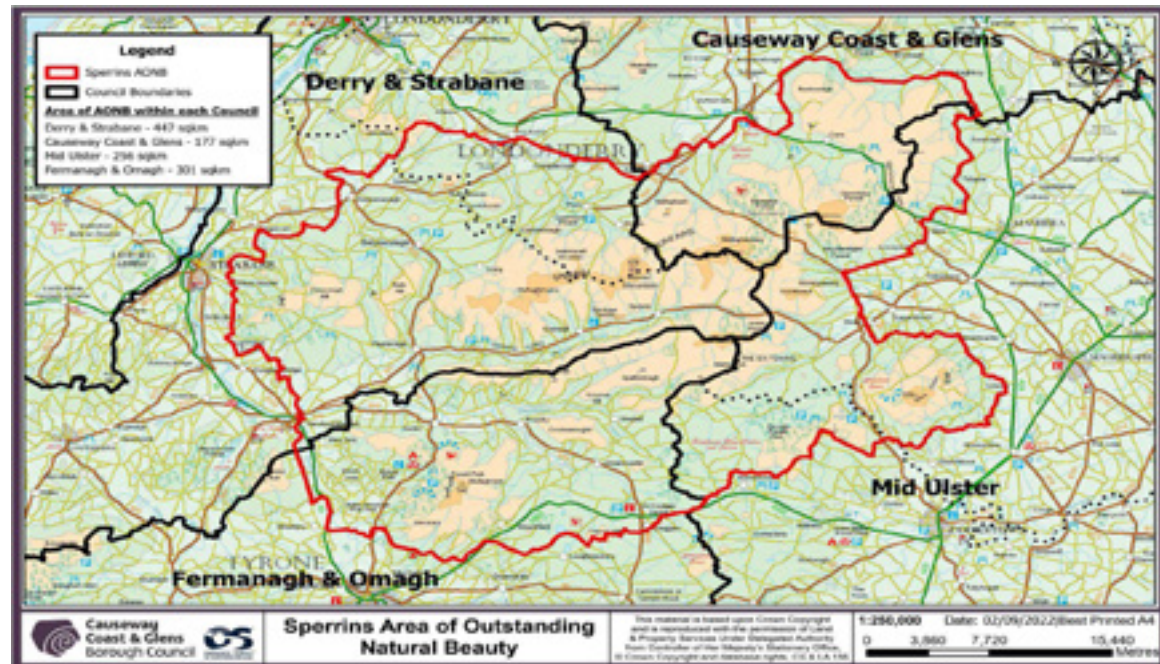
Sperrin AONB was first designated in 1968 under the Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965 and covered an area of 101,000 hectares (ha) making it the largest AONB in Northern Ireland. The area was subsequently re-designated in 2008 under The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985 (NCALO) with a revised boundary, now encompassing an area of 118,206 ha.

The AONB is located across two counties, Counties Derry/Londonderry and Tyrone, and across four local authorities: Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council. It covers a large stretch of land in the heart of Ulster.

The landscape character of the AONB will be considered in greater detail in the following chapter, however it comprises a largely mountainous area incorporating vast expanses of moorland, penetrated by narrow glens and deep valleys.

The Sperrin Mountains run from west to east, continuing to the north-east through the area surrounding Mount Sawel, the highest peak in the range, and across the Glenshane Pass to Benbradagh and Carntogher, and covers the eastward outlying peak of Slieve Gallion. This expansive and geologically complex landscape is one of the wildest and most remote within Northern Ireland. The Sperrins

is rich in historic archaeological and cultural heritage which has contributed significantly to its sense of place, and the identity of communities in the area. Moreover, the Sperrins is an important destination for outdoor activity and recreation, for local people and visitors alike. Each of these themes will be examined more closely in Chapter Two.



Sperrin AONB



1.2 AONB Management

The aim of an AONB management plan is to conserve and enhance the landscape quality of the designation for the benefit of present and future generations. Although AONB management plans in Northern Ireland are not statutory documents they can however provide an informed, evidenced based approach to landscape management and an agreed framework that all stakeholders can work to for the benefit of the AONB.

Despite having been designated as an AONB almost sixty years ago, Sperrin is the only AONB within Northern Ireland that has not yet benefitted from a management plan until now. This document therefore marks the first edition AONB plan for the Sperrins.

1.3 The Sperrins Partnership

Established in 2017 and operationalised in 2020, the Sperrins Partnership is a cross-council led project created with the aim of preserving, enhancing and managing the landscape and natural, built and cultural heritage of Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The development of the Sperrins Partnership was a key recommendation of the Sperrins Future Search Conference, which brought together a range of stakeholders to create a plan for the future of the AONB. The Sperrins Partnership marks the first concerted, cross-council attempt to manage Sperrin AONB.

**No part of this plan should be read as generating an expectation as to how a Council will determine any individual application or any future provisions within the Local Development Plan, and the weight to be attributed to it in decision making will be a matter for the decision maker.*

Chapter 2

Sperrin AONB



2.1 Sperrin AONB

The European Landscapes Convention defines a landscape as - **“an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”**¹

Located in the heart of Ulster, in Counties Derry/Londonderry and Tyrone, Sperrin AONB is a diverse landscape, and the largest AONB within Northern Ireland, comprising an extensive boundary of 118,206 ha. The vast size of the AONB means that it falls under four local authorities, namely Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council. The total area of the AONB can be broken down as follows:

- Derry City & Strabane District Council – 447km² (38%)
- Fermanagh & Omagh District Council – 301km² (25%)
- Mid Ulster District Council – 256km² (22%)
- Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council – 177km² (15%)

The main population settlements of the Sperrins are confined to the valleys surrounding the mountains, with more upland areas of the AONB sparsely populated thus contributing to their remoteness and tranquillity. For the purposes of this plan, we also recognised the gateway towns and villages surrounding the AONB boundary, many of which are considered locally as part of the Sperrins. The Glenshane Pass provides the main corridor of access from the north-west towards Belfast and the east.²



¹ Council of Europe Landscape Convention - Definition and legal recognition of landscapes - Council of Europe Landscape Convention
² Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Assessment. Sperrins.

2.2 Landscape Character of Sperrin AONB

The Sperrins are formed of Dalradian rocks, pushed up some 450 million years ago during the Caledonian Orogeny. This period of mountain-building arose from the collision of European and North American landmasses. The Dalradian series comprises folded metamorphic rocks including schists and psammite (metamorphosed sandstones). These are interbedded in places with calcareous schists.³

The Sperrins are the principal mountain range of the north-west, comprising some of the wildest and most rugged terrain in Northern Ireland. The main ridges, divided by the scenic Glenelly Valley, are surrounded by a series of outliers including Bessy Bell and Mullaghcaru above the River Strule, Slieve Gallion in the east, and Benbradagh across the Glenshane Pass. The boundaries follow the main east-west ridges of the Sperrins, separating them from the lower hills to north and south. ⁴The Landscape is characterised by extensive moorland with coniferous forest plantations and broad summits. The highest points of the Sperrins include Sawel Mountain (678m), Mullaghclogha (635m) and Mullaghaneany (627m). In less elevated areas, rounded ridges are defined by moorland features as well as extensive areas of bog land.

Gortin Glen and the surrounding upland area towards Mary Gray and the outlying Bessy Bell act as a gateway to the Sperrins from the southwest with the A5 providing the key route to the northwest from Omagh to the south. The River Strule cuts between these projections forming a scenic valley with Bessy Bell particularly prominent in the landscape despite its relatively diminutive stature (420m).

To the northeast of Mullaghaneany the Sperrins join with the bold basalt escarpment of Benbradagh dominating the head of the Roe Valley. The conifer plantations at Banagher and along the Glenshane Pass contrast with the surrounding open moorland. The Glenshane Pass provides the main corridor of access from the north-west towards Belfast and the east. The higher peaks in the northern part of the AONB are distinctly more mountainous, comprising a ridge with knife-like projections and rocky summits beyond. The screes of Mullaghmore are a prominent feature above Draperstown, within the farmed upper Moyola valley. Slieve Gallion is the most easterly peak of the Sperrins, with distinctive ladder fields on its flanks, and provides views from its eastern slope over the surrounding area to Lough Neagh to the east and beyond to Slemish Mountain in the northeast.

There are expansive views in all directions from the high points of the Sperrins; east over the lower lying lands surrounding Lough Neagh; north along the Roe Valley to Lough Foyle and Inishowen; south across the central Tyrone farmlands; and west across the River Foyle to the hills of Donegal.⁵



³DAERA, *Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*. Available - *Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty* | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

⁴DAERA, *Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Assessment. Sperrins*.

⁵DAERA, (2016) *Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment*. Available at: <https://daerani.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=3fdf82b3e41e44a1bb86a542dfb67d97>

Fast flowing streams and water sources within Sperrin AONB have resulted in the formation of deep steeply sided gullies and valleys with native tree cover becoming denser along the floors of valleys. The Glenelly River flows along one of the principal faultlines of the Sperrins from east to west, from Mullaghaneany to Plumbridge, in the valley below the high peaks of Mullaghclogha, Sawel and Mullaghaneany. The river has cut deep into the softer deposits and meanders between steep ridges which combine to give the area a hidden quality which is at odds with the expansive nature of the uplands area surrounding on either side. The Glenelly Valley is recognised as a scenic route of particular quality. To the south beyond the broad rounded ridge of Craignamaddy the Owenkillew River has formed another upland valley to the north of Crocknamoghil which in comparison is much more open. There are many areas of ancient woodland, though most of these are very small in extent.

The Owenkillew, Strule and Glenelly Rivers flow into the Foyle system to the southwest. The Owenkillew River is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) for its pearl mussels and other key priority species. The River Faughan and Burn Dennet flow to the northwest. These are also tributaries of the Foyle.

To the north the headwaters of the River Roe flow north through Banagher Glen SAC. Both the Foyle and Roe systems are important as spawning and nursery beds for salmonid species. Although the valleys of the Sperrins are populated, upland areas are sparsely settled. The mountains and upper glens have significant wildness character arising from their inaccessibility and are a dark sky resource.

The Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment provides a strategic overview of the landscape in Northern Ireland and subdivides the countryside into 26 Regional Landscape Character Areas (RLCAs) based upon information on people and place and the combinations of nature, culture and perception which make each part of Northern Ireland unique. Sperrin AONB is incorporated into 7 of these RLCAs.

The Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment currently identifies a total of 130 Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) based upon local patterns of geology, landform, land use, cultural and ecological features. Given its extensive size, Sperrin AONB incorporates 17 of these LCAs, as identified in the table below. It should be noted however, that a number of these have only a small proportion of land within the AONB. Some Councils will have undertaken landscape assessments as part of their Local Development Plan (LDP) work, and they will be published as part of their LDP evidence.

Further information can be found within the North Derry and Sperrin AONB Boundary Review Final Report (2005), Julie Martin Associates for the Environment and Heritage Service, Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland.



LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Omagh Farmland	LCA 22	A very small area of Sperrin AONB (1968) occurs in the north of the LCA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lowland landscape densely packed with drumlins which create deeply undulating terrain with rounded slopes and a dynamic, quirky character. • Numerous small, winding streams, with peaty marsh on some floodplains and occasional small, rounded loughs. • Diverse, small-scale field pattern, with fields forming an even, geometric patchwork over the drumlins, but becoming irregular in shape on the flatter land in between; broader more open field pattern near Omagh. • Dense hedgerows, many hedgerow trees and small deciduous woodlands; often wire fencing on marginal farmland. • Numerous farms, typically sited half-way up drumlin slopes; many small villages and settlements, generally at road junctions. • Principal routes tend to be straight and deeply undulating, minor roads are tortuous; straight roads across small, marshy floodplains are embanked.
Camowen Valley	LCA 23	A small area of Sperrin AONB (1968) occurs in the north of the LCA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, shallow valley with winding rivers and numerous branching streams. • Glacial moraine, deposited within the valley, has produced an undulating, complex landform. • Patchy large-scale mosaic of peaty marsh, conifer plantations and pasture. • Extensive bog, marsh and scrubby birch/willow woodland in low-lying areas throughout the local area. • Conifer plantations with straight, angular shapes on shallow slopes. • Small pastures with scrubby hedgerows on more elevated land. • Narrow lanes form an unconnected, sparse network; routes are winding on undulating land and straight, often embanked across marshes, farms and smallholdings confined to elevated, undulating land.
South Sperrins	LCA 24	All of the LCA lies completely within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad rounded ridges with deep, branching gullies and fast-flowing upland streams • Meandering rivers are a focus for views - the narrow floodplain is often subdivided by irregular mounds of glacial till. • Patches of peaty marsh in low-lying areas between ridges of moraine and valley sides. • Marginal farmland, with scrub, rushes and moorland vegetation on upper slopes of stream valleys. • Hedgerows & stone walls on lower slopes follow historic townland boundaries and emphasise the undulating landform. • Narrow lanes along margins of river floodplains - stone bridges at crossing points are local landscape features.

LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Beaghmore Moors & Marsh	LCA 25	All of the LCA lies completely within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shallow low ridges of glacial moraine separated by extensive peaty marsh. • Numerous winding small rivers and tributary streams flow in open channels with scrubby margins. • Pasture predominates on higher land, with exposed moorland on some ridgetops and extensive conifer plantations on shallow slopes. • Most fields enclosed by wire fences or broken scrubby hedgerows. • Small conifer shelterbelts are prominent around most farmsteads. • Few settlements but many farmsteads on higher land, connected by straight, embanked roads . • Bronze Age sites.
Bessy Bell & Gortin	LCA 26	The eastern half of LCA lies in Sperrin AONB.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenic, accessible landscape on western fringes of Sperrins; steep mountain of Mullaghcarn to east & rounded moorland summit of Bessy Bell to west. • River Strule flows within incised, wooded valley, with roads following river course on terraces alongside. • Diverse landscape pattern, with a transition from steep, wooded river banks to farmland to open moor within relatively short distances. • Hedgerows enclose all fields, becoming gappy, with wire fencing on higher land; stone walls in areas of higher land close to the Sperrins. • Relatively dense tree cover, with numerous hedgerow trees and small copses; landscape becomes more open on elevated slopes. • Long scenic views from mountain slopes and along valley.

LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Foyle Valley	LCA 27	Small areas of Sperrin AONB lie in the south and west of the LCA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, accessible valley on the western slopes of the Sperrins. • Farmland has strong, geometric field pattern, which continues onto the slopes of the adjacent higher land. • Sperrins to the east, with scenic, steep, wooded tributary glens. • Deeply incised river channel, with wooded banks and river terraces between Victoria Bridge and Newtownstewart. • Roads follow terraces on outer edge of valley floor or on lower valley slopes. • Attractive stone bridges.
Glenelly Valley	LCA 28	Lies completely within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenic narrow mountain valley, with steep marginal farmland on fringes of upland moors. • The meandering river is a visual focus on a narrow floodplain which is often subdivided by irregular mounds of glacial till. • Hedgerows and stone walls form a well-connected network, following the historic townland boundaries and emphasising the undulating landform. • Open fields predominate, although tree cover increases in steeper areas and towards the foot of the slopes. • Small 'clachans', churches, stone bridges and traditional stone farmsteads are attractive features, linked by steep, narrow roads. • Numerous ancient historic sites.
Sperrin Mountains	LCA 29	Lies completely within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, rounded ridges with rocky outcrops leading to steep, pointed summits. • Deep, branching gullies and open, fast-flowing moorland streams. • Carpet of open moorland pasture and heather with extensive bog and areas of damp grassland on flatter land and lower slopes. • Earthbanks and stone walls follow historic townland boundaries on lower slopes; some pastures are derelict and infested by scrub and rushes. • Winding moorland roads and straight tracks leading across contours. • Broadleaf woodland concentrated within lower valleys; some conifer woodland on mountain slopes. Isolated barns on upper slopes; clachans and farmsteads in valleys.

LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Sperrin Foothills	LCA 30	The southern margin of the LCA lies in Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied landform; typically rounded, dome-shaped hills and deeply dissected valleys, with a complex, undulating landform. • Steep winding valleys, with waterfalls & dense woodland beside river. • Diverse landscape pattern with transition from steep wooded valley sides to brown moorland summits or extensive moss within short distances. • Hedgerows enclose all fields, becoming gappy with wire fencing on higher land; stone walls in areas of higher land close to the Sperrins. • Relatively dense tree cover with numerous hedgerow trees and small copses; landscape becomes more open on elevated slopes. • Dense network of roads and small settlements, with pressures for more development.
Binevenagh	LCA 36	A small area lies in Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sloping upland basalt plateau ending at a dramatic, cliff-like escarpment. • Escarpment summits have a distinctive profile and form a sequence of local landmarks. • Large-scale mosaic of upland moor and extensive conifer plantations. • Open, exposed upland moors, with few native trees or field boundaries. • Rocky outcrops and scree slopes reveal grey basalt rock. • Patchy, textured pattern of moorland grass, heather, rushes and stunted scrubby bushes.
Roe Basin	LCA 37	A small area in the south lies in Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, saucer-shaped valley dominated by basalt escarpment to the east and the Sperrin Mountains to the south. • River meanders between open, grassy embankments in centre of the basin, with numerous small, branching tributary streams and small marshy oxbows. • Small, rounded ridges of glacial moraine. • Landform becomes undulating, with deep wooded glens, on margins of the basin. • Regular, geometric patchwork of medium-sized pastures, with some larger arable fields on well-drained glacial till. • Fields within basin enclosed by dense, hawthorn hedgerows with numerous, well-spaced hedgerow trees; hedgerows on margins are predominantly gorse. • Fairly open farmland, with only small blocks of deciduous woodland. • Scattered white-washed farms spaced at regular intervals throughout the basin; small villages and stone bridges at river crossing points.

LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Eastern Binevenagh Slopes	LCA 38	A small area in the south overlaps Sperrin AONB (1968)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low rolling plateau, falling gradually from basalt uplands eastwards towards the River Bann. • Fairly steep, narrow glens; gullies on higher land to west. • Poor quality pastures with patches of gleyed soils, partially infested with scrub and rushes. • Gappy hedgerows and broken stone walls. • Fields have angular geometric shapes; size varies with terrain and elevation. • Numerous scattered dwellings and farms; many derelict buildings. • Few woodlands; mostly in steep valleys on higher land on margins of basalt upland. • Dense network of straight, narrow lanes and tracks,
Glenshane Slopes	LCA 39	Almost all of the LCA lies within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, rounded ridges with sweeping slopes and rocky outcrops leading to steep, pointed summits. • Deep, branching gullies and open, fast-flowing moorland streams. • Open moorland wilderness, exposed to the elements, with a gradual transition to scrub and pasture on the lower eastern slopes. • Carpet of open moorland pasture and heather with extensive bog and areas of damp grassland on flatter land and lower slopes. • Prominent townland boundaries are visible as earth banks and stone walls and form a striking landscape pattern on some slopes. • Winding moorland roads and straight tracks leading across contours. • Scattered buildings on lower moorland slopes; occasional isolated farms or barns.
Upper Moyola Valley	LCA 40	The western half of the LCA lies within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad, undulating limestone valley, dissected by numerous small, branching streams. • Small-scale patchwork of pastures and broadleaf woodland on the valley floor, while farmland on upper slopes has a relatively open character. • Small, angular fields with dense hedgerows and numerous hedgerow trees; stone walls on more elevated slopes. • Sharp transition between farmland patchwork and open moorland on the upland slopes to the west of the valley. • Straight roads along margins of valley; elsewhere lanes are narrow and twisting, with fords and small stone bridges at stream crossings. • Numerous farms and scattered cottages; a few larger settlements at principal road junctions.

LCA Name	Reference	In AONB?	Landscape Key Characteristics
Slieve Gallion	LCA 41	Except in the far east, almost all of the LCA lies within Sperrin AONB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steep, flat-topped summit of a former volcanic plug with a distinctive, uneven slope profile. • Striking landmark at the eastern limit of the Sperrins; summit has a single tall mast. • Undulating landscape at the foot of the mountain, deeply dissected by narrow, branching glens. • Mixed woodland within glens and small conifer plantations. • Varied patchwork of pastures and dense, well-managed hedgerows with numerous hedgerow trees. • Fairly large farms and scattered buildings along narrow, winding lanes.
Carrickmore Hills	LCA 43	The northern margin of the LCA lies within Sperrin AONB (1968).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steep, rocky summits with a crinkled ridge-top profile, separated by extensive moss and small, rounded loughs. Irregular, deeply undulating landform in areas of glacial moraine. • On higher land, small, rough pastures are enclosed by gorse hedgerows and wire fences or by granite boulders and earthbanks form the margins to some fields. • Rolling lowland landscape of poor quality farmland with patches of marsh and rush infested pastures in low-lying areas. • Narrow, twisting roads link scattered farms on lower slopes; small settlement clusters are concentrated at junctions. • Scrubby woodland on margins of marsh; tree cover becomes sparse and the landscape more exposed on elevated land. Extensive sand and gravel quarrying.
Garvagh Farmland	LCA 51	A small area in the south overlaps Sperrin AONB (1968)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lowland drumlin landscape with drumlins which are consistently aligned along a SWNE axis; land rises and becomes more undulating to the west. • Drumlins are evenly sized and create deeply undulating terrain with rounded slopes and a diverse landscape character. • Winding rivers and numerous streams, with peaty marsh on the floodplain of some smaller rivers. • Fields form an even, geometric patchwork over the drumlins, becoming irregular in shape on the flatter land in between. • Dense hedgerows, many hedgerow trees and small deciduous woodlands form a diverse pattern; often wire fencing on marginal farmland. • Numerous scattered farms, typically sited half-way up drumlin slopes; many small settlements concentrated at road junctions. • Principal routes are straight and deeply undulating, minor roads are tortuous.

2.3 Sperrin AONB Natural Environment/Natural Heritage

Sperrin AONB encompasses a rich natural environment that supports a diverse range of biodiversity. 'Biodiversity is the variety of all living things, including every species of plant and animal and the genetic variety both within and between species and within the communities that they form.'⁷ We derive a wide range of benefits from biodiversity that are critical to our survival, and that add substantial value to our lives. Recognising these benefits the recent Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland states "Our natural environment is our life support system and our greatest asset."

Commonly referred to as ecosystem services, these benefits can be broken down into four categories:

- **Provisioning** - the products obtained from ecosystems such as food, fibre and fresh water;
- **Regulating** - the benefits obtained from ecosystem processes such as pollination and control of climate and water, both quality and quantity;
- **Cultural** - the non-material benefits obtained from ecosystems such as spiritual or religious enrichment, cultural heritage, recreation and tourism, or other aesthetic experiences;
- **Supporting** - ecosystem functions that are necessary for the production of all other ecosystem services including soil formation and the cycling of nutrients and water.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment defines ecosystem services as "the benefits provided by ecosystems that contribute to making human life both possible and worth living."

⁷DAERA, *Valuing Nature. A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020*
⁸UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) Available - UK NEA

An ecosystem service approach to landscape management recognises the crucial role that our natural environment plays, and critically, the role we too must play, protecting and conserving our environment to ensure these benefits continue.

This section will consider the variety of habitats within Sperrin AONB, and the vast array of species which they support. The significance of these habitats and species has been acknowledged by national and European designations, which will be discussed later in the chapter.



Habitats

WOODLANDS AND HEDGEROWS

Woodland cover in Northern Ireland is only 8.7% of land area which is one of the lowest levels in Europe. Of that 8.7%, 64,000 ha (64%) is commercial, non-native conifer plantations which are ecologically poor and c55,000 ha (46%) are broadleaf woodlands.⁹

The extent of woodland coverage in Sperrin AONB is quite varied depending on the area. In Glenelly Valley LCA for example woodlands account for less than 2% of land cover which is significantly lower than the Northern Ireland average of 5.6%. In contrast however, at 12% coverage, woodlands make up more than twice the NI average in Bessy Bell and Gortin LCAs. Small, private conifer plantations are scattered throughout the AONB, however, the vast majority of woodland is comprised of publicly owned, and Forest Service managed, conifer plantations.

These include:

- Bradkeel
- Banagher
- Creggan
- Davagh
- Derrynoyd
- Glenshane
- Gortin Glen
- Iniscarn
- Killens
- Learmount
- Ligfordrum
- Moydamlaght

Forests and woodland are estimated to cover around 12,700 ha, which is 8.9%, of the Sperrin Forestry Planning Area (FPA). Forest Service manages 53% of this woodland.¹⁰ The Sperrin Forest Plan can be accessed online at www.experience.arcgis.com

Many of these plantations are made up of primarily Sitka Spruce, along with other mixed conifers. Although low in biodiversity value, they do act as important wildlife corridors, supporting some NI priority species such as the red squirrel, pine marten, hen harrier and Irish hare. These forests also provide important ecosystem services such as flood management, water quality improvement and carbon sequestration. The current Sperrin Forest Plan, 2019 – 30 sets out the strategic direction for Forest Service managed sites in the named period. While commercial production remains at the core, the plan does commit to increasing native woodland coverage within the Sperrin Forestry Planning Area. This currently equates to 434ha.¹¹ Moreover, the plan identifies regeneration opportunities including the conversion of forest to open ground, for water protection, peatland restoration and the creation of buffer areas to protect natural habitats.



Sperrins Landscape

⁹Landscapes NI, 2025, Manifesto Position Paper 'Trees and Woodland in Designated and Iconic Landscapes'

¹⁰DAERA, Sperrin Forest Plan, 2019 - 30

¹¹Ibid

NATIVE WOODLAND

Throughout the AONB, isolated patches of native tree coverage and ancient woodland exist, often acting as buffer zones promoting watercourse protection, although there are sporadic instances of wider land cover. Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) include Drumlea and Mullan Woods - an important semi-natural broad-leaved woodland- Crockaghole Wood, Owenkillew and Glenelly Woods and Grange Wood.

The Ancient Woodland Inventory for Northern Ireland states that 'more than one eighth of ancient and long-established woodland has been cleared in the last 40 years'¹², with the Woodland Trust placing current land cover in Northern Ireland at just 0.7%¹³. The need to protect, conserve and enhance native woodland is therefore an urgent priority.

Banagher Glen (ASSI, SAC, NNR- National Nature Reserve) is particularly notable, as the largest surviving intact block of semi-natural woodland in Northern Ireland. It lies approximately 3.5 miles southwest of Dungiven and comprises a total area of 87.7ha. The primary site selection features for Banagher Glen SAC are "oak woodlands" and "mixed ashwoods". These NI Priority Habitats are discussed in greater detail below.

OAK WOODLANDS

Oakwood, generally referred to as acidic woodland, is predominantly found in upland areas, hillsides and valley sides although it can also occur in lowland areas. It is characterised by a predominance of Sessile Oak *Quercus petraea*, Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* and Downy Birch *Betula pubescens* in the canopy, with varying amounts of Holly *Ilex aquifolium*, Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* and Hazel *Corylus avellana* as the main understorey species.

The variety of plants found in the ground layer is determined by the underlying soil type and level of grazing; but includes Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Greater Wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica* and ferns, through to grassy or moss dominated areas.

To qualify as the Oakwood priority habitat, the woodland must meet the following criteria:

- Woodland area greater than 0.5 ha.
- 20% or more canopy cover, or the potential to achieve this in the case of regenerating or newly planted stands of trees.
- A canopy composed of 50% or more site-native trees or shrubs (or will be at canopy closure in the case of younger stands). Site-native trees are those which are native to the locality and capable of growing naturally on the site, and/or
- Typical acid woodland ground flora (which may be under non-native tree species such as Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*).¹⁴



Sperrins Landscape

¹²Woodland Trust, *Back on the Map - Ancient Tree Inventory*. Available - *Back on the Map - Ancient Tree Inventory*

¹³Woodland Trust, *Northern Ireland*

¹⁴DAERA, *NI Priority Habitat Guides – Oakwoods*.

OAK WOODLANDS

Oakwood is particularly common within the Sperrins and can be found in many of the Landscape Character Areas, albeit in small pockets. Banagher Glen ASSI, (SAC, NNR) located in LCA 29, Sperrin Mountains, as a whole, is the largest surviving intact block of semi-natural woodland in Northern Ireland and the finest example of acid upland oakwood found.

The underlying geology of the site gives rise to a wide range of growing conditions ranging from strongly acid to flushed, base rich. Consequently, the site is one of the most biologically diverse woodlands in Northern Ireland.¹⁵

Oakwood is notable for its assemblages of flowering herbs and lower plants. The ferns, mosses and liverworts found in the most oceanic of these woods are particularly rich; containing rare species such as the mosses *Hylocomium umbratum* and *Leucobryum juniperoideum* and the Liverwort *Anastrophyllum hellerianum*. Notable fungi associated with Oakwoods include *Inonotus dryadeus* and *Phylloporus pelletieri*. Many also hold very diverse lichen communities. Oakwoods support a variety of priority species including the Red Squirrel, Bat species, Spotted Flycatcher, Song Thrush and Bullfinch and the diverse abundance of flowering plants also provide good sources of pollen and nectar for many pollinating insects.

Oak woodlands should be protected and maintained where they occur and should be restored where their condition has declined. Woodland habitat can be

managed through grazing or no grazing, the decision informed by historical management and current condition. Optimal grazing management for Oakwoods is light, extensive grazing at low stocking rates during late spring and summer months, with no winter grazing. Ungrazed Oakwood management is used to maintain naturally ungrazed woodlands and to restore woodlands which have been subject to prolonged grazing, used for over-wintering of livestock and where there is damage to the woodland ground flora and little evidence of natural regeneration. Most woodland features of designated sites will be subject to the exclusion of grazing, dependant on the condition of the woodland. Organic and inorganic fertilisers should not be applied as this would reduce species-richness and diversity with a loss of nature conservation value. Deadwood should be retained, and windblown trees should be left where they fall. Non-native invasive species, including Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and *Rhododendron* pose a risk to the habitat and should be removed where possible.



Sperrins Landscape

¹⁵DAERA, *Landscape Character Assessment, LCA 29 Sperrin Mountains*.

MIXED ASHWOODS

The term Mixed Ashwoods is used to describe a broad range of woods on base-rich soils across Northern Ireland. Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* is generally the dominant species, although locally Hazel *Corylus avellana* may be the most dominant species. Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* is also common. Some woods have been colonised by Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and Beech *Fagus sylvatica*.

To qualify as a Mixed Ashwoods priority habitat, the woodland must meet the following criteria:

- Woodland area greater than 0.5 ha.
- 20% or more canopy cover or the potential to achieve this in the case of regenerating or newly planted stands of trees.
- A canopy composed of 50% or more site-native trees or shrubs (or will be at canopy closure in the case of younger stands). Site-native trees are those which are native to the locality and capable of growing naturally on the site, and/or
- Typical base-rich woodland ground flora (which may be composed of non-native tree species such as beech or sycamore).¹⁶

Mixed Ashwoods are the main woodland type in Northern Ireland on base-rich soils. Although less common within Sperrin AONB, they can be found occasionally in several Landscape Character Areas including LCA 28 Glenelly Valley, LCA 29 Sperrin Mountains, LCA 30 Sperrin Foothills, LCA 37 Roe Basin, and LCA 41 Slieve Gallion. Within any Mixed Ashwoods, there may be pockets of acidic Oakwood and flushed woodland which are similar to wet woodland.

Mixed Ashwoods are notable for their species rich ground flora including Primrose *Primula vulgaris*, Wood Anemone *nemorosa*, Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Pignut *Conopodium majus* and Wild Garlic *Allium ursinum*. They also support a wide diversity of invertebrate species, mammals and birds including priority species such as Red Squirrel. The variety and abundance of flowering plants provide good sources of pollen and nectar for many pollinating insects such as bumblebees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths. Management of Mixed Ashwoods adopts a similar approach to that of Oak Woodlands, to ensure that this diverse habitat is protected and conserved.



Banagher

¹⁶DAERA, NI Priority Habitat Guide – Ashwoods.

Native Woodland - Banagher Glen Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Banagher Glen SAC is the largest surviving block of old semi-natural woodland in Northern Ireland, with a history of continuous woodland cover for over 200 years. Twisted veteran oaks cling precariously to the steep cliffs above the Glenedra and Altnaheglish rivers which merge to become the Owenrigh River. The Glen is one of the finest examples of calcifuge oak woodland in Northern Ireland and one of the very few upland deciduous forests in Ireland, and as such it has its own special biodiversity.

The high canopy forest has natural glades with regeneration of native broadleaf species, including sessile oak, ash, downy birch and rowan. Trees encroach into the bracken and grassland areas. Planned regeneration of native woodland on adjacent Forest Service land and along river corridors expands the native woodland and links Banagher Glen with other long-established woodland in the wider landscape. The Sperrin Forest Plan for 2019 to 2030, outlines how Forest Service forests and woodland in the area are managed to provide a required balance of ecosystem services. The Forest design and regeneration plans specify native woodland buffers around the ancient woodland and SAC sites to protect them from colonisation with conifers and non-native broadleaves. Native woodland buffers are also within Banagher Forest, along the Glenedra water and Altnaheglish dam and river. The plan summarises where and when forest management activities should take place and how individual forests will evolve during the period of the plan.

Conifers and non-native broadleaved species within the SAC are reduced to very low level, ensuring light levels needed for germination of dormant seeds and growth of native species. Light and nutrient availability supports growth of seedlings to saplings that will form a successive woodland canopy, safeguarding the survival and sustainability of Banagher Glen SAC. Sycamore, beech and other invasive species affecting composition of the ground flora are reduced, encouraging restoration of ground flora characteristic of the internationally recognised califuge oak and calcicolous mixed ash woodlands. A lush ground carpet of wood anemone, bluebells and lesser celandine has recovered as grazing exclusion allows grass cover to decrease. The understory shrub layer is characteristic of the woodland and the underlying soils with hazel, holly, hard fern and bilberry. Sallow thickets and glades on the valley floor remain undisturbed, protecting the river.

All stages of tree growth from saplings to mature and over-mature trees are present with many species supported by the structural diversity. Encouraging diversity increases the glen's resilience to adapt to increasing climatic and ecological pressures. Veteran trees are managed, if required, to prolong their presence in the glen, for visitor safety and to support the specialist bryophyte, fungi and invertebrate communities reliant on specific tree species. Banagher Glen SAC's veteran trees have been identified as supporting several dry bark specialist lichens that are rare in Ireland. Standing and fallen deadwood has increased in frequency, further increasing the variety of species present that depend on dead wood during their lifecycle.

Glades, coppiced areas and gaps created by natural wind-blow and tree death allow adequate light levels to sustain the internationally significant assemblage of lichens. A balance has been found between grazing exclusion and targeted light grazing, allowing sufficient light levels and protection for tree regeneration as well as healthy lichen and invertebrate populations.

The woodland supports a wide variety of native flora and fauna, providing a haven for protected species such as NI Priority Species of spotted flycatcher and red squirrels and European Priority Species such as otters. The silver washed fritillary butterfly and other invertebrates, whose survival depends on the specialised woodland habitat, continue to breed at Banagher Glen SAC. Specialist bird species such as the dipper, great spotted woodpecker and peregrine falcon benefit from the diverse range of habitats within the SAC, along with over 60 other species of birds that have been recorded in the wider site.

¹⁷DAERA, Conservation Management Plan – Banagher Glen SAC

A key part in the management of all habitats is identifying and thereafter addressing potential threats. In terms of woodland habitats, key pressures include:

Pressures	Description
Inappropriate grazing	Inappropriate grazing can have a significant impact on the structure, species and regeneration potential of woodland habitats.
Browsing and bark stripping	Browsing and bark stripping by animals such as squirrels, can lead to substantial changes in woodland structure, ground flora impoverishment, and regeneration potential.
Invasive species	Invasive species including the replacement of native trees by species not native to Northern Ireland such as Sycamore <i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i> , Beech <i>Fagus sylvatica</i> and conifers, and invasive alien species including Cherry Laurel <i>Prunus laurocerasus</i> , Salmonberry <i>Rubus spectabilis</i> , Japanese Knotweed <i>Fallopia japonica</i> and Snowberry <i>Symphoricarpos albus</i> can be extremely detrimental to woodland, leading to changes in composition and diversity.
Habitat loss and fragmentation	Habitat loss and fragmentation through development and agricultural practices can lead to greater ecological isolation of existing woods. Fragmentation is exacerbated by the removal of trees in field boundaries.
Fly-tipping	Unfortunately, wooded areas remain prone to fly-tipping.
Outdoor recreation	Increased footfall can lead to soil enrichment and changes in ground flora.
Nutrient enrichment	This may occur from spray drift, runoff from adjacent agricultural land and game bird rearing leading to changes in soils and ground flora
Plant disease	Chalara dieback of ash, also known as Chalara or ash dieback, is a disease of ash trees caused by a fungus called <i>Hymenoscyphus fraxineus</i> . Unfortunately, the disease, which it is now widespread within NI will cause many ash trees to lose their leaves and eventually die. Sudden Oak Death caused by the fungus-like organism <i>Phytophthora Ramorum</i> which invades susceptible trees through the bark, kills portions of the tree.
Nitrogen deposition	Excess nitrogen deposition can favour the growth of competitive plants and lead to changes in ecosystem structure or function and to a reduction in biodiversity.
Air pollution	Air pollution, derived remotely from vehicle and industry emissions could potentially cause pre-mature death of old and veteran trees.
Climate change	Climate change could potentially result in changes in vegetation communities.

HEDGEROWS

Hedges are defined as any linear boundary comprised of planted shrubs. They are common throughout Sperrin AONB, traditionally used as boundaries separating fields and roads. Hedgerows resemble woodlands in their basic structure of trees with an understorey.

They act as important wildlife corridors, facilitating movement within the AONB and supporting, plus sheltering a range of species including wildflowers, birds, mammals, and invertebrates.

Hedges which are species rich, are a Priority Habitat. NIEA (2003) has defined species-rich hedges as:

- Hedges with six or more woody species in a 30m length.
- Hedges containing fewer woody species (≤ 5) in a 30m length, but which have a rich ground flora of herbaceous species.
- Townland hedges. These are considered the oldest, most ancient, hedge types in Ireland.¹⁹

As well as their ecological value, hedges also have scenic value and together with drystone walls they contribute to the landscape character of Sperrin AONB. Furthermore, as a traditional feature in the landscape, they are significant in terms of cultural heritage.



Foraging in the Sperrins

¹⁹DAERA, *Habitat Action Plans, Hedgerows*

Waterbodies

Sperrin AONB is rich in wetland habitats with lakes, rivers and streams supporting a substantial proportion of the area’s biodiversity. As well as supporting our natural environment, these water bodies also provide us with drinking water and play an important economic role, impacting on fishing, agriculture, transport, tourism and industry.

Northern Ireland’s water resources are managed and protected using a catchment-based approach which includes rivers, lakes and groundwater as well as coastal and transitional water bodies. The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (NI) 2017 requires production and implementation of a River Basin Management Plan in six yearly cycles. Northern Ireland is divided into three River Basin Districts - North West, Neagh Bann and North East.²⁰ Sperrin AONB occupies two of these River Basin Districts – North West and Neagh Bann.

WETLANDS, RIVERS, LAKES AND STREAMS

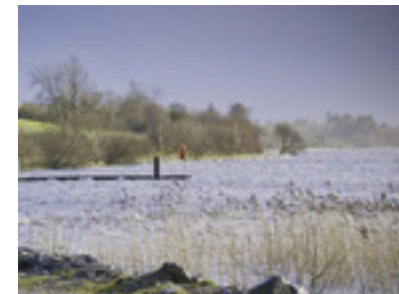
The term wetlands refer to areas of land permanently or seasonably saturated with water and therefore includes lakes, fens and flooded grasslands. Within Sperrin AONB there are numerous examples of these important habitats, which support an extensive range of rare and priority species.

LAKES

A lake can be broadly defined as a slow-moving body of water surrounded by land. Several different types of lake are located within Sperrin AONB, with varying depths and nutrient status informed by the underlying geology of the area. Mesotrophic lakes such as Creggan Lough, Lough Ash and Moor Lough, are characterised by peaty or silty sediments and by being moderately enriched. In fact, mesotrophic lakes potentially have the highest macrophyte diversity of any lake type and contain a higher proportion of nationally scarce and rare aquatic plants. This is an increasingly rare type of lake in Northern Ireland because of increasing nutrient load in water bodies. The Water Classification Report surveys lakes with an area exceeding 50ha. In total, twenty one lakes are surveyed throughout Northern Ireland, and of these only one, Lough Fea, is located within Sperrin AONB. In the last four lake classification surveys, the Lough has maintained it’s ‘Good Ecological Potential’ status. The most recent data was recorded in 2021.



Map of River Basin Districts



Lough Fea

Lake Name	Ecological Status 2015	Ecological Status 2018	Ecological Status 2020	Ecological Status 2021
Lough Fea	Good Ecological Potential	Good Ecological Potential	Good Ecological Potential	Good Ecological Potential

Numerous other lakes exist throughout the AONB which have not been included within the water classification report due to their smaller size. Nonetheless, these lakes support a range of important species including priority species such as Curlew and other breeding waders.

²⁰DAERA, River Basin Management Plan NI, 2021 - 27

FENS

Fens are peatlands that receive the majority of their water and nutrients from soil, rock and ground water. They occur in river valleys, basins or beside open water. In Northern Ireland many fens have formed on cut over raised bog. Sites are classified as either 'Poor Fens' or 'Rich Fens'. Poor Fens, where the water is derived from base-poor rock such as sandstones and granites occur mainly in the uplands or are associated with lowland heaths. They are characterised by short vegetation with a high proportion of bog mosses *Sphagnum* sp. and acid water. Rich Fens are fed by mineral-enriched calcareous waters and are mainly confined to the lowlands and where there are localised occurrences of base-rich rocks such as limestone in the uplands.^{21a}

Small instances of Fens are located in a number of Landscape Character Areas throughout the AONB including LCA 39 Glenshane Slopes, particularly at Ballyknock ASSI which is dominated by fen meadow.

Fens are an extremely diverse habitat which support a very wide variety of plant and animal species. These include breeding birds such as Curlew, butterflies such as the Marsh Fritillary and over 200 different plant species. Protecting these important habitats is therefore crucial to support biodiversity within the AONB. Habitat management includes maintaining and enhancing grassland and restricting high levels of grazing.



Diverse Fen Rich Habitat

REEDBED

The term reedbed describes tall, wetland vegetation where the water table is above ground level for most of the year. Reedbeds are dominated by common reed and other large grasses or sedges and although not species diverse, they do support a number of priority species including the Reed Bunting, Otter and Reed-beetle. Although not common or widespread, sporadic instances of reedbed do occur within Sperrin AONB for example in LCA 22 Omagh Farmland and LCA 26 Bessy Bell & Gortin.



Reedbed

^{21a}DAERA, NI Priority Habitat Guide – Fens

WATERWAYS – RIVERS, STREAMS

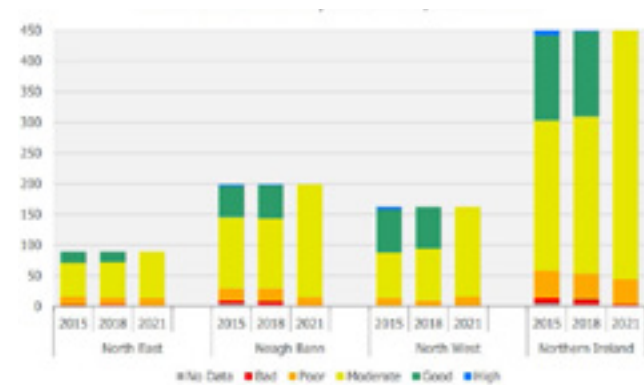
Sperrin AONB contains some of the most ecologically rich waterways (rivers and streams) in Northern Ireland which support a wide range of animal and plant species. Management of these waterways can be identified at both a local and regional level, with each tributary feeding into a larger catchment. As highlighted above, Sperrin AONB is unique in that it covers two River Basin Districts – North West and Neagh Bann. Within each a number of smaller catchments exist.

There are multiple fast-running streams throughout the slopes and gullies of the AONB that have resulted in places sometimes becoming deep and branching. The main flowing rivers within the AONB include the Owenkillew, Owenreagh, Glenelly, Strule, Faughan, Dennet, Douglas, Moyola and Roe. These support a range of rare, protected priority species including the otter, Atlantic salmon, brown trout and freshwater pearl mussel. Several sites within the AONB have received European designation because of the occurrence of these important, threatened species. The Owenkillew River and its immediate environs for example is of national and international importance due to its population of freshwater pearl mussel. These waterways also support plant species and woodland with patches occurring along riverbanks.

The Water Framework Directive monitors 450 rivers within Northern Ireland, with recent figures revealing a declining status in all. In 2015, 147 (33 %) of the 450 river water bodies were classified as good or high overall status. In 2018, 141 (31 %) of river water bodies were classified as good or high overall status. In 2021, no river water bodies achieved good or high overall

status.^{21b} A range of pressures have contributed to habitat loss and destruction, with efforts to halt and reverse the damage now an urgent environmental, economic and political priority, particularly given the increasingly prevalent impact of climate change.

Citing finite resources, the River Basin Management Plan, 2021 – 27, identified a number of Local Management Areas (LMAs) for prioritisation of catchment action, with two located within Sperrin AONB – The Roe and Strule. Following the emergence of blue-green algae in Lough Neagh during the summer of 2023 however, this approach was reevaluated with the 7 LMAs flowing directly into Lough Neagh prioritised. All identified areas can be viewed on the map below.²² The protection of all catchment areas within Sperrin AONB remains a critical task to maintain and improve ecological status.



River Waterbody Status 2015 - 2021



Priority Local Management Areas (LMAs)



NI Catchment Data Map Viewer (2021)(LMAs)

^{21b}DAERA, NI Water Framework Directive Statistics Report 2021.pdf

²²DAERA, River Basin Management Plan 2021 - 27

Owenkillev River Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

The Owenkillev River Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) is significant as a result of the physical features of the river, its associated fauna and flora, and the areas of woodland located parallel to the river habitat. When compared with other rivers, the Owenkillev is especially remarkable in terms of the physical diversity and naturalness of its bank and channel. In addition to this, the site is noteworthy for the richness and naturalness of its plant and animal communities and supports the largest known population of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel *Margaritifera* in NI, and other rare species.

The Owenkillev River although typically a fast-flowing spate river, gradually alters from ultra-oligotrophic (very low in nutrients) to become mesotrophic (moderately low in nutrients) over the course of the river's initial source point until it ultimately converges with the River Strule downstream. The river rises within Davagh Forest as the Davagh Water and then becomes the Broughderg River. In these initial reaches the river flows through moorland and coniferous forest plantations. The river channel then widens in the lower reaches of the Broughderg and begins meandering through rough pasture and more moorland. The channel becomes more natural and the flow regime more dynamic as the Broughderg becomes the Owenkillev River. These changes bring an increase in species and both banks become progressively more tree lined. The channel widens then at the mid reaches of the Owenkillev, while remaining highly natural with dynamic flows. This section sees an increase in agricultural land management. The flow regime then slows down along the lower section of the Owenkillev prior to merging with the Strule near Newtown Stewart. In some areas particularly in the upper earlier stages of the river, wet depressions occur within river terraces. These areas support fen and swamp communities.



Owenkillev River (SAC, ASSI) is designated for its pearl mussels and other key species.

The first step in improving habitat degradation, is identifying risks to Waterbody habitats. These have been summarised in the table below.

Pressures	Description
Agricultural intensification	Land clearance, removal of scrub and extension of pasture <100m from channel edge; Risk of sediment and nutrient inputs, loss of natural and semi-natural habitats. Areas of grazing being converted to arable; Risk of loss of semi-natural agricultural habitats into intensive production areas.
Livestock farming and animal	Livestock access points to river with soil exposed; extensive trampling in riparian zone and channel riverbank erosion and collapse. Use of Cypermethrin in sheep dip. Further expansion of livestock farming and animal breeding is a threat.
Cultivation	Silage cutting at rivers edge, no buffer. If undertaken during inappropriate conditions can result in rutting and soil damage, increase risk of sediment and nutrient run-off. Slurry spreading providing diffuse nutrient sources. Chemical fertiliser application and Use of MCPA/Mecoprop for rush control.
Aerial deposition	Air pollution pressure including ammonia and nitrogen.
Agricultural drainage	The maintenance of existing drains and the excavation of new drainage is a high risk.
Afforestation and forestry replanting	Afforestation of new sites and replanting of felled areas requires extensive site preparation and soil disturbance. Activities such as drainage or road-ing, mounding, windrowing and associated soil preparation are very high risk.
Felling (including thinning and removal of individual trees)	Clear felling of trees and thinning operations can be damaging to hydrologically linked aquatic features through : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sediment and nutrient release • changes to hydrology and flow regime • release of nutrients through the decay of foliage on harvesting, and in the period of decay afterwards.
Forestry roads	Provision of necessary infrastructure e.g. new roads and road drainage can impact on flows, causing erosion and sedimentation in sensitive downstream habitats.
Forest drainage	Risks posed by drainage pathways can be influenced from the contributing catchment area (potential flow volume), an indication of gradient (velocity), the connectivity to the aquatic zone and the extent of the drainage pathway within the operational area which can impact the aquatic habitats through nutrient, sediment and flow alterations.

Pressures	Description
Extraction of minerals	<p>Small-scale sand/gravel extraction from the riverbed has been an ongoing practice by farmers in the AONB. The AONB contains a number of quarries which are licenced through the NIEA Industrial Consents, therefore there is a risk of quarry dust, effluent or pollution incidents.</p> <p>Exploration associated with prospective gold mining in the AONB has occurred in the past, any further exploration presents a potential risk to water quality from run-off and drilling associated with exploration site.</p>
Road infrastructure, laneways and fords	Active fords in river channel for livestock crossing are common in the AONB. The construction of the new roads could potentially impact waterbodies in terms of physical changes and temporary run-off during construction and permanent road drainage.
Residential, development diffuse urban run-off	<p>On-site wastewater treatment systems and other small effluent systems can be significant sources of nutrients to rivers. Losses from such systems typically behave as diffuse nutrient sources, however, more serious leaks and inappropriate systems can cause point source pollution.</p> <p>High numbers of one-off housing can be observed within the AONB, not connected to a sewer network and that therefore have an onsite wastewater treatment system e.g. septic tank.</p>
Urban wastewater and industrial discharges	Diffuse run-off from villages within the AONB should be noted as a risk.
Abstraction for public and private water supply (agricultural, industrial or commercial)	There are a number of abstractions throughout the AONB, which are associated with quarrying/mineral washing. These abstractions are from surface water and present a significant risk to the natural flow regime of the river. A natural flow regime is essential to support existing biodiversity.
Recreational fishing	Well established pathways have resulted in trampling and risk of erosion within the oak woodlands.
Poaching	Poaching of trout, salmon and pearl fishing. Enforcement by the Loughs Agency ensures poaching is not common and pearl fishing is a practise that was prevalent in the past but which is not as extensive now.
Fish farms	Fish farm existed on the Owenreagh river but hasn't operated as an aquaculture farm for possibly more than 10 years. It still may operate for the processing of fish.
Illegal dumping, fly-tipping and burning	The build-up of debris can damage habitats and encourage further fly tipping.

Pressures	Description
Invasive species	<p>Invasive non-native species are defined as those that have been introduced, either intentionally or unintentionally, outside of their natural range and that present a threat to biodiversity. They can have a wide range of impacts on ecology, the environment and the economy. Once established they can be extremely difficult to control and costly to eradicate.</p> <p>The following invasive species have been recorded within the AONB:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japanese Knotweed • Himalayan Balsam • Giant Hogweed • Rhododendron • Sitka spruce • Snowberry • Sycamore • Montbretia
Problematic native species	<p>Bracken and brambles can be abundant in some areas of the AONB, this is fairly localised and not beyond expected natural levels. Evidence of oak regeneration in the form of both seedlings and saplings does occur and indication of livestock activity e.g. Deer.</p>
Flooding	<p>The flooding that occurred in 2017 in the Glenelly catchment in particular was estimated to be a 1 in 3000 year event leading to extensive landslides affecting river habitat and aquatic species. Landslides of a similar scale will not happen again unless an event of greater magnitude occurs according to Kingston University research on the landslides that occurred in 2017. Nevertheless, more frequent flooding can result in damage to river habitat and riparian zones that whilst should recover given time will be less resilient if frequency of such events increases with climate change.</p>
Energy generation, transmission and distribution	<p>Potential threat from wind turbines, electricity telegraph poles and electric light station in close proximity to riverbanks.</p>
Climate change	<p>Increased water temperatures could impact the structural diversity of the plant community with the proliferation of opportunistic species such as filamentous algae which may have an adverse impact on natural flora and fauna and river habitat. River flow affects a range of habitat factors of critical importance, including current velocity, water depth, wetted area, substrate quality, dissolved oxygen levels and water temperature. The maintenance of flushing flows and baseflows, based on natural hydrological processes is vital. Drought conditions can impact on these hydrological processes resulting in sub optimum conditions from those required for a healthy, naturally functioning river ecosystem. This is currently not a pressure, but it may become a threat. Extended dry periods could impact on woodland ecosystem.</p>

Grassland

Grassland makes up the majority of land coverage in Northern Ireland, accounting for approximately 60% of the land area. Of this figure, approximately 70% is classified as improved grassland. This land is intensively managed for agricultural production and as a result has low biodiversity value. The extent of grassland coverage and classification varies within Sperrin AONB, from one landscape character area to the next. Divergence for example depends on the lowland versus upland nature of each area. A variety of different grass types occur across the AONB.

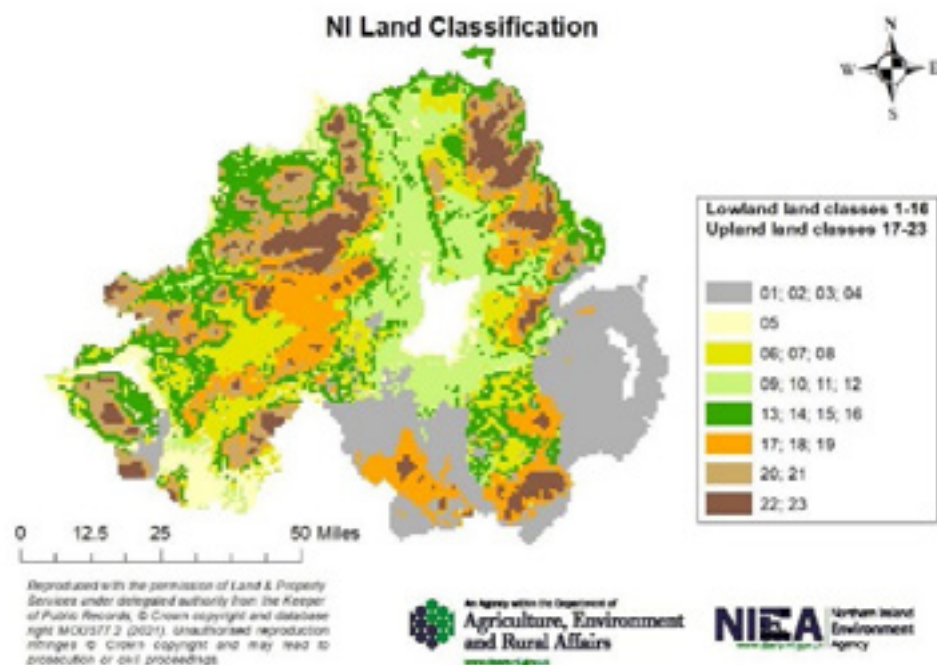
Pastures of improved grasslands dominate the foothills of the Sperrins. Grassland in this area supports livestock farming and in addition to regular grazing and repeated cutting for silage, land is intensively managed with the application of fertiliser, slurry and herbicides. Although biodiversity value on such farmland is low, priority species such as the Barn Owl, Cuckoo and Irish Hare do occur.

Less productive grasslands are mainly confined to the wetter and thinner soils found in upland areas of the AONB. More traditional farming practices, with lower stocking and therefore grazing levels, combined with harsher, more exposed conditions contribute to lower soil fertility which supports a diverse range of biodiversity. The NI Countryside Survey (2000) revealed that Sperrin AONB 'had the greatest percentage of uplands of all the study areas. Just over one-tenth is enclosed lowland landscape, with wet bog the main seminatural habitat'.²³ It should be noted however, that this survey and its subsequent edition, published in 2007 reference the AONB prior to its redesignation and extension in 2008.

²³DAERA, NI Countryside Survey, (2000)

The NI Countryside Survey assesses the area, distribution and species composition of land cover and habitat types in Northern Ireland, measuring change and helping to inform future management. Surveying is currently underway for the next edition of the NI Countryside Survey, the first of its kind since 2007 and therefore, the first to reflect current AONB boundaries. The figure below illustrates land classification in Northern Ireland as a whole, assessing lowland and upland composition.

In terms of grassland type, a number of NI priority habitats occur in Sperrin AONB, each influenced by climate, soil acidity, soil moisture and past/ present management. These are summarised below.



Land Classification. NI Countryside Survey

PURPLE MOOR-GRASS AND RUSH PASTURE

Purple moor-grass and rush pasture is a species-rich semi-natural grassland which is generally found on poorly drained soils. Soil type can be acidic, neutral or base-rich. Purple moor-grass and rush pasture is found in both the lowlands and upland fringes. Rush pastures in the west of Northern Ireland can often be flushed by base-rich waters flowing downslope, hence their occurrence on slopes around drumlins or hillsides. This is an important type of species-rich rush pasture and may be defined as fen meadow.

They generally have a component of purple moor-grass and/or jointed rushes with a rich variety of wildflowers and sedges. Purple moor-grass and rush pasture in Northern Ireland is defined as being grasslands which are:

- Dominated by Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* and/or jointed rushes, predominantly Sharp-flowered Rush *Juncus acutiflorus*;
- Species-rich with a suite of characteristic plant species, which vary according to the habitat type;
- Have less than 25% cover of scrub or dwarf shrub.²⁵

These grasslands should not be confused with species-poor, rush-dominated flushes and semi-improved pastures where Soft Rush *Juncus effusus* is often the most abundant rush. Purple moor-grass and rush pasture has been recorded in a number of Landscape Character areas throughout Sperrin AONB including, LCA 28 Glenelly Valley, LCA 30 Sperrin Foothills, LCA 37 Roe Basin and LCA 39 Glenshane Slopes. They are one of our most flower-rich habitats which support numerous pollinators and priority species within the AONB including the European protected Marsh Fritillary Butterfly and breeding waders such as Curlew.²⁴



Purple Moor-grass and Rush

²⁴DAERA, NI Priority Habitats, Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures

CALCAREOUS GRASSLAND

Calcareous grassland is defined in general terms as species-rich grassland occurring on shallow, lime-rich soils most often derived from chalk and limestone rocks. Within Northern Ireland, most Calcareous grassland occurs on soils derived from Carboniferous limestone bedrock. Calcareous grassland exists on the shallow soils that have developed around limestone outcrops. Most Calcareous grassland in Northern Ireland occurs above 250–300m altitude with only small pockets found at lower elevations.

The Calcareous grasslands in Northern Ireland are defined as being grasslands which are:

- Species-rich (generally more than 20 species per 2 x 2m square).
- Include a suite of characteristic plant species, which vary according to the underlying geology and location.
- Have less than 25% cover of scrub or dwarf shrubs.

Within Sperrin AONB calcareous grasslands can be found within LCA 39 Glenshane Slopes and LCA 41 Slieve Gallion. Calcareous grasslands are among the most flower-rich of all our semi-natural grasslands. Rare plants can include Irish Eyebright, Dense-flowered Orchid and Autumn Gentian. The variety and abundance of flowering plants within semi-natural habitats provide good sources of pollen and nectar for many of our pollinating insects such as bumblebees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths. In fact, calcareous grasslands within the AONB support a range of NI Priority Species including the Irish Hare and Marsh Fritillary.²⁵



Calcareous Grassland

²⁵DAERA, NI Priority Habitats, Calcareous Grassland

POTENTIAL PRESSURES GRASSLAND HABITATS

Pressures	Description
Agricultural improvement	Cultivation, fertiliser and pesticide application, ploughing and reseeded have all been major causes of habitat loss and continue to be the most significant threat to this habitat.
Grazing	Appropriate levels of grazing are necessary to maintain the habitat by preserving a relatively low nutrient status and by keeping competitive species in check. Overgrazing, particularly by sheep, can reduce species diversity as stress-tolerant species dominate. Supplementary feeding can lead to nutrient enrichment, as well as localised poaching.
Abandonment	In the absence of management by cutting or grazing, grassland undergoes vegetation change leading to rankness and the development of scrub and woodland.
Burning	Burning can result in a loss of habitat structure and species diversity by allowing ruderals to dominate.
Afforestation	Land dominated by Purple moor-grass and rush pasture tends to be difficult to improve agriculturally and therefore afforestation can be an attractive option.
Quarrying	Quarrying of limestone and other calcareous bedrocks is a local but significant factor resulting in the loss of Calcareous grasslands. Conversely, the infilling of abandoned limestone quarries where Calcareous grasslands have become established is also a threat in some areas
Habitat fragmentation	Reduction of grassland area and separation of semi-natural grassland parcels results in fragmentation.
Recreation	Recreational pressure bringing about floristic change associated with soil compaction and damage to the grassland sward may occur at certain sites.
Erosion	Natural processes and recreational pressure can lead to accelerated loss of thin calcareous soils, particularly where these are sparsely vegetated. This may occur in tandem with overgrazing and poaching of Calcareous grassland.
Airborne pollution	Acidification and nitrogen enrichment from atmospheric deposition could potentially lead to vegetation change.
Climate change	Could potentially result in changes in the species composition and diversity of grassland communities and associated invertebrate populations.

Peatland Habitats

Sperrin AONB contains the highest proportion of peatland habitats within Northern Ireland, which is unsurprising given its vast size and the upland nature of much of the AONB. Unfortunately, a large extent of the AONB's peatland is in a degraded state as a result of previous policy and practice, which comprised drain blocking, tree planting, overgrazing and peat extraction.

In recent years the important role of peatlands and the variety of ecosystem services they provide, has been increasingly recognised. As well as supporting a diverse range of animal and plant species, our peatland habitats also play an important role sequestering vast amounts of carbon, managing flood risk and contributing to clean water supply. To provide such nature-based solutions however, peatlands must be in a healthy state. Ongoing efforts to restore and manage peatlands in Northern Ireland, are a pivotal step towards tackling climate change and halting biodiversity loss. The recent publication of Northern Ireland's first ever peatland strategy marks an important milestone in this regard, as it will guide and support concerted ongoing restoration efforts, and help to ensure they receive appropriate funding. *“Peatlands are among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth and a stark example of how important our natural environment is to our wellbeing. Occupying just 3% of the Earth's land surface, peatlands are our largest carbon store on land. They are places where people derive clean water and food, and can act as buffers for environmental disasters, such as flooding. They are also of global significance for biodiversity with the majority of peatland species and habitats rare, threatened or declining.”*⁶⁷

When considering peatlands within the AONB, it is also important to recognise the substantial cultural role they have played within society on the island of Ireland. Many traditions and customs at both a local and regional level have been informed by the special role of the bog to everyday life. The turbary rights to cut and remove peat remain an important part of rural society in many communities throughout the Sperrins, therefore any potential projects must take account of these traditions. Within the AONB peatlands are also significant from an archaeological perspective, with many heritage sites discovered through peat extraction and many more sites laying undiscovered beneath the ground.



Barnes Gap

⁶⁷Inger Anderson, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme

A number of peatland habitats exist within Sperrin AONB, each determined by the geology of the site and local topography. Management of these habitats therefore, should take account of local conditions. These habitats have been discussed in greater detail below.

UPLAND HEATHLAND

Upland heathland occurs widely throughout uplands in Northern Ireland, on mineral soils and thin peats of less than 0.5m depth. It is found above the upper edge of agricultural land, generally on steeper slopes with deep peats and blanket bog occurring on more gentle upland slopes. Upland heathland is characterised by the presence of dwarf shrubs such as Heather, Cross-leaved Heath, Bell Heather and Bilberry. Heathland often occurs as part of an intricate mosaic with acid grassland, fen, bog, woodland, and freshwater habitats. This diversity increases its value for wildlife. Upland heathland in Northern Ireland is therefore defined as:

- Vegetation containing dwarf shrub cover of at least 25% (including species such as Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Bell Heather *E. cinerea* and Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*).
- Peat depth of less than 0.5 m.
- Located above the upper edge of agricultural land (generally around 200m, although in the west this may be as low as 120m) and below the alpine or montane zone (at about 600m).²⁷

Upland heathland can be easily confused with blanket bog and lowland heathland both of which frequently occur in close proximity to upland heathland and also contain substantial amounts of dwarf shrubs. Blanket bog occurs at the same altitudes but has peat depth greater than 0.5 m and has more peat forming species. Montane heath also contains dwarf shrubs but contains species such as dwarf willow, *Salix herbacea* and occurs above the natural level of tree development generally above 600m.

Upland heathland supports a wide range of plant and animal species, including a number of priority species such as Hen Harrier, Red Grouse, Irish Hare and Skylark. The wide range of flowering plants also support pollinating insects including bumblebees, butterflies and moths.

Upland heathland is prevalent in a number of Landscape Character Areas throughout Sperrin AONB, including LCA 26 Bessy Bell and Gortin and LCA 28 Glenelly Valley. It is also widespread within LCA 30 Sperrin Foothills. Upland heathland is a declining habitat in Britain and Ireland, partly resulting from forestry and land reclamation but also from overgrazing in recent times.

The widespread occurrence of the habitat in these LCAs is therefore of local and national significance, and because the habitat is largely restricted in Europe to the northwest seaboard, it is also of international importance.²⁸



Upland Heathland

²⁷ DAERA, NI Priority Habitat Guide, Upland Heath

BLANKET BOG

Blanket bog is a globally restricted peatland habitat confined to cool, wet, typically oceanic climates. It is, however, one of the most extensive semi-natural habitats in Northern Ireland, the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Blanket bog peat accumulates in response to the very slow rate at which plant material decomposes under conditions of waterlogging and can cloak entire landscapes. It is widespread in the wetter north and west areas of the country, and tends to occur at altitudes above 200m, although in particularly wet areas can be found above 150m altitude. Blanket bog in Northern Ireland is therefore defined as:

- Peatland covering extensive areas in the uplands (and at lower altitudes in the north and west) including hill slopes, valley bottoms and summits.
- Peat depth normally greater than 0.5 m.
- Vegetation generally dominated by peat-forming plants, particularly bog mosses Sphagnum species and Cotton-grass Eriophorum species with a limited range of other characteristic species including Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Deer Grass *Trichophorum cespitosum* and Purple-moor Grass *Molinia caerulea*.²⁹



Blanket Bog

Blanket bog supports a range of animal and plant species including priority species such as the Hen Harrier, Red Grouse, Golden Plover, Curlew, Cuckoo and Skylark. It is widespread within Sperrin AONB, occurring in a number of Landscape Character Areas including LCA 24 South Sperrins, LCA 25 Beaghmore Moors and Marsh, LCA 26 Bessy Bell & Gortin, LCA 39 Glenshane Slopes and LCA 41 Slieve Gallion, to name a few. Unfortunately, the integrity of the blanket bog in many of these areas has been undermined and it is currently in an unfavourable condition.

²⁹DAERA, *NI Priority Habitat Guide, Blanket Bog*

MONTANE HEATH

In Northern Ireland, Montane heath is restricted, occurring only on higher summits and consisting of dwarf-shrub heaths, moss heaths and montane grassland with a high sedge component. The presence and numbers of characteristic vascular plants, mosses, lichens and alpine fungi assemblage are important indicators of habitat quality. Montane heath in good condition is typically dominated by a range of dwarf shrubs such as Heather, Bell heather, Cross-leaved Heath, Bilberry and Cowberry. Average dwarf-shrub height is generally short, typically between 5 and 10cm, being wind-pruned by the montane climatic conditions.

Montane heath in Northern Ireland is defined as being an upland habitat which:

- Occurs on the summits of the highest mountains generally above 600m.
- Consist of short (5-10 cm) dwarf-shrub heath, moss heaths and montane grassland with a high sedge component.
- Include characteristic plants such as Cowberry and Dwarf Willow, Stiff Sedge, and Alpine Clubmoss and Stag's-horn Clubmoss.³⁰

Montane heath supports a range of plant and animal species such as cowberry with bilberry and heather, and the NI Priority Species, Skylark. Montane heath is a rare and declining habitat in Northern Ireland, but it can be found within Sperrin AONB on LCA 41 Slieve Gallion and LCA 29 Sperrin Mountains, particularly on Dart and Sawel. To the west of Dart and Sawel, on the North facing slopes of Mullaghclogha, the only recorded instance of Cloudberry on the island of Ireland has been found. These important habitats should therefore be protected and restored where possible.



Cloudberry

³⁰DAERA, NI Priority Habitat Guide, Montane Heath

LOWLAND RAISED BOG

Lowland raised bogs are peatland habitats which develop primarily in lowland areas below 150m and are generally surrounded by mineral soils. Lowland raised bogs may develop from fen or, if the climate is sufficiently wet, by peat formation directly onto a bare substrate. Continued accumulation of peat elevates the bog surface above groundwater levels from a gently curving dome, from which the term 'raised' bog is derived. Peat depths are greater than 0.5m, but can exceed 12m. The dome of the raised bog may be totally or partly surrounded by an area of shallow peat or mineral soil subject to ground water influence or periodic flooding, most commonly referred to as the 'lagg'. Lowland raised bogs should be treated as single interdependent hydrological units. However, all raised bogs have been subject to past peat-cutting and drainage which has affected natural processes and the extent of bog vegetation. Intact surfaces and cut-over surfaces should be managed for peat-forming active bog vegetation which is the focus of this habitat descriptor. Extensive areas of cut-over bog can also contain areas lacking bog vegetation and should be managed as fen, grassland or woodland priority habitats. Lowland raised bog in Northern Ireland is therefore defined as:

- Peatland which have developed primarily in lowland areas below 150m and are generally surrounded by mineral soils.
- Peat depth normally greater than 0.5 m.
- Hydrological units which contain significant (or potentially significant) areas of vegetation dominated by peat-forming plants particularly bog mosses Sphagnum species and Cotton-grass Eriophorum species with a limited range of other characteristic species including

Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Deer Grass *Trichophorum cespitosum* and Purple-moor Grass *Molinia caerulea*.

- Intact lowland raised bog occurs in areas that have largely not been subject to peat-cutting.
- Cut-over lowland raised bogs includes areas which have been subject to peat-cutting and may support other priority habitat types.³¹

Lowland raised bog can be confused with blanket bog where peat is able to form on slopes in marginal upland areas. It can be distinguished by the degree of isolation the bog has from adjoining peatlands. Within Sperrin AONB lowland raised bog can be found on LCA 30 Sperrin Foothills and LCA 37 Roe Basin. The habitat supports a range of plant and habitat priority species such as the Curlew, Cuckoo, Skylark and Marsh Fritillary as well as a range of pollinators.



Lowland Raised Bog

³¹DAERA, NI Priority Habitat Guide, Lowland Raised Bog (info extracted from this source interpreted to inform table)

POTENTIAL PRESSURES FOR PEATLAND HABITATS

Pressures	Description
Peat cutting	The extraction of peat for both fuel and horticulture has negative impacts on both the vegetation and water levels and often causes irreparable damage.
Drainage	Peatland habitats are impacted by both through lowering regional water tables or local drainage.
Mineral extraction	The extraction of underlying minerals beneath the peat deposits. Mineral extraction ancillary/associated works.
Burning	Burning can impact vegetation structure and eliminate sensitive species, especially Sphagnum bog mosses.
Agricultural improvement	Drainage, fertiliser application and conversion to pasture can have a significant impact on peatland habitats.
Grazing	Overgrazing can have a significant impact on Sphagnum bog mosses, heather and other dwarf shrubs and can result in localised poaching and peat erosion. Drainage, burning, fencing and supplementary feeding all contribute to the problems associated with heavy grazing.
Forestry	Afforestation can have a significant hydrological and physical impacts on peatland vegetation.
Scrub encroachment	Downy birch scrub and woodland which frequently develops in cut-over lowland raised bog and can encroach onto the intact surface, especially where the hydrological integrity of the bog has been damaged resulting in drying of the surface peat.
Recreation	With many walking routes located over peatland habitats, surface trampling can disturb vegetation and have a negative impact.
Waste disposal	Cut-over bogs have been used as designated waste disposal sites in the past and are frequently used for illegal dumping of agricultural and domestic waste.
Pollution	Contamination from adjacent landfill or agricultural drainage, fertiliser drift during its application, or localised dumping or fly-tipping, may be significant at certain sites.
Nutrient enrichment	Nitrogen enrichment caused by atmospheric deposition could lead to significant vegetation changes, especially bryophyte and lichen interest. Any change to Sphagnum mosses in particular, would have wider implications for the whole bog.
Planning developments	Development for urban expansion, rural dwellings, energy infrastructure and development of the road network, may have long-term repercussions on the stability of the ecosystem. Wind farms and communication masts are increasingly being proposed on areas of Blanket bog with long-term repercussions on the stability of the ecosystem.
Climate change	The vegetation communities occurring in bogs and heathlands are likely to be impacted from the prediction of higher temperature, increased rainfall and changed weather patterns.
Invasive species	Invasive species can become dominant, leading to the loss of biodiversity within these habitats.
Erosion	Although some loss of habitat may be due to natural processes, blanket bog on some slopes are being lost through erosion of the shallow peat soils due to overgrazing and recreational activities.

PROTECTED AREAS

Sperrin AONB contains a number of protected areas, designated because of their national or international ecological significance. Protecting these areas is crucial to ensure the conservation of their habitat and species. Within Northern Ireland as a whole, 9.8% of the total land is currently designated as a protected area. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework has set an ambitious target to increase this globally to 30% by 2030, in an effort to halt and reverse biodiversity decline. This ambitious target has been adopted by the NI Executive under the Environmental Improvement Plan. Northern Ireland has a total land area of 1,340,867.191 ha, excluding urban areas, therefore, to meet the '30 by 30' target, a total of 424,543.1 ha of habitat would need to be effectively protected, managed and monitored.³²

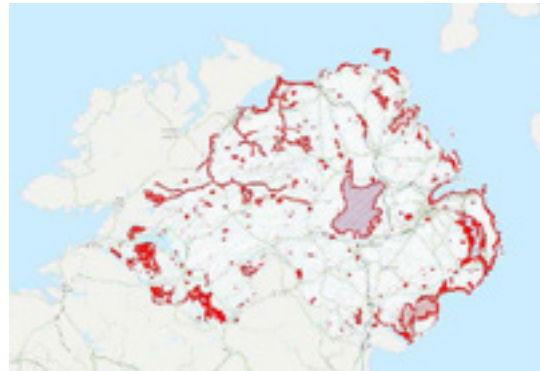
A list of conservation designations is set out in the table below and they can be explored on the NI Environment Agency Natural Environment Map Viewer. To access click on link: <https://gis.daera-ni.gov.uk/arcgis/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=7ed27d1df5c3451da04b18057b6d48bf>

SAC –Special Area of Conservation means a site of European Community importance designated under the EU Habitats Directive.

ASSI –Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) are defined in the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (N.I.) Order 1985 as being of the highest degree of conservation value.

Ramsar – In line with the Convention on Wetland of International Importance, signed at Ramsar in 1973.

NNR – National Nature Reserve – An area declared under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 as of importance for flora, fauna or features of geological or other special interest.



Map of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI's) in Northern Ireland. A number of these have received further designation as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

³²Ulster Wildlife, February 2022, *Developing Habitat Networks in Support of a Northern Ireland Nature Recovery Network Mapping Framework*

The table below provides an overview of all designated sites within Sperrin AONB. The reader will note duplication, which reflects that several sites have received both National and European Designation.

The publication of conservation management plans for these sites provides a useful tool, identifying key issues as well as measures that can be adopted for effective site management. Such management is reliant on a range of stakeholders, including the landowner, be that a private, individual or public body. These plans have been published by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

Classification	Designated within Sperrin AONB	Site
Special Area of Conservation (SAC)	9	River Faughan and Tributaries
		Owenkillew River
		Black Bog
		Teal Lough
		Carn/ Glenshane Pass
		Banagher Glen
		River Roe and Tributaries
		River Foyle and Tributaries
		Upper Ballinderry River
Area of Scientific Interest (ASSI)	30	Ballyknock
		Banagher Glen
		Carn/Glenshane Pass
		Silverbrook Wood
		Crockaghole Wood
		Teal Lough Part II
		Owenkillew and Glenelly Woods
		Drumlea and Mullan Woods
		Teal Lough and Slaughterfreeden Bogs
		Grange Wood
		Owenkillew River
		Black Bog
		Upper Ballinderry River
		River Foyle and Tributaries

Classification	Designated within Sperrin AONB	Site
Area of Scientific Interest (ASSI)	30	Bonds Glen
		Murrins
		River Roe and Tributaries
		Ballymacallion
		River Faughan and Tributaries
		Mountfield Quarry
		Sruhanleanantawey Burn
		Mullaghcarn
		Cashel Rock
		Aghabrack
		Lisnaragh
		Butterlope Glen
		Lough Lark
		Tamnyrankin
		Owenreagh River
Corbylin Wood		
National Nature Reserve	3	Banagher Glen
		Boorin
		Murrins Forest
Ramsar	1	Black Bog
Local Council Designations	1	An Creagán Bog Local Nature Reserve

SITES OF LOCAL NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE (SLNCI)

Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs) may possibly be identified and designated in the respective Council Local Development Plan (LDP). They are identified as supporting habitats, species or earth science features. As well as making a contribution to the local natural heritage, they contribute to National and European biodiversity.

2.4 Geology of Sperrin AONB

The Sperrin Mountains are made of the oldest rocks in the province comprising metamorphic rocks 650 to 570 million years old resulting from the alteration of sedimentary and volcanic rocks. The sedimentary layers originally accumulated as layers of sandstone, mudstone and some limestone in an ancient ocean. The lavas erupted onto the ocean floor and formed part of the succession of layers. As the ocean closed adjacent continents collided and the oceanic rocks underwent deep burial and contortion under high temperatures and pressures which altered or metamorphosed the entire rock package. This produced schist and other metamorphic rock types that were then pushed up over younger rocks at the margin of this ocean. The fractured contact between these rock masses is known as the Omagh Fault. The younger rocks, 480 to 465 million years old, are located to the south-east of the Omagh Fault and are composed of various igneous rock types such as granite and gabbro.³³

A number of ASSIs within the AONB have been designated due to their Earth Science features.



Beaghmore Stone Circles

³³https://earthwise.bgs.ac.uk/index.php/Northern_Ireland_-_Sperrin_Mountains

Aghabrack Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)

Aghabrack ASSI is of importance in understanding the recent glacial history of NI. The features of interest at Aghabrack formed by the action of water and ice toward the end of the last Ice Age, between 17,000 and 13,000 years ago. At this time the earth's climate was warming after the prolonged cold period that had allowed the ice to form. Sand and gravel were laid down in front of the ice as it was retreating south toward the main Sperrin Mountains. In Aghabrack, a hummocky ridge of this material, called moraine, was deposited when the ice briefly stopped its retreat. The site also contains part of an esker ridge. An esker forms when a water channel under the ice becomes blocked up by sand and gravel as the flow of water declines. It is these ice channels that feed sediment from under the glacier to its front. The water was actually flowing up hill because of the pressure from the ice to the south. The majority of the site is composed of a very flat surface. This is an outwash plain that formed as meltwater deposited and smoothed out sand and gravel transported from the glacier. Since the end of the Ice Age, peat has built up on the outwash deposits to form a raised bog. This habitat supports unique raised bog plant communities with vegetation such as bog mosses, heather and bog cotton. It is the build up of bog mosses that eventually form peat over thousands of years. Correct management is essential for special places like Aghabrack. The processes that created the deglacial landform features are no longer in operation, so if the features were damaged it would be impossible to restore them.



Aghabrack ASSI

³³ DAERA, Declaration of Area of Special Scientific Interest, Aghabrack ASSI

2.5 Sperrin AONB Historic Environment

The diverse natural heritage of the Sperrins has shaped a rich historic environment evidenced by the presence here of some of the most archaeologically significant sites on the island of Ireland. Sperrin AONB is a 'living landscape' which reflects a long history of human activity and interaction.

Together the natural and built heritage of the area have fostered a unique cultural heritage encompassing language, music, dance, folklore, and local traditions and customs.



Beaghmore Stone Circles

Beaghmore Stone Circles consist of a large, impressive series of Bronze Age ceremonial stone monuments excavated from the surrounding bog between 1945 and 1949 and in 1965. The main features are six stone circles occurring in pairs, with twelve small cairns which held cremation burials and eight stone alignments running in parallel in a NE-SW direction. The average height of the stones in these circles is 0.3-0.6 m high. A further single stone circle, The 'Dragon's Teeth', is filled with closely-set stones and contains the tallest stone on site which stands at 1.2 m. Running under these features are low banks of small stones, probably derived from clearing fields for arable farming in the Neolithic period. The stone structures continue, under the bog, and there are many other Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in this area. Finds were sparse from the excavations but two flint hoards were found, one dated by radiocarbon to the late Neolithic period and the other to the early Bronze Age. Study of pollen from a nearby former lake suggests Neolithic activity from 3500 BC, with the main period of the stone monuments in the Bronze Age, 1500 to 800 BC.

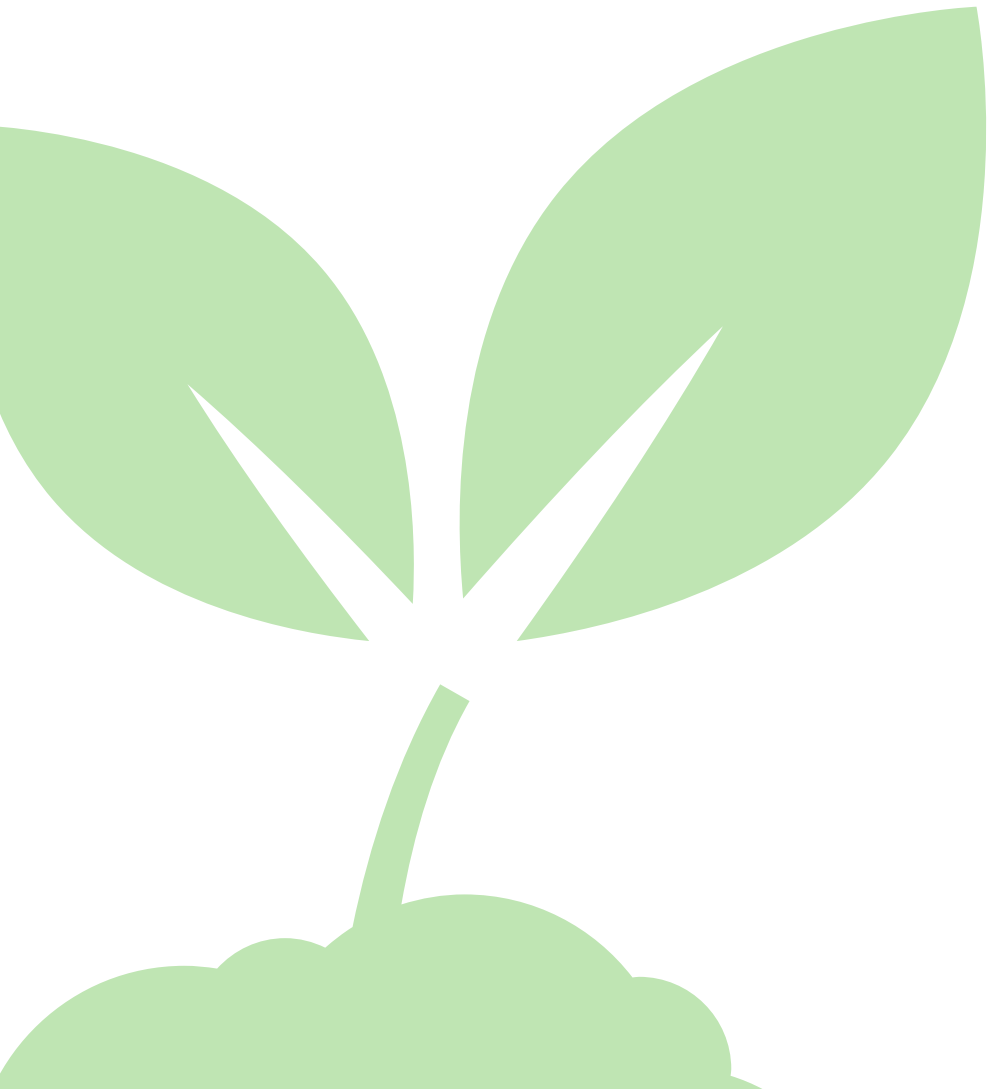
A significant area around Beaghmore Stone Circles has been classified as an area of 'significant archaeological interest' by DfC's Historic Environment Division.



Beaghmore Stone Circles

³⁶Department for Communities, *Beaghmore Stone Circles, Available Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record - BEAGHMORE STONE CIRCLE, CAIRNS AND ALIGNMENTS*

Surviving remnants of the Early Christian (c. 400 – 1150 AD) and later Medieval (up to 1500AD) periods add to the archaeological significance of Sperrin AONB, with examples including forts, ringforts, raths and crannogs as well as the sites of ecclesiastical and monastic origins such as churches, burial grounds and ogham stones.



Aghascrebagh Ogham Stone

Banagher Church

The church, on a prominent hill of sand and gravel, was traditionally founded by St Muiredach O’Heney who may have lived in the late 11th or early 12th century.

It is first mentioned in 1121. This was the medieval parish church, chosen by Archbishop Colton of Armagh as the base for his visitation of Derry diocese in 1397, but was later abandoned in the 17th century. The nave must date from the early or mid-12th century (the date 474 on the west door was cut in the 1730s). There is a small semi-circular-headed south window and a fine west door, archaic in general appearance, with a massive lintel and sloping jambs, but with a semi-circular arch inside.

The chancel was added in the early 13th century, with three windows, the south with elegant multiple roll mouldings, and a similarly moulded sedile (seat) in the south wall. This was blocked when the east end was remodelled in the 15th century to form a narrow sacristy behind the altar. Unfortunately, after excavation the 15th century features had to be covered again to prevent rapid weathering. The exterior east angles have attached shafts with decorated capitals, reset at a lower level than their original eaves height. South-west of the chancel, in the same distinctive masonry, is the small church- or house-shaped mortuary house, traditionally St Muiredach’s burial place. This is the source of the famous Banagher sand which can bring good fortune to members of the saint’s family. East of the church is a simple stone cross and a bullaun stone (outside the graveyard wall), and a second cross stands across the road to the south-west on the townland boundary.

The ruin west of the graveyard gate is the remains of the medieval priest’s strong-house or tower, still standing to gable height in the early 19th century.



Banagher Church

The Early Modern Period (1500 – 1800AD) brought societal, economic and cultural changes to Ireland, all of which impacted the Sperrins and its landscape. Throughout the 16th century the ancient Irish clans maintained their position, with the O’Neill dynasty and O’Cahans covering the Sperrins. Defeat however in the Nine Years War (1593 – 1603) and the consequent Flight of the Earls in 1607 changed the course of Irish history. The subsequent Plantation of Ulster from 1609 brought with it fundamental changes to the province, including demographic and agricultural changes. The creation of plantation towns such as Draperstown had economic and cultural ramifications, as did the emergence of the linen industry and the necessary infrastructure to support it. The archaeological legacy of this period in history can be found in a variety of sites throughout the AONB, and includes castles, mills, forts and vernacular houses. The Campbell House now located in the Ulster American Folk Park (The Folk Park) near Omagh is one example of vernacular building styles from the period. The original, ancestral home of the Campbell family from Plumbridge, was built in 1786 by Hugh Campbell, before two of his sons, Hugh and Robert, emigrated to America around 1818.

The Folk Park also provides examples of vernacular architecture from the Modern Period (From 1800AD) before the devastating impact of the Great Irish Famine (1845 – 51). Later 20th century examples of built heritage within the AONB include the remains of wartime military bases and crash sites. These tangible examples of heritage, provide an insight into life in the Sperrins over the course of thousands of years. It is important to note however, that many significant monuments and

archaeological sites within the AONB have not been sufficiently surveyed or promoted. A lack of awareness is therefore a major threat to the conservation of built heritage in the Sperrins.

Furthermore, with the majority of sites located on private land, access is another important consideration in terms of conservation.



Ancestral Home of the Campbell Family, Plumbridge

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The valuable historic environment of Sperrin AONB is further enriched by a vibrant cultural heritage that is inextricably linked to the landscape. This intangible cultural heritage of Sperrin AONB includes traditional language, dance, music, sport, folklore and a vast array of local traditions and customs.

The area contains a number of local dialects, influenced by both the Irish language and Ulster Scots. The Sperrins includes some of the last remaining areas such as Greencastle and Benedy, where Irish endured as a primary language up until the 1950s. In recent years, it has enjoyed a strong revival within the AONB as demonstrated by the significant number of children attending Irish medium primary schools in the area. Moreover, Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, located in the historic Dungiven Castle, is one of only two post primary Irish medium schools in Northern Ireland. This revival is further supported by a flourishing Irish language community sector, with groups including An Carn, An Creagán and Glór Dhún Geimhin.

As well as the cultural identity significance, the Irish language can also be used as a tool to learn more about the landscape of the AONB. The names of many townlands within the Sperrins, and indeed field names, when translated provide a clear description of landscape features. For many local people, townlands are an integral part of their cultural heritage, and it is therefore important to record and preserve this information.

In terms of topography, the landscape of the Sperrins maintains many historic features. The lower valley slopes retain the historic field pattern, with hedgerows, earth banks and stone walls enclosing a diverse patchwork of fields and woodlands. Stone walls on the upper slopes often follow the historic townland boundaries. In more remote areas to the north-east these historic field patterns are in pristine condition.

Ladder fields are a locally distinct feature, and there are traces of the former rundale, or open-field systems.³⁷

The fields, bogs, rivers and mountains of the Sperrins have been a source of inspiration for many musicians, authors and poets including George Barnett (1876–1965) who spent his life studying and writing about the Sperrins. His works include the poem “Life in Glenelly”:

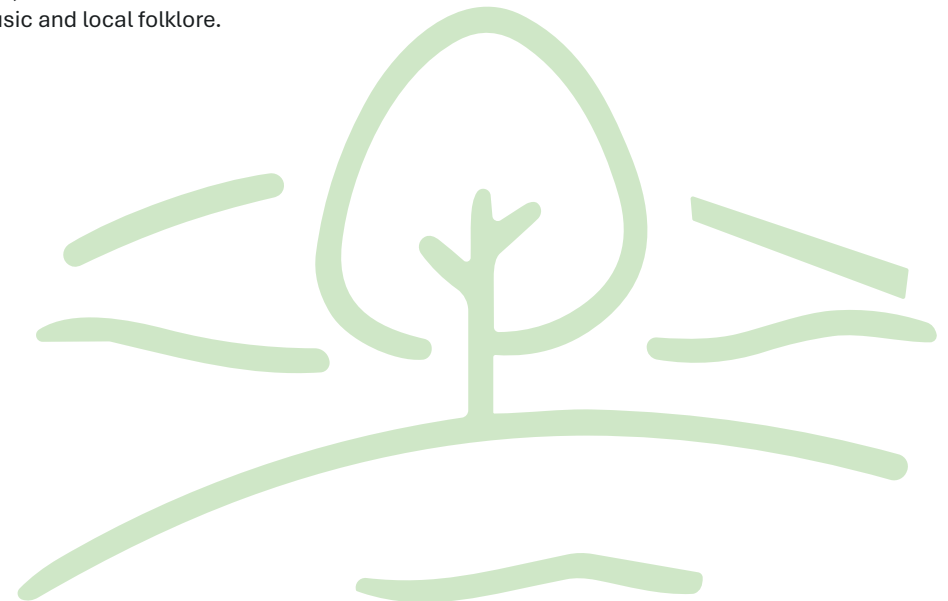
***“It’s sixteen miles to Plumbridge town from
flowery Ballinascreen,
But many’s the one has dandered there
along Glenelly stream,
There’s good fish sporting in the stream,
and flowery banks at hand,
And spread beauty on the same,
are bushy meadows grand.”***

In more recent years, Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, who was born in Bellaghy on the edge of the AONB also drew literacy inspiration from the Sperrins, not least Slieve Gallion.

The strong cultural traditions throughout the area reflect a deep and meaningful connection between people and place, and one that is often explored in traditional music and local folklore.

***“In a land of O’Cahan where bleak
mountains rise,
O’er those brown ridgy tops now the
dusky clouds fly, Deep sunk in a valley
a wild flower did grow, And her name
was Finvola, the Gem of the Roe”³⁸***

The tradition of storytelling and oral history has retained a special part within cultural heritage in the Sperrins, however it too risks being lost due to a lack of promotion and preservation. The recording of local stories, music and customs is therefore crucial to ensure that this information is retained for future generations.



³⁷DAERA, *Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*

³⁸NI Community Heritage Archive – Coleraine Museum, Sam Henry Collection “The Gem of the Roe”

2.6 Sperrin AONB Socio Economic Environment

Sperrin AONB is a living, working landscape. The area has been shaped by its first settlers right through to the communities who reside there today. The landscape management plan is for all those who live, work and visit the Sperrins, and therefore cognisance must be taken of the socio-economic context of the AONB.

THE COMMUNITIES OF THE SPERRINS

Given its vast size, a substantial number of small rural communities exist right across the AONB. Most of these consist of villages and small towns on the foothills of the Sperrins. A number of larger gateway towns exist bordering the AONB boundary. Despite its large size, many people throughout the area feel a common sense of identity with the Sperrins.

Throughout the AONB, community development is particularly strong, as evidenced by the large number of community organisations, sports clubs and historical societies, each of which plays an important role in contributing to the vibrancy of their small, rural communities.

³⁹NISRA, 2021 Census

POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Encompassing such a large area and cutting across four different Council boundaries and 18 Super Output Areas (SOAs), it is difficult to accurately analyse population and demographic data within the AONB. The total population of the 18 Super Output Areas is 47,122 however this figure does not reflect that many SOAs contain only a proportion of their area within the AONB boundary. Within the AONB itself, uplands are sparsely populated, with the majority of settlements single dwellings on the foothills of the Sperrins and in the local villages.

Using the figure as a basis for analysis, along with data from the most recent census (2021 Census) population trends within the AONB broadly follow Northern Ireland averages, in terms of population growth, demographic age and composition. In terms of economic activity, employment rates also mirror regional averages, ranging between 54% - 66% (NI Average 56%).³⁹ Unsurprisingly, given the rural nature of the AONB and the poor public transport links within, private car or van is the most common method for travel to work and is above the NI average of 63%. In terms of employment agriculture, construction and manufacturing feature as the primary employers, with employment in each of these sectors above the NI average.



Exploring the Sperrins

The 2017 Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) ranks a total of 890 SOAs across Northern Ireland, 1 (most deprived) to 890 (least deprived) examining a number of indicators such as employment, income, health, crime and access to services. The table below reveals results for the 18 SOAs within Sperrin AONB.

SOA	MDM Rank	Income	Employment	Health Deprivation & Disability	Education, Skills & Training	Access to Services	Living Environment	Crime & Disorder
Draperstown	389	214	416	370	575	174	686	812
Lower Glenshane	527	574	563	502	761	30	489	869
Owenkillew	257	179	419	424	665	9	282	813
Plumbridge	304	368	393	461	589	1	286	834
Feeny	203	53	366	414	389	186	388	684
Upper Glenshane	440	381	356	447	497	160	555	828
Banagher	245	130	414	505	517	41	148	760
Dunamanagh	148	79	248	319	443	21	264	671
Claudy 1	490	565	340	366	471	229	849	600
Claudy 2	340	316	442	467	571	32	241	533
Victoria Bridge	266	220	304	355	290	114	499	580
Sion Mills	175	304	131	150	207	339	128	266
Newtownstewart	201	314	150	240	230	162	450	312
Gortin	573	466	621	512	702	119	607	590
Dunamore	271	222	441	425	590	6	463	740
Artigarvan	376	324	369	436	281	191	692	601
Swatragh 1	562	364	565	632	742	123	741	842
Swatragh 2	459	299	640	723	725	24	400	839
Garvagh	272	71	432	559	467	189	724	623
Dungiven	145	39	151	241	455	483	661	450

Super Output Areas within Sperrin AONB

As highlighted above, three of the SOA's rank within the overall top 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland. The rural nature of the AONB is also very evident in Plumbridge SOA's ranking as having the least access to services in the whole of Northern Ireland. In other indicators the AONB generally ranks well, particularly in terms of crime and disorder.

ECONOMY OF SPERRIN AONB

Within Sperrin AONB a number of key sectors drive the economy. As highlighted above, the primary employers are the agricultural, manufacturing and construction industries. To a lesser, but growingly significant degree, rural tourism also provides employment opportunities throughout the AONB.

The quarrying industry, including sand and aggregates, have historically contributed significantly to the economy of the Sperrins, providing an industrial heritage which should be recognised. It prevails as a key employer in the area. From a landscape management perspective, the restoration of abandoned quarries should be explored to improve biodiversity in the area.

AGRICULTURE

The agricultural industry remains a primary employer within the Sperrins, providing direct employment opportunities, but also supporting a much wider rural economy which includes farm shops, suppliers, vets and contractors.

The majority of farms within Sperrin AONB are small in scale and primarily livestock focused, with sheep and cattle. The upland nature of much of the AONB means that a large proportion of land is unsuitable for arable farming, as reflected in the classification of 'Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDA)' in considerable proportions of the AONB. In recent years increased input costs, market volatility, lack of labour, disease outbreak and succession planning have

all impacted the farming industry generally in Northern Ireland. Farming the difficult terrain of the Sperrins, however, comes with added challenges, not least remote access and poor weather conditions. Nonetheless, farming remains an important industry within the AONB, and one that must be viewed in a much wider context than simply economically.

Farmers and farming families play an important role socially within the Sperrins, contributing to the fabric of rural community. The industry itself however can be extremely isolating, with instances of poor mental health particularly prevalent. Sustaining existing and creating new social opportunities is therefore important to address these challenges.

Agriculture must also be viewed from an environmental and heritage perspective. As custodians of the land, it is the farming community who have helped maintain the landscape of the AONB for successive generations. "Grazing is a vital natural process and management tool to maintain a vegetation structure which delivers a range of ecosystem services, including food production, carbon sequestration, soil health and biodiversity."⁴⁰ Moreover, farmers often have a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding local traditions, customs and skills and their engagement is therefore key to ensure that the area is protected and conserved for future generations.



⁴⁰McAdams, (April 2024), *Changes in Upland Biodiversity resulting from Agriculture in NI - A Literature Review for the Office for Environmental Protection*

It is difficult to accurately determine the exact number of farms within Sperrin AONB because of ward boundaries, however it is estimated to be over 2,000.

Number of Farms per Ward in Sperrin AONB (2023)		
Local Government District	Ward	Number of Farms
Causeway Coast & Glens	Dungiven	97
	Feeny	106
	Garvagh	149
Derry & Strabane	Glenelly Valley	307
	Dunnamanagh	212
	Artigarvan	83
	Park	201
	Newtownstewart (only 5% of ward within AONB)	116
Fermanagh & Omagh	Gortin	117
	Owenkillew	260
Mid Ulster	Lower Glenshane	198
	Draperstown	99
	Lissan	194
	Swatragh	179
Total		2,318

Farms per Ward in Sperrin AONB

RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism is steadily becoming a growing industry within the AONB. Given the AONB's scenic value and rich heritage, it is not surprising that the majority of tourism is motivated by outdoor recreation and historic site visits.

There are numerous tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities available throughout Sperrin AONB. These promote exploration of the natural environment; participation in slow adventure, high adrenalin and sporting activity; and visits to attractions such as sites of archaeological interest. A series of trails and waymarked routes (driving, walking, and cycling) have been developed to facilitate access and to support visitor and user navigation of the area.

Some of the region's most popular attractions and outdoor recreation experiences include:

- **The Sperrins Giant Trail** which traverses the Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and Mid Ulster District Council areas. The trail features three sculptures by artist Thomas Dambo, inspired by geological wonders and ancient heritage, symbolising the past, present, and future.⁴¹
- **Gortin Glen Forest Park** which is located at the western gateway to the Sperrins. The park is made up of a network of 5 waymarked trails of varying lengths which give visitors the opportunity to explore the woodland. The park also includes 13.5km of mountain biking trails, part of the Ulster Way Walking Route (also the International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland) and hosts offerings such as a large playpark, trim trail, BBQ, picnic area, and onsite cafe.⁴² Mountain Biking trail provision also exists in Davagh Forest and Garvagh Forest.

- **The International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland** is a 279-mile walking trail starting in West Donegal in the Republic of Ireland and continuing into Northern Ireland, passing through Sperrin AONB before progressing to the Glens of Antrim and finishing in Larne. The route is a part of the world's largest network of walking trails which share a common geological heritage and stretch across 3 continents.⁴³
- **The OM Dark Sky and Observatory at Davagh** is the first and only accredited Dark Sky Park in Northern Ireland and the 78th in the world. Providing the latest technology, visitors to the centre can explore the solar system and stargaze using telescopes or the naked eye to view the night sky. Davagh Forest has one of the 'darkest skies' in Ireland, which means there is so little to no light pollution, providing clear views of star constellations, planets and the Milky Way.⁴⁴
- **The Sperrin Scenic Driving Route Experience** offers four driving routes: North, Central, East and South. Each route represents an opportunity to become immersed in an environment millions of years in the making and steeped in myth and legend.



Nowanois, The Storyteller,



Mountain Biking at Davagh, Garvagh and Gortin Glens Forest Parks



OM Dark Sky Park and Observatory, Davagh Forest

⁴¹Giants of the Sperrins (2024) *The Sperrins Giant Trail*. Available at: <https://giantsofthesperrins.com/>

⁴²Discover Northern Ireland (2024) *Gortin Glen Forest Park*. Available at: <https://discovernorthernireland.com/listing/gortin-glen-forest-park/67576101/>

⁴³International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland (2024) *Available at: https://iatulsterireland.com/*

⁴⁴OM Dark Sky Park (2024) *OM Dark Sky Park*. Available at: <https://omdarksky.com/om-dark-sky-park/>

The Ulster American Folk Park is an open-air museum just outside Omagh, in County Tyrone. The museum focuses on those who left Ulster for America in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The museum is part of National Museums Northern Ireland and is comprised of many restored, original buildings with connections to local families.⁴⁵

This is not an extensive list and does not take into account the many private sector business operations and independent and community-led tourism initiatives.⁴⁶ A significant number of private sector and community-led local accommodation and activity offerings have been developed within Sperrin AONB in recent years which could support rural tourism developments.



Launch of Update to Sperrin Scenic Driving Routes Guide

⁴⁵Ulster American Folk Park (2024) *Journey Back in Time*. Available at: <https://www.ulsteramericanfolkpark.org/>

⁴⁶Further information can be found at: Ordnance Survey Ireland (2019). *Sperrins Tourism Infrastructure*. Available at: <https://fermanagh.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/interactivelegend/index.html?appid=49807465976849dfae0fde789401ce10>

OUTDOOR RECREATION

As well as a key motivator driving tourism to the AONB, the importance of outdoor recreation must be considered from a community, health and wellbeing perspective. As well as conservation, the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (NCALCO) designation of AONB's includes objectives for:

- **promoting its enjoyment by the public, and**
- **providing or maintaining public access to it.**

Outdoor recreation provides a multitude of opportunities to support health and wellbeing, including a diverse range of exercise activities, and an opportunity for people to connect both with others, and with the natural environment around them. The collective impact contributes to improved levels of physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing.

This myriad of benefits has been recognised in recent research commissioned by Sport NI. The four-year research project undertaken by Cardiff Metropolitan University aimed to better understand “the demographic profiles of individuals participating in outdoor sports, their motivations, and the potential relationship between outdoor sport and both nature connectedness and wellbeing.” As demonstrated in the diagram opposite, mental wellbeing ranked as the highest motivating factor, however the responses were varied.⁴⁷

The research also supports the adoption of outdoor recreation as a social prescribing tool, an approach reaffirmed in various other further research publications at both a local, regional and international level.⁴⁸

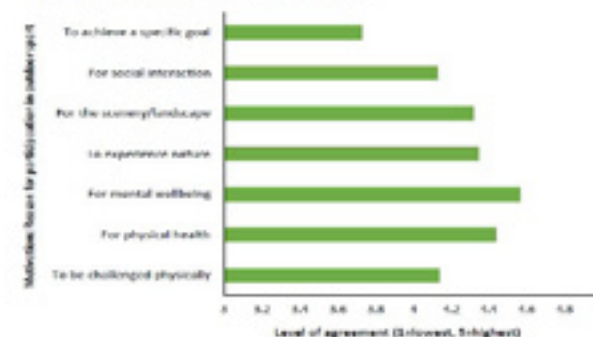
In spite of its numerous benefits, there are unfortunately a number of barriers to outdoor recreation within the AONB, particularly access. Given that the majority of land within Sperrin AONB is privately owned, access cannot be secured without landowner agreement. These difficulties are reflected in the Sport NI commissioned research, that despite being a regional study, cites the Sperrins as a particularly difficult area to access.

Such obstacles are also reflected in the People in the Outdoors Monitor for Northern Ireland (POMNI) 2025.⁵¹ Undertaken by Outscape, the survey examines use of the outdoors and considers obstacles to access. It has found that rural residents face the greatest access barriers, often due to a lack of local greenspaces and transport. Furthermore, there are considerable disparities demographically, with women, disabled people and those from disadvantaged areas facing more difficulty accessing the outdoors.

It is therefore important to address such challenges and promote equal access to the AONB. The Sperrins Outdoor Recreation Action Plan aims to promote outdoor recreation opportunities to all those who live and visit the Sperrins, including marginalised groups within society.

Outdoor Recreation also provides an opportunity to encourage skills development and the creation of volunteering opportunities within the AONB. Previous youth engagement projects including forestry schools, and youth ranger projects demonstrate the significant impact these projects can have on a young person's personal and educational development and as such should be promoted going forward.

Figure 9: Reasons for participation and levels of agreement



Demographic Profiles – Research carried out by Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁴⁷Sellars, Crone, Moll, & Dickson (2025), *Understanding outdoor sports participants' motivations, connectedness to nature, and wellbeing in Northern Ireland*.

⁴⁸Kindermann, Domegan, C. & Carlin., (1 Aug 2021) *Understanding the dynamics of green and blue spaces for health and wellbeing outcomes in Ireland: a systemic stakeholder perspective: A systemic stakeholder perspective*, In: *Sustainability*, 13, 17, 9553.

⁵¹Outscape (2025) *People in the Outdoors Monitor for Northern Ireland (POMNI) 2025*.

Chapter 3

AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

Despite having been designated as an AONB nearly 60 years ago, Sperrin AONB has not yet benefitted from a management plan. This plan therefore marks an important milestone for the Sperrins, providing an opportunity for a coordinated approach to landscape management and rationale for the requisite funding to achieve this goal. Creation of the plan has been funded by Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) through the Environment Fund. This first management plan for Sperrin AONB covers the ten-year period, 2026 – 2036 and the accompanying action plan, 2026 – 2031. It sets out an agreed vision, mission and management priorities for the area over this period.

This chapter will outline the journey towards the first ever management plan for Sperrin AONB as well as its strategic fit with local and regional policy and legislation.

3.1 What is an AONB Management Plan?

An AONB management plan is a broad strategy that provides an agreed framework for all stakeholders to work to. Objectives of AONB management plans include retaining the landscape character and the natural, built and cultural heritage of the area.

Although AONB management plans in Northern Ireland are not statutory documents they can however provide an informed, evidenced based approach to landscape management and an agreed framework that all stakeholders can work to for the benefit of the AONB.

As set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) Edition 2 (at paragraphs 6.187 & 6.188)

“Development proposals in AONBs must be sensitive to the distinctive special character of the area and the quality of their landscape, heritage and wildlife, and be in the accordant with relevant plan policies. In assessing proposals, including cumulative impacts in such areas, account will also be taken of the Landscape Character Assessments and any other relevant guidance including AONB management plans and local design guides.”

Each of the four local councils, whose areas include the Sperrin AONB, is currently preparing a Local Development Plan (LDP) for its area, which will include planning policies relating to development in AONB.

Planning approval in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the eleven local councils, with applications deemed ‘regionally significant’ decided by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI). Each council sets out their own local priorities through the development of Local Development Plans. At the time of writing, this process was ongoing.

Some proposals such as signage, building reuse, tourism accommodation, or environmental projects may require planning permission or other consents. Consultation should be made with the relevant council before commencing development.

Although AONB management plans in Northern Ireland are not statutory documents, they are evidence-based documents, reflecting local consultation on landscape management issues as well as regional and local policies. In this context they may be used as a mechanism to inform decision making on the AONB.



Hiking in the Sperrins

3.2 Who is this Plan for?

This AONB management plan is for the benefit of all those who live, work and visit Sperrin AONB. By providing a shared vision, it will be used as a framework to advance landscape management in the area and to enhance and conserve natural, cultural and built heritage in the Sperrins.

The success of the plan is reliant on the support and collective collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders, including local communities, and statutory agencies.

3.3 How was this plan developed?

The journey towards the first AONB management plan for Sperrin AONB has been shaped by a series of developments in the preceding decade. The vast size of the AONB meant that prior to 2015 a total of seven local councils would have been involved with the management of the AONB. The reform of local government in 2015 resulted in the emergence of four new local authorities, namely Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council. This transformation allowed a focusing of efforts into AONB management. The Sperrins Future Search Conference in 2017 marked an important milestone in the journey towards an AONB management plan.

**At the time of producing this plan it is noted that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council are progressing to produce a Design Guide and this is something that may be co-ordinated in the future with other councils to produce a Design Guide for Sperrin AONB.*



SPERRINS FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE

In 2017, the Sperrins: *Reaching New Heights, Realising Our Potential Future Search Conference* brought together a group of key stakeholders to create an action plan for the future of Sperrin AONB. The event was initiated by the four local councils responsible for the area with a view to enabling participants to agree a common mission, to take responsibility for actions and to develop commitment to implementation. Through this process, a draft mission and a series of aims and *Common Ground Statements* were produced.

FORMATION OF THE SPERRINS PARTNERSHIP

Established in 2017 and operationalised in 2020, the Sperrins Partnership is a cross-council led project with the aim of preserving, enhancing and managing the landscape and natural, built and cultural heritage of the Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The development of the Sperrins Partnership was a recommendation of the Sperrins Future Search Conference which brought together key stakeholders to create plans for the future of Sperrin AONB. Elected representatives of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and Mid Ulster District Council are involved in the management of the Sperrins Partnership through shared cooperation and each commit an equal financial contribution. The Sperrins Partnership is governed by a board which currently includes representatives of the four respective council areas, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and Tourism Northern Ireland.



Sperrin Future Search Conference 2017

SPERRINS PARTNERSHIP LEAD PROJECT OFFICER

A Lead Project Officer for the Sperrins Partnership has been in post since October 2020. The Sperrins Partnership Lead Project Officer's role is to embody the aim of the Sperrins Partnership. Specific functions include strengthening and reviewing the role of the Sperrins Partnership to ensure diverse representation; developing, implementing and maintaining appropriate management and administrative systems to ensure effective monitoring and control of resources; and with consulting new and existing stakeholders to develop a detailed programme of activities and projects to engage people.

SPERRIN AONB PROJECT OFFICER

The Sperrin AONB Project Officer has been in post since November 2023. The Sperrin AONB Project Officer's role includes delivering an identified programme of conservation, enhancement and promotional actions for natural, built and cultural heritage in Sperrin AONB as well as sustainable tourism activities. A key part of the role is to engage with local communities, landowners and other key stakeholders to identify, agree and implement planned measures and to agree project solutions.

This role includes responsibility for the coordination of activities in environmental management, sustainable development, raising awareness and good practice within the geographic area.



Launch of plans to commence development of first ever Sperrin AONB Management Plan

SPERRIN AONB OFFICER WORKSHOP

In continuation of the development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan, a *Sperrin AONB Officer Workshop* was held in February 2024 with representatives from various departments within the four councils e.g. planning, tourism, community, biodiversity etc. An independent consultant report was laterally compiled detailing a SWOT analysis of the current provision and future management of Sperrin AONB, early thoughts on a strategic vision and mission, and emerging themes for the management plan. As set out in the terms of reference for this evaluation process, these elements were sense checked during consultation, with further insight and feedback sought on their appropriateness. To support this process, the following commonalities were identified between the results of the *Future Search Conference and the Sperrin AONB Officer Workshop* and were used to shape consultation in Phase B of the research process.

SPERRIN AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN CONSULTATION

Undertaken between February and September 2024, the Sperrin AONB management plan consultation included an extensive, community wide consultation process to inform development of the first landscape management plan for Sperrin AONB. Throughout the process a number of in person and online workshops were held at different locations throughout the AONB, to encourage inclusive and wide-ranging participation. Targeted workshops were held for community organisations and stakeholders including the farming community and statutory bodies. Further details on the process and the results of the consultation can be found in the next chapter.



Launch of Sperrin AONB Consultation Findings Report at Glenpark

LAUNCH OF SPERRIN AONB CONSULTATION FINDINGS

Following an extensive consultation exercise, the findings report was launched at an event in the Glenpark Estate on the 14th November 2024. As well as providing an opportunity to reveal consultation findings, the event also provided an opportunity to discuss the next steps in the process and to encourage ongoing community engagement.

SPERRIN AONB ACTION PLANNING WORKING GROUPS

The Action Planning Working Groups commenced in February 2025, following a thorough recruitment effort. Between February and October 2025, one online and five in person workshops were held to determine actions for inclusion within the Sperrin AONB Action Plan. This externally managed process ensured an extensive and transparent approach to action planning.



Sperrin AONB Action Planning Working Group, Ponderosa, Dungiven

3.4 Strategic Context

STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF THE SPERRIN AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Sperrin AONB Management Plan should be viewed in the wider local, national and indeed international context in which it operates. Development of the plan has been informed by a range of policies and strategies that will be considered below. The plan aligns with the priorities identified in many of these documents, and therefore synergistic opportunities exist, to advance the needs of Sperrin AONB. Further analysis of relevant strategies is available in the Research to Inform Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan Report (November 2024).

LEGISLATIVE FOUNDATION

As highlighted previously, the legal foundation for the designation of Sperrin AONB is the **Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965** and subsequently the **Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985**. This legislation commits government departments, district councils and statutory undertakers to have regard to the need to conserve the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside and the need to protect (so far as reasonably practicable) flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features of the countryside from any harmful effects in exercising functions relating to land under any statutory provision.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA's) position on protected landscapes is set out in **Shared Horizons** in which it notes that the classification of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty enables DAERA to address a "full range of issues associated with protecting these areas and for promoting their public enjoyment and sustainable use."

⁵⁰DAERA, *The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 - Key elements*

Alongside protection, the policy recognises that those involved in maintaining AONBs also seek to secure sustainable use of natural resources, healthy rural economies and strong rural communities, with the potential for tourism also highlighted. The policy notes that AONB designation and management offers an integrated approach whereby environmental, recreational and local community interests are seen as interdependent, and creates a platform for the "full and formal consideration of local issues through the preparation of a management plan or strategy."

The **2016 Rural Needs Act** requires policy makers and public authorities in Northern Ireland to have due regard to rural needs when developing and implementing policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services. Given the rural nature of Sperrin AONB, this legislation is therefore applicable in terms of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan.

The **Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022** set an ambitious legal target for Northern Ireland to reach net zero by 2050. "There is a legal requirement on all Northern Ireland departments to exercise their functions, as far as is possible to do so, in a manner consistent with the achievement of the targets of the Act and carbon budgets set under it."⁵⁰ The Sperrin AONB Management and Action Plan, have an important role to play in contributing to these targets.

NATIONAL POLICY

A range of national policies align with the development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan:

The NI Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'	The NI Programme for Government identifies nine overarching priorities. The eighth priority commits to “Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment”. Although Lough Neagh has been prioritised, the range of measures included closely align to the Sperrin AONB Management Plan.
The Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland	Outlining six strategic environmental outcomes, the Environmental Improvement Plan provides a framework for a vibrant, healthy and accessible landscapes in Northern Ireland and is therefore pivotal to delivering the Sperrin AONB Management Plan.
Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy	Developed to take account of targets set at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference in 2022. The targets commit DAERA, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, to consider actions on a number of important issues, including sustainable food production and implementing nature-based solutions for tackling climate change and reversing biodiversity loss.
Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040	The NI Peatland Strategy sets the Government’s direction of travel over the next two decades and beyond. It provides a framework to guide the conservation and restoration of peatland habitats in NI. Given the significance of peatland habitats in the Sperrins, the document is closely aligned to the AONB management plan.
Wildfires in Northern Ireland Strategic Framework 2025 - 2030	This document outlines a framework for wildfire prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and enforcement work in Northern Ireland up to 2030. Given the significant threat that wildfires pose to habitats and species within Sperrin AONB, this strategy is closely aligned to the AONB Management Plan.
Draft Green Growth Strategy	The Green Growth Strategy outlines a long-term strategy to achieving Northern Ireland’s net zero targets by 2050. It encompasses climate, green economy and environmental considerations.
River Basin Management Plan for Northern Ireland 2021 – 2027	Promoting an integrated approach to the protection, improvement and sustainable use of the water environment, the document is therefore closely aligned to Sperrin AONB Management Plan.
Sperrin Forestry Plan 2019 - 30	Outlining how DAERA Forests will be managed until 2030, the plan considers a range of eco carbon sequestration, water protection and biodiversity, as well as providing opportunities fo aligned to Sperrin AONB Management Plan.

NI Draft Climate Action Plan	The plan sets out policies and proposals to achieve The NI Executive's 2050 net zero target. It outlines required reductions in emissions and the actions to enable this to happen.
The Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland: 10 Year Plan	This plan aims to increase the value of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy by 50-75% compared to 2019. This is supported by the development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan given the potential for tourism, promotion and public awareness raising of the natural and cultural heritage of the area, and the support for appropriate recreation activities, events and the development of sustainable tourism.
The Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Business Plan for 25-26	Linking closely with the Environmental Improvement Plan, this document identifies three key priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Regulation, Protection and Enforcement; • Water Quality; and • Nature Recovery. It therefore aligns closely with Sperrin AONB Management Plan.
The Regional Development Strategy (RDS)	Focuses on the future development of Northern Ireland to 2035 and is the spatial strategy of the Executive. Management plans are a material consideration in the determination of proposals within the AONB.
Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS)	<i>"Development proposals in AONBs must be sensitive to the distinctive special character of the area and the quality of their landscape, heritage and wildlife, and be in the accordance with relevant plan policies. In assessing proposals, including cumulative impacts in such areas, account will also be taken of the Landscape Character Assessments and any other relevant guidance including AONB Management Plans and local design guides."</i>
The Outdoor Recreation Plan for the Sperrins	Outlining current provision, management and opportunities for the future development of outdoor recreation in the Sperrins, the plan links closely to the Sperrin AONB Management Plan.
The Northern Ireland Executive Energy Strategy: Path to Net Zero Energy	Focuses on five key principles, including the growth of green economy and the replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy, focused on the development and growth of an indigenous renewable energy base.



Launch of Peatland Strategy NI 2040, September

LOCAL STRATEGIC CONTEXT

A range of local strategies and plans have a strong synergistic link with the AONB management plan. A more detailed description of each of these can be found in the research to inform Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan Report (November 2024).

Corporate Strategy 2021-2025		Local Biodiversity Action Plan
Local Development Plan 2038:		Benbradagh Masterplan
A Better Future Together: A Community Plan for Causeway Coast and Glens (2017-2030):		Causeway Outdoor Recreation Strategy and Action Plan
Tourism and Destination Management Strategy		CCGBC's Local Peace Plus Action Plan
Corporate Plan and Performance Improvement Plan 2023/2024		Green Infrastructure Plan
Local Development Plan (LDP):		Climate Change Adaption Plan
Inclusive Strategic Growth Plan		Tourism 2018-2025 A New Level of Ambition
Heritage Plan - A Vision for Our Future 2022-2027		DCSDC's Local Peace Plus Action Plan
The Sperrin Local Growth Plan		
Corporate Plan 2024-2028		Climate Change and Sustainable Development Strategy 2020 - 2030
Local Development Plan 2030		Inclusive Economy Action Plan 2024-2029
The Fermanagh Omagh 2030 Community Plan		Visitor Experience Development Plan
Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan		FODC Heritage Plan 2030 FODC Local Peace Plus Action Plan
Corporate Plan 2024-2028		Sustainability Strategy and Climate Change Action Plan
Local Development Plan (LDP) - 2030		Mid Ulster Outdoor Recreation Five Year Strategic Plan
The Mid Ulster District Council Community Plan		Mid Ulster draft Heritage Strategy
Biodiversity Action Plan		Mid Ulster District Council's Local Peace Plus Action Plan



Chapter 4

AONB Management and Action Plan Consultation

This chapter provides an overview of the AONB consultation exercise carried out by independent consultant, S3 Solutions between February and November 2024 to inform development of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan. The consultation process gathered feedback from a wide range of stakeholders and that feedback is reflected throughout this chapter. Further analysis can be found in the full Consultation Findings Report which can be accessed in the Sperrins Partnership Project's website or by scanning the QR code below.



4.1 Research Methodology

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach to data collection which was delivered across three phases.

PHASE A

Desk review of national and local strategies, policies and plans; existing and proposed industrial activity; existing natural and built heritage assets; and a commissioned consultant report detailing the draft aims, visions and objectives for a Sperrin AONB management plan, as identified at the Sperrin AONB Officer Workshop (7 February 2024).

S3 Solutions attended the Civic Initiative x North West Community Network workshop (23 February 2024). S3 Solutions attended to gather thoughts on these topics, network with key stakeholders, and to raise awareness of the forthcoming consultation process for a Sperrin AONB management plan.

PHASE B

1 x online focus group with the Sperrins Partnership Board and 4 x individual focus groups with elected members and council officials (1 per council).

1 x web-based survey targeting government departments, cross-border agencies and landscape Partnerships. A total of 32 responses were gathered from a total of 19 departments and organisations.

PHASE C

8 in-person public consultations; 2 per council area. The total unique number of participants in public consultations was 125.

This included 3 representatives of political parties, 24 independent farmers/landowners and representatives of 31 community and voluntary sector organisations.

Consultation locations are listed:

- **Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council: Glenshane Community Development**
- **Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council: Glór Dhún Geimhin.**
- **Derry City and Strabane District Council: Glenelly House**
- **Derry City and Strabane District Council: Learmount Resource Centre**
- **Fermanagh and Omagh District Council: An Creagán**
- **Fermanagh and Omagh District Council: Gortin Community Centre**
- **Mid Ulster District Council: Broughderg Hall**
- **Mid Ulster District Council: An Carn**

2 x additional public consultations focusing on the farming community. The total number of unique participants in public farming consultations was 8. Consultations occurred in the Oak Leaf Restaurant (Maghera) and the Glenpark Estate (Omagh).

6 x focus groups and interviews with representatives of community and voluntary sector organisations. A total of 26 individuals representing 20 organisations participated in these consultations.

3 x 1-1 consultations with subject matter experts (1 attendee per consultation).

1 x web-based survey targeting the general public. 290 respondents progressed past the first question.

1 x web-based survey targeting community and voluntary sector organisations. 37 respondents progressed past the first question.

1 x web-based survey targeting local businesses. 11 respondents progressed past the first question.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using both thematic and narrative approaches. Categories were developed, coded, and reduced. Survey data, researcher observations and thematic data from consultations were cross referenced to identify emergent themes and issues and to explore the relationships between issues.

Participant sampling and data collection continued until no new conceptual insights were generated and the researcher felt they had gathered repeated evidence for the analysis, thus reaching theoretical saturation.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

Efforts were made to enhance the reliability and validity of findings through multiple methods of consultation. However, the following limitations were noted:

- With regards to the surveys, errors due to question non-response may exist. The lack of responses to certain questions could lead to incomplete data, potentially affecting the representativeness of the findings and introducing response-bias into the results.
- With regards to in-person and virtual consultations, participants discussed matters relating to Sperrin AONB in group settings. Therefore, data collected may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is the tendency for people to respond to research questions in a manner which they believe is socially acceptable or desirable, rather than providing truthful /accurate information. This bias can distort research findings.
- Efforts were made to identify consultation locations which strategically maximised accessibility and would attract a broad cross-section of the population. Public

consultations were split between afternoon and evening sessions to promote accessibility.

However, it is acknowledged that the geographic and logistical constraints inherent in such a large area make it challenging to identify locations that were equally convenient for all community members. Resultingly, it is possible that there may be segments of the Sperrins population whose views are underrepresented in the findings.

- Limited responses to the business survey raises the risk of biased conclusions and limits the generalisability of findings to all private businesses within Sperrin AONB. Further, there were no responses provided by businesses within the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area.
- Limited participation from young people through both public consultation and the public survey restricts the representation of younger demographics in the community's views on the management of the AONB. A survey for secondary-school aged young people was drafted and shared but did not garner response. Consequently, the findings may be biased towards the perspectives of older members of the community, potentially overlooking issues and preferences that are particularly important to younger individuals.

CONSULTATION FINDINGS

A summary of the AONB Management Plan Consultation Findings is presented below. A detailed analysis can be found in the Consultation Findings Report - *Research to Inform Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (November 2024)*. The report can be accessed on the Sperrins Partnership Project's website or by scanning the QR code below.



4.3 A Vision for Sperrin AONB

Following the analysis and incorporation of feedback on draft versions of the vision, the following statement emerged as the recommended vision statement for Sperrin AONB. The researcher acknowledged contrary feedback, with research participants favouring a short and concise vision statement whilst also noting the need to include a wide range of information.

“Community-driven and renowned for its natural beauty and rich heritage, environmental protection and cultural significance are centralised to ensure long-term preservation and to support communities and visitors to discover the ancient heart of Ulster.”

The rationale for the construction of this revised vision statement is outlined below:

- Environmental protection is centralised, and the terms ‘protection’ and ‘preservation’ have been inserted in line with research participant feedback. Terms which participants felt to be less tangible and open to misinterpretation have been removed.
- The heritage and cultural significance of Sperrin AONB has been emphasised in line with research participant feedback.
- Communities have been placed at the heart of the vision, acknowledging the importance of their role, ensuring their needs are central to the AONB’s future. Reference to long-term preservation has been included in line with feedback noting a need for to emphasis intentions for long-term management and protection.

- Long-term preservation of the AONB has been referenced in line with feedback that emphasis should be placed on long-term management and protection. The inclusion of the ‘Heart of Ulster’ has remained as this phrase was received positively and participants were supportive of a geographic identifier; the addition of the term ‘ancient’ speaks further to the heritage and rich history of Sperrin AONB.
- The length of the statement has been reduced whilst maintaining its focus on communities, the environment and heritage. The constructed vision statement is shorter than four of the seven other AONBs in Northern Ireland.



4.4 A Mission for Sperrin AONB

Following a similar process, feedback from draft mission statements was analysed to support the construction of a recommended mission statement for Sperrin AONB. Paralleling feedback on the vision statement, the researcher acknowledged contrary feedback with research participants favouring a concise mission statement whilst also noting the need to include a range of information.

“Through community engagement and collaborative partnership, protect and enhance the Sperrins’ distinctive environment, natural beauty, and unique heritage; fostering a community-informed balance between the needs of residents, visitors, and local economic sustainability.”

The rationale for the construction of this revised mission statement is outlined below:

- The mission statement has been shortened in line with research participant feedback and descriptive terminology has been used to avoid ambiguity.
- Reference to environmental protection and the preservation of the natural beauty of Sperrin AONB has been strengthened through the use of the terms ‘protect’ and ‘enhance.’ This speaks directly to research participant feedback and removes ambiguity of terminology.
- Synergising with amendments to the vision statement, the Sperrin AONB community features prominently in the mission statement. Local communities are referenced from the outset; their role in the future of the area’s management is recognised and the importance of addressing their needs is underlined.

- The reference to balance in the mission statement remains in line with research participant acknowledgment of the wide range of opportunities and challenges present in Sperrin AONB; the suggested use of economic sustainability has been adopted to provide clarity of intention.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Research participants favoured the inclusion of precise terminology definitions to support understanding of the vision and mission statement, provide clarity of intention and avoid misinterpretation.



4.5 Recommended Themes

A wide range of feedback was collected on the potential thematic focus areas of the Sperrin AONB Management Plan. Analysis of Phase C data revealed nine potential themes, several of which covered topics which synergised and intersected. The sub-sections below identify the recommended themes for the AONB Management Plan which emerged from the initial consultation exercise. Reference is included as to the rationale for their selection and the opportunities and concerns identified during the consultation. A more detailed analysis on each theme is available in the Consultation Findings Report - Research to Inform Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (November 2024).

RECOMMENDED THEME:

ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE

Stakeholders from both Phase B and Phase C of the research process were unanimous in their support for a theme focused on the protection, conservation and enhancement of the Sperrin AONB environment and habitat. As stakeholders from the research process displayed strong support for these elements, it was recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to a theme of Environment and Wildlife and progress towards the development of associated action areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE

- The *biodiversity of the Sperrins* was seen as an important element of the AONB's environment. Specific reference was made to peatlands, waterways, wildlife, and fauna which it was felt makes Sperrin AONB "different from others."
- Participants were in favour of the protection of the AONB environment and landscape but felt the management plan should go further to *safeguard, restore and enhance the environment*.

- Farmers displayed openness and support for *positive environmental actions through farming*. It was felt that "farmers are a major part of the solution to climate change," with note that farmers can play a central role in facilitating biodiversity development.
- Community and voluntary sector participants viewed *renewable energy interventions* favourably, with reference to environmental and economic benefits. Whilst the efficiency of wind power was questioned, solar and hydro energy were seen as opportunities.

CONCERNS FOR ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE

- At a local level, concerns related to *littering* and the threat of flooding due to global warming.
- A lack of *environmental education* in the communities of the AONB was widely referenced. Participants felt this gap creates a "lack of respect," for the environment and threatened commitment to future conservation efforts as buy-in is not secured from a young age.
- Farming participants and representatives highlighted a lack of *clarity around environmental schemes*, including reference to the Environmental Farming Scheme. There was widespread criticism of the scheme, with participants noting the complexity of regulations and that instructions underpinning such schemes are only available in digital format which compounds difficulties for those with low levels of digital literacy or a lack of access to digital resources.
- Farming participants and representatives referenced a *lack of long-term planning in farming policy*, with measures implemented in one period reversed in the next and reintroduced again at a later stage.
- They also referenced a lack of consultation from the governmental level with the farming community and noted that "the issue with these schemes is they just role them out on the same basis as the last with no communication."

- Significant concern regarding the potential for 'industrial development' was displayed, with reference made to both the potential environmental and landscape impacts.
- There was strong objection to the introduction of gold mining in the Sperrins, with reference made to the potential for 'industrial developments' to damage the environment and to "destroy the elements [of the area] which bring in tourists."
- Furthermore, there was also strong objection to the creation of wind farms, with reference made to negative environmental implications with regard carbon release and landscape deterioration. Instances of intimidation and threatening behaviour made towards community members as a result of their opposition to 'industrialisation' was highlighted during consultation.
- Aligned with concerns about 'industrial developments' were concerns about *environmental governance* in Sperrin AONB. It was noted that currently, the designation of the Sperrins as an AONB seems to mean "very little," given the potential for 'industrialisation'.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE

A range of suggestions were provided by research participants on the actioning of a theme of Environment and Wildlife. In progressing toward the development of key action areas for the management plan, it was recommended that the Sperrins Partnership build from data collected to determine the most appropriate areas of focus for the next 5-10 years.

Environment and Wildlife	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Facilitatory Partnerships	Central to all action areas under a theme of Environment and Wildlife will be the establishment of key partnerships with environmental and wildlife specialists and organisations which are well-placed to inform and deliver specific projects and interventions. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and consult further with organisations who have participated to build relationships and establish a framework for future collaboration.
2. Baseline Mapping and Environmental Auditing	Research participants displayed strong support for the performance of environmental data collection to establish the current position of the Sperrin AONB environment. Such activity would provide greater information on the elements most in need of attention and allow for the effective allocation of resources and effort.
3. Immediate Small-Scale Opportunities	Alongside the potential for widespread environmental mapping, research participants contributed a range of suggestions for environmental projects which could be delivered in the short-term and which could build on work already ongoing. This included clean-up projects such as litter picks, peatland restoration efforts and landslide monitoring activity.
4. Education	Research participants were in favour of environmental education initiatives to promote commitment to the conservation of Sperrin AONB from a young age and ensure the community's connection to their environment. Whilst investigating the most effective and resource-appropriate initiatives, the Sperrins Partnership could seek to build on existing resources developed by the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland to deliver environmental education in the short-term.

RECOMMENDED THEME:

HERITAGE

Stakeholders from both Phase B and Phase C of the research process were unanimous in their support for a theme focused on the natural, built and cultural heritage of Sperrin AONB. As stakeholders displayed strong support for a theme of Heritage, it is recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to this thematic area and progress towards the development of associated action areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HERITAGE

- Participants highlighted the cultural heritage stemming from the history of the Irish language in Sperrin AONB. Participants valued connection to the Irish language, noting that it “tells us about the landscape and about where names come from.”
- The rich natural heritage of Sperrin AONB was highlighted, including the extensive geodiversity in the area.
- The ancient and now mystical history of the area was also felt to present opportunity, with reference to the ancient clans and Hugh O’Neill, the Irish Gaelic lord and key figure of the Irish Nine Years’ War.
- Public participants also highlighted heritage sites of interest including mass rocks; holy wells; standing stones; fairy forts; local graveyards; tombs; lime kilns; and sweathouses.

CONCERNS FOR HERITAGE

- Participants felt that there was a lack of *general awareness about the area’s history*. It was stated that we are “losing heritage,” and a note was made to a “time limit,” on local knowledge and oral history as the older generation possess most of this information and “things fade away in time.”
- The *breadth of the Sperrins* area was felt to be a challenge to preservation and promotion as it was noted there are a great many heritage opportunities which require development.
- Participants noted a *lack of physical access to heritage assets* and noted the potential threat of tourism to preservation. It was felt that heritage should be developed firstly for the community. Whilst heritage was seen as a tool for tourism, it was noted that balance is needed between “opening up sites” and the potential for “heavy footfall or vandalism.”

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR HERITAGE

Heritage	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Facilitatory Partnerships	Central to all action areas under a theme of Heritage will be the establishment of key partnerships with history and heritage specialists and organisations which are well-placed to inform and deliver specific projects and interventions. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and consult further with organisations who have participated to build relationships and establish a framework for future collaboration.
2. Centralising Information	Research participants were in favour of the creation of a heritage directory and/or map which could bring together relevant heritage information in a convenient and accessible format for local communities and visitors alike. Given the range of information currently available, this would be a consolidation project in collaboration with public sector departments and local heritage trusts.
3. Physical Accessibility	Aligning with potential action areas 1 and 2, physical accessibility could be investigated to promote access to existing heritage assets through permissive path agreements and the evaluation of current infrastructure.
4. Immediate Small-Scale Opportunities	Research participants contributed a range of suggestions for heritage projects which could be delivered in the short-term and which could build on work already ongoing. This included projects on the history of the clans in the Sperrins, linking in with the work of Mid Ulster Council on Hugh O’Neill and the Flight of the Earls; public forums and intergenerational projects to promote knowledge sharing; and projects to promote the linguistic heritage of the Sperrins.

RECOMMENDED THEME:

COMMUNITY

Stakeholders from both Phase B and Phase C of the research process were unanimous in their support for a theme focused on the communities of Sperrin AONB. As stakeholders displayed strong support for a theme of Community, it is recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to this thematic area and progress towards the development of associated action areas. The reference to health and wellbeing in this theme synergises with action areas which could equally be placed under the heading of outdoor recreation.

The positioning of this theme should be considered given the confidence deficit highlighted through the research process, to foster an inclusive and responsive approach, reinforcing dedication to addressing the community needs.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY

- Participants noted that buy-in from local people was foundational to the Sperrin AONB Management Plan and that the ongoing consultation of communities was favoured and seen as a positive step towards building trust within communities. It was felt that there is a need to focus on local empowerment through the management plan and to “build hope.”
- Participants referenced the need to support community mental health and wellbeing.
- Participants from An Creagán favoured the adoption of a ‘Participatory Budget model’, whereby the local community propose ideas for their area and come together to vote on which ones should move forward and receive funding.

CONCERNS FOR COMMUNITY

- Participants varied in their connection to a wider Sperrin AONB community with a small percentage feeling connected. It was prevalently reported that there is a lack of common identity between communities in the Sperrins.
- Participants from Gortin, Broughderg and An Carn noted dwindling population numbers. A lack of housing and economic opportunity was felt to contribute to this, and a lack of community care was seen as a barrier to older adults remaining in the community. Participants from Broughderg feared that “AONBs are a clumper,” which will continue this cycle, and it was felt that “local people suffer for someone else’s benefit.”
- There was recognition of the success of local community groups in rural areas of Sperrin AONB. However, it was highlighted that local groups are volunteer-led and the reliance on volunteers has left community members “close to burn out.”

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR COMMUNITY

Community	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Onward Engagement	Central to all action areas under a theme of Community will be the engagement of local communities and the organisations who represent them and can facilitate specific projects and interventions. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and establish a mixed-method engagement strategy based on the feedback collected.
2. Immediate Small-Scale Opportunities	Research participants contributed a range of suggestions for community projects which could be delivered in the short-term and which could build on work already ongoing by local community and voluntary sector organisations. This included projects to address health, wellbeing and isolation, celebrate local crafts, and projects to align with the themes of Environment and Heritage.
3. Outdoor Recreation	Research participants noted the importance of health and wellbeing in local communities and also contributed a range of supporting suggestions which align with outdoor recreation. This includes ensuring the maintenance and upkeep of existing spaces and advertising their availability. This aligns with the potential physical accessibility action area under the theme of Heritage.

RECOMMENDED THEME:

VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION PROMOTION

Stakeholders from both Phase B and Phase C of the research process were supportive of a theme focused on the tourism potential of Sperrin AONB.

As stakeholders from Phase B and Phase C of the research process displayed support for a theme of Tourism, it is recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to this thematic area and progress towards the development of associated action areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION PROMOTION

- Participants were supportive of the development of tourism in Sperrin AONB. There was widespread agreement about the potential to create a Sperrin AONB brand to promote the area as it was felt that “people don’t know about the area,” and that is not “easy to know where to go or what to visit.”
- Participants highlighted the importance of centring local communities in the development of tourism in Sperrin AONB. Participants in Gortin favoured a “community ownership model,” to ensure benefits for the local community whilst participants in An Carn highlighted that if local people have “pride and knowledge, they’ll naturally develop tourism.” The need to support local communities to develop tourism opportunities was seen as central to the development of this industry.
- The potential for a collective approach to tourism and the environment was highlighted. It was suggested that performing an audit of what is currently available would be beneficial in supporting the Sperrins to produce a collective eco-tourism approach.

CONCERNS FOR VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION PROMOTION

- Participants viewed accessibility and infrastructure as major barriers to the development of tourism in Sperrin AONB. The lack of public transport in these communities was seen as a central issue, impacting community functionality and also reducing tourism potential.
- In terms of accessibility, participants recognised the concerns of farmers and landowners around liability for tourists on their land. It was noted that tourism should not come at a cost for farming livelihoods. However, participants noted that effective management, permissive path agreements to remove liability, and a focus on economic benefits and diversification opportunities could promote support among the farming community.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION PROMOTION

Visitor Experience and Destination Promotion	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Facilitatory Partnerships	Central to all action areas under a theme of Visitor Experience and Destination Promotion will be the establishment of key partnerships with industry experts and organisations which are already delivering or are primed to deliver tourist offerings. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and consult further with organisations who have participated to build relationships and establish a framework for future collaboration.
2. Sperrin AONB Brand	Research participants were strongly in favour of developing a Sperrin AONB brand to be used in the promotion of the area. Suggestions included learning from successes in other areas such as the ‘Wild Atlantic Way;’ and linking in with existing brands to increase access to resources for promotion; and drawing on the AONB’s unique landscape and history.
3. Tourism Information and Signage	There are a range of tourism opportunities already present in Sperrin AONB which research participants feel are not well advertised. The installation and maintenance of signage throughout the AONB to direct visitors toward existing attractions and the development of a central hub of tourism information could support this theme in the short-term.
4. Physical Accessibility	Aligning with the potential action areas of physical accessibility under the Heritage theme and outdoor recreation under the Community theme, physical accessibility could be investigated to promote access to existing tourism opportunities through permissive path agreements and the evaluation of current infrastructure.

RECOMMENDED THEME:

FARMING AND AGRICULTURE

The topic of farming and agriculture featured more prominently in Phase C of the research process than in Phase B. Given that much of the land in Sperrin AONB is privately owned, research participants recognised the need to ensure buy-in from local farmers and landowners to support the successful achievement of actions under a range of potential thematic headings.

In line with the focus on farming and agriculture in Phase C of the research process, and the acknowledgement of the importance of this community by the Sperrins Partnership, it is recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to this thematic area and progress towards the development of associated action areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FARMING AND AGRICULTURE

Discussion relating to opportunities for farming and agriculture primarily included reference to the potential for diversification opportunities, supported by instructional advice and funding opportunities. Diversification opportunities centred on environmental projects and tourism opportunities stemming from farmers' access to land and disused buildings.

CONCERNS FOR FARMING AND AGRICULTURE

Participants noted that farmers experience a range of difficulties in participating in schemes aimed at improving the environment and note a lack of consultation in the development of these schemes. Participants highlighted issues with the Basic Payment Scheme which requires farmers to comply with greening measures to qualify for 30% of their payment.²³ Participants noted that as costs of farming rise and the profits from agriculture decrease for individual farms, “upland farms couldn’t survive without [this] payment,” and “are totally dependent on it.” Some participant farmers viewed Governmental schemes as a “tool for enforcement,” and a way to collect financial resources due to the high cost of fines attached. Due to the combined impact of the dropping profitability of agriculture produce and livestock and the administrative burden of participating in farming schemes, farming participants highlighted that people are moving away from agriculture and that the sustainability of the small-scale agricultural industry in the Sperrins is under threat.

Participants noted that the reduction in social opportunities for farmers has created a growing social isolation problem. Farming is a time intensive career, and it was noted that the decrease in the number of local marts and agricultural shows has reduced opportunities for farmers to socialise. Other challenges cited by farming participants included the challenges of climate change for the land; concerns about tourism; and a lack of awareness among the general public about farming and “less appreciation for farmers.”



SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR FARMING AND AGRICULTURE

Farming and Agriculture	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Facilitatory Partnerships	Central to all action areas under a theme of Farming and Agriculture will be the establishment of key partnerships with local farmers, representatives and landowners. These relationships will underpin a range of potential actions under the themes of Environment and Wildlife, Heritage, Community, and Visitor Experience and Destination Promotion. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and consult further with individuals and organisations who have participated to establish a framework for future collaboration and discuss issues such as land accessibility and environmental needs.
2. Environmental Farming Policy	Given the focus on environment and wildlife within this management plan, and the issues highlighted during consultation with existing environmental schemes, the Sperrins Partnership could consider providing localised education workshops to clarify policy and regulations to support farmers to maximise current and future opportunities.
3. Farming Diversification	Research participants identified that farmers and landowners are well placed to support environmental and tourism projects. The Sperrins Partnership could consider centralising the farming community in these discussions, offering opportunities for early engagement.

RECOMMENDED THEME:

GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

Stakeholders from both Phase B and Phase C of the research process recognised the need for structured governance and management for Sperrin AONB and were supportive of facilitatory partnerships with the community and relevant stakeholders.

Given the confidence deficit evident and the need for this management plan to lay the foundation for future development and to establish mechanisms for the onward management of the AONB, it is recommended that the Sperrins Partnership commit to a theme of Governance, Management and Partnerships and progress towards the development of associated action areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

In consultation, there was a general consensus that the Sperrins Partnership have an opportunity as a relatively new management body to build trust from a neutral position rather than from a negative one. Participants were supportive of continual engagement with communities and for the appointment of community members to the Sperrins Partnership Board.

CONCERNS FOR GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

Participants felt that living in Sperrin AONB was less beneficial than others as the AONB is split across four council areas, creating “an abject idea of the Sperrins,” and noting that it is “difficult to get councils to work together.” There was a prevailing tone of frustration with sentiment that there is a lack of investment in rural areas, both financially and in terms of strategic consideration.

The potential for industrialisation was also raised in relation to Governance, Management and Partnerships. Participants repeatedly raised concerns about potential impacts for the environment and resulting for health and wellbeing. Participants felt that the voices of the communities of Sperrin AONB are not heard on these matters, whilst others felt they are deliberately ignored. Participants noted a distrust of the environmental governance processes in Northern Ireland, referencing concerns about a lack of independence in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) which sits within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). Alongside concerns about environmental governance, frustration with the governance of farming was also highlighted. Throughout consultation, there was strong sentiment that the lack of statutory power assigned to management plans limits their functionality.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

A range of suggestions were provided by research participants on the actioning of a theme of Governance, Management and Partnerships.

Governance, Management and Partnerships	
Suggested Action	Description
1. Facilitatory Partnerships	<p>As evidenced in the above sub-sections on recommended themes, the establishment of key partnerships will underpin the actions crafted for the Sperrin AONB Management Plan and be central to their success. Such actions outlined in previous themes could be transferred under this theme if preferred. The Sperrins Partnership should seek to utilise traction gained through this research process and consult further with individuals and organisations who have participated to establish a framework for future collaboration. Specific suggestions include:</p> <p>a. Composition of the Sperrins Partnership Board: The Sperrins Partnership could seek to create dedicated thematic sub-groups and to recruit thematic experts to support the crafting and delivery of action areas. This includes the recruitment of community ambassadors.</p> <p>b. Dedicated Personnel: To support existing personnel in the future management of Sperrin AONB, the potential to create further staff roles exists. Research participants advocated for a Sperrin AONB ranger to assume responsibility for Environment and Wildlife. Additionally, the existing presence of a Sperrins Outdoor Activity Development Officer presents a range of opportunities given the support and funding already secured for this role.</p> <p>c. Focus on Young People: A survey for secondary school-aged children was developed for this research process but did not attract response, potentially stemming from the late spring/early summer enactment of the consultation process. Public consultations attracted few youth participants and just 15.8% of responses to the public survey were from individuals aged under 35, and just 8.9% of responses were from individuals aged under 25. Given the recognition in both Phases B and C of the consultation process of the need to ensure buy-in from younger generations, the Sperrins Partnership could consider specific mechanisms for consulting this age group.</p>
2. Lobbying Potential	<p>The consultation to inform the management plan elicited a wealth of diverse and multifaceted feedback from stakeholders, not all of which is directly actionable by the management plan. This underlines the importance of information sharing and partnership working in both the future management of Sperrin AONB and in measures to support its community. Synergising with actions in management plans for other AONBs, the Sperrins Partnership could consider sharing the results of this research process with relevant government departments and act as a lobbying force on behalf of the views of the Sperrin AONB community in future.</p>

Chapter 5

Management Plan Aims and Objectives

The management plan themes identified throughout the AONB consultation provided a framework for further discussion and the development of a robust set of actions for inclusion within the first Sperrin AONB action plan. Each action has been informed by extensive engagement with working group members and key stakeholders, including delivery partners.

The comprehensive action plan will facilitate a holistic approach to landscape management within the Sperrins, ensuring that local communities have a key role to play at both a planning and implementation stage.

In order to appropriately reflect each of the themes and ensure an AONB Management and Action Plan that is both deliverable and accountable,

these themes have been incorporated into a series of six key aims with fifteen accompanying objectives. As well as the thematic areas identified throughout the consultation, these themes also reflect the approach adopted by other AONB management plans in Northern Ireland.

The table below provides an overview of the AONB management plan aims and objectives. This chapter will explore each of these aims in greater detail, highlighting the thematic fit, the accompanying actions and potential synergistic opportunities as well as potential threats.

Within the accompanying action plan, delivery partners have been identified. A collaborative approach will ensure effective and efficient action plan delivery, with no duplication.



Aim	Objective
1. Conserve and protect the natural heritage of sperrin aonb	1.1 Support the conservation of priority habitats and species within the AONB
	1.2 Promote sustainable land management and conservation within the AONB
2. Protect, enhance and promote the historic environment within Sperrin AONB	2.1 Value, protect and enhance built heritage within the AONB.
	2.2 Champion and promote the cultural heritage of Sperrin AONB
3. Protect and conserve the landscape character of Sperrin AONB for future generations	3.1 Monitor landscape character changes within the AONB
	3.2 Promote traditional heritage skills
4. Encourage sustainable use and access of Sperrin AONB which promotes the wellbeing and resilience of local communities	4.1 Support initiatives that enhance the health and wellbeing of communities within the AONB.
	4.2 Encourage greater access to outdoor recreation opportunities within the AONB
	4.3 Promote sustainable tourism within the AONB
	4.4 Encourage responsible use of the AONB
5. Raise awareness of the AONB and promote appreciation and pride in its landscape, and natural and historic environment.	5.1 Raise awareness of the AONB among local communities.
	5.2 Raise awareness of the AONB among stakeholders & the wider public
6. Adopt a collaborative and partnership approach to AONB management	6.1 Pursue a governance structure that promotes inclusivity and best practice.
	6.2 Promote a collaborative and coordinated approach to landscape management

**The Aims and Objectives are listed in no particular order and therefore are afforded the same weight and value*

AIM 1: CONSERVE AND PROTECT THE NATURAL HERITAGE OF SPERRIN AONB

The first aim of the AONB Action Plan ‘Conserve and Protect the Natural Heritage of Sperrin AONB’ aligns closely with the thematic focus areas Environment and Farming and Agriculture. As expected, both themes emerged strongly throughout the consultation process and the subsequent action planning working groups. This aim includes two objectives which encompass a diverse range of actions.

The first objective “Support the conservation of priority habitats and species within the AONB” incorporates a total of sixteen actions, many of which are interlinked. The first two actions for example relate to watercourse protection, and include both an education, training and awareness raising element as well as practical measures to implement improvements. The importance of watercourse protection was identified consistently at all stages of the consultation and action planning workshops. Many participants referenced the success of previous projects such as ‘Source to Tap’ and ‘Catchment Care’ as well as the ongoing work of the Ballinderry Rivers Trust. The Sustainable Catchment Programme was identified as an opportunity to improve watercourse protection throughout the AONB. The recent extension of the programme to the Owenkillew catchment is a welcome development that will assist conservation efforts within the AONB. The Sperrins Partnership will lobby for the extension of the Sustainable Catchment Programme to other catchments within the area. The identification of the Roe catchment for example, as a priority Local Management Area (LMA) in the previous river basin planning cycle provides rationale for its inclusion in the next extension of the programme.

A common feature in each of these schemes has been the presence of engagement staff on the ground, assisting with the development of farm management plans or the identification of potential measures for capital support. A number of farmers throughout the consultation highlighted that such

plans were developed in collaboration with themselves and that this co-design model is one that should be replicated in future schemes. Several farmers also specified that having non-regulatory project advisors with an understanding and awareness of agricultural issues was particularly useful.

As well as advocating for the expansion of the Sustainable Catchment Programme to other catchment areas within the AONB, the Sperrins Partnership will also explore funding options to replicate the programme, albeit on a smaller scale initially, given the level of resources required. The Partnership will also work with other delivery partners including the Rivers Trust, Loughs Agency and NI Water to complement their own projects in the locality. The Partnership will also map existing educational workshops and training, to ensure no duplication and sufficient geographic spread throughout the entirety of the AONB. Suggested workshops and training at a consultation and action planning stage included nutrient and fertiliser management, runoff control, buffer zones and riparian management, and chemical use, to name a few, however these will be responsive to local need.

Improvements and protection of water quality will have a direct impact on a number of additional actions within the plan, particularly habitat recovery, management of invasive species and the conservation of priority species.

Several rivers within the AONB have been designated due to the presence of NI Priority Species, however this presence and their continued survival is dependent on the adequate ecological status of the water. The Owenkillew River for example, has been designated as an Special Area of Conservation due to the presence of Atlantic salmon, freshwater pearl mussel, otter and brook lamprey. In fact, it contains Northern Ireland’s largest known population of freshwater pearl mussel, one of the most threatened freshwater bivalve species in the world.⁵¹ These species only survive in the cleanest waters and are therefore biological indicators of excellent water

quality. Incidents of pollution and increased nutrient and sediment levels pose a major risk to water habitats within the AONB, the ecosystem services they provide and the range of species they support.



Salmon Leaping

⁵¹Machordom et al. 2003; Geist 2010

Infrequent monitoring of all protected sites as well as a low proportion of designated areas throughout Northern Ireland as a whole, were identified as major concerns among many participants. The importance of designation is reflected in the recent Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) review that states “A key aspect of protecting and enhancing Northern Ireland’s habitats and species is the designation of important areas for nature. DAERA is under a duty to designate ASSIs once it has formed the opinion that the land is of special scientific interest and to designate SACs where the relevant criteria are met. Designation is important for meeting domestic and international commitments such as 30 by 30.

Regular reviews are needed to ensure that the protected site network remains fit for purpose.”⁵² This requirement is recognised in the Northern Ireland Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) which states “further work is required to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, achieve favourable conservation status for Northern Ireland’s priority habitats and species and to deliver resilient, functioning ecosystems capable of providing nature-based solutions to climate change. The protected site network of SACs, SPAs and ASSIs covers 8.9% of Northern Ireland. Much of our priority habitats and species occur outside protected areas.” The EIP provides a framework for nature recovery, outlining six strategic environmental outcomes that will contribute to a resilient and fully functioning natural environment.

Through the EIP, the NI Executive have committed to the target of having at least 30% of Northern Ireland effectively managed for nature by 2030, however NIEA has not yet created the framework for 30x30 and to date there has not been any engagement held with stakeholders on this framework.⁵³ The Sperrins Partnership will support efforts to identify potential sites within the AONB for inclusion within 30 x 30, liaising and consulting with stakeholders where appropriate. This action is closely linked to other actions within the plan, which aim to halt and reverse

biodiversity decline in the Sperrins. Throughout the consultation, participants highlighted the need to produce an up-to-date report on priority species and species of interest within the AONB, outlining their current status and providing a baseline for future monitoring. The Sperrins Partnership recognise that this is an ambitious but critical task, given the 2023 State of Nature Report that found “of 2,508 species in Northern Ireland that have been assessed using IUCN Regional Red List criteria, 12% have been classified as threatened with extinction from Ireland as a whole.”⁵⁴ The need for such an action is given further urgency given the increasingly prominent impact of climate change. Current trends predict milder, wetter winters and increased instances of storms and flooding, thereby increasing the possibility of biodiversity loss, if mitigations are not put in place. The action will also complement the current work being undertaken at a regional level by the NI Species Recovery Partnership.

While priority species conservation in general was referenced throughout the consultation process, four species were consistently identified as a local priority for communities and stakeholders within Sperrin AONB, these included the freshwater pearl mussel and Atlantic salmon along with the Marsh Fritillary and Curlew. Initial efforts in terms of practical conservation measures will therefore prioritise these four species. Measures will include predator control, the removal of invasive species and habitat recovery actions. Community engagement will also form an integral part of this process as local monitoring and recording will be key.



Freshwater Pearl Mussel

⁵²Office of Environmental Protection - Review of implementation of laws for terrestrial and freshwater protected sites in Northern Ireland

⁵³Landscapes NI, (October 2025), Manifesto Position Paper, The Role of Designated and Iconic Landscapes in Nature Recovery and Delivering on the UK 30x30 Biodiversity Commitment.

⁵⁴State of Nature Partnership (2023), State of Nature NI. Available - TP26055-SoN-NI_Ireland-summary-report-v4-1.pdf

A recent Ornithological Gap Analysis for Sperrin AONB, carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology for example concluded that data gaps could be addressed through the promotion of recording and upskilling of local residents in bird identification⁵⁵The same report also noted the decline of key breeding waders including Curlew within the AONB. This is also reflected in RSPB research which found that regionally, Curlew have declined by 82% between 1987 and 2013, from an estimated 5,000 to an estimated 526 pairs, although RSPB now suspect this may now be as low as 150 pairs today.

Curlew have also undergone a significant decline in breeding distribution. The population are now largely confined to two main core areas – the wet grasslands and islands of Lough Erne and the uplands of the Antrim Plateau – which together hold an estimated two-thirds of the NI population. Smaller numbers of pairs are present elsewhere but in most cases are under recorded, including within the Sperrin AONB. In 2015, the Eurasian Curlew was described as the UK’s most pressing avian conservation priority.

Curlew serve as a strong indicator of healthy, thriving, nature friendly landscapes. Managing land for the benefit of curlew will also have wider benefits for other priority species. For example, Marsh Fritillaries are currently present on curlew sites at Lough Erne and Glenullin, where direct management is targeted for Curlew.

Management for Curlew can have positive impacts on water quality as intact peatland and undrained wet grassland sites slow the release of water, filtering before entry to freshwater systems. In addition to this, management for Curlew benefits from little or no fertiliser input. This subsequently will benefit salmonoid species such as Atlantic salmon, who are a host species at a key stage in the life cycle for freshwater pearl mussel.⁵⁶The above indicates the holistic nature of landscape management, and as such the connected nature of this AONB management and action plan, with many action areas

directly correlating with the other. Monitoring and subsequent suitable management of peatland emerged as one of the most persistent elements of feedback during the consultation process, reflecting the local significance of these important habitats. Participants emphasised the need to monitor the AONB accurately, measuring peat depth and condition. Throughout the action planning process, participants also emphasised the need to carry out radon sampling on peatland soils within the AONB, the rationale being the high levels identified in the UK Radon Atlas.⁵⁷ Recent data published by the James Huton Institute in conjunction with Ulster Wildlife, provides overarching peatland maps for the whole of Northern Ireland. These maps will be used to influence policy direction and funding, however it has been recognised that the information should be supplemented by local data to provide a more accurate and informed picture of peatlands within the AONB.



Curlew

The AONB action plan therefore includes an action to survey the AONB, providing a baseline for restoration projects. Again, given the vast size of the AONB, this will be an incredibly difficult task, not least as the majority of peatland occurs on private land and therefore will be reliant on landowner permission. When published, the recent LiDAR surveys commissioned by DAERA as part of the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme will provide another useful tool in identifying priority areas. The Sperrins Partnership will work in collaboration with delivery partners such as Ulster Wildlife, RSPB, NI Water, UFU and crucially landowners, to identify priority areas for surveying and subsequently to support restoration efforts. The recent launch of Northern Ireland’s first ever Peatland Strategy marks a major milestone in recognising the importance of peatland habitats and prioritising restoration efforts. Healthy peatland habitats provide a multifaceted range of benefits, supporting a range of priority species, contributing to clean water and sequestering carbon. They therefore have an integral role to play if Northern Ireland is to meet the net zero targets, set out in the **Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022**.



Peatland Restoration

⁵⁵Clements and Haddad, (May 2025), Ornithological

Gap Analysis for Sperrin AONB, (May 2025)

⁵⁶RSPB

⁵⁷UK Radon Atlas

Throughout the consultation process, the work undertaken by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at the Glenwherry Hill Farm was identified as an example of good practice, particularly among the farming community. It has demonstrated how “effective grazing management of the land with cattle and sheep, predator control, and habitat management has led to significant increases in the number of hares, farmland birds, in particular breeding waders and grouse.”⁵⁸ Previous work at Glenwherry also provides evidence for when, if and how innovative tools such as flux towers should be adopted to assist restoration work. At a UK wide level, the IUCN UK Peatland Programme also provides strong science backed advice on effective approach and practice.

At a local level the ongoing work by Ulster Wildlife at An Creagán was also cited during consultation as another example of good practice. Practical work together with their educational, community and volunteer workshops could be replicated in other areas of the AONB, for example Glenshane Forest, depending on funding, resource allocation and landowner agreement. Altnheglish Dam provides another priority project within the area, given the recently commissioned NI Water Management Plan.

The need for forest to bog projects was highlighted regularly at all stages of the consultation, with participants stressing the need to reduce levels of non-native, ecologically poor trees such as Sitka Spruce within the AONB. Conversely, participants strongly favoured an increase of native tree coverage. As highlighted previously in the plan instances of native woodlands in the AONB are quite sporadic, with many isolated patches acting as watercourse buffer zones. Banagher Glen SAC is a regionally significant example of native woodland, that should therefore be protected as a matter of priority. The Sperrins Partnership will support efforts to conserve and increase native woodland within the AONB, working in conjunction with partners including Forest

Service, local councils, the Woodland Trust, Ulster Wildlife and the Conservation Volunteers to bolster their efforts. The Partnership will also promote statutory schemes and other initiatives for landowners and local communities. Northern Ireland Electricity Networks for example are currently funding the Conservation Volunteers to offer free trees, advice and planting support to schools and communities across Northern Ireland. While the current Sperrins Forest Plan is in place up to 2030, the Sperrins Partnership will also advocate for the inclusion of increased native woodland coverage and peatland restoration as commitments within the next edition of the plan.

This collaborative approach will be integral to achieving each of the aims within the entire AONB Action plan. The establishment of a Sperrins wildfire group, for example cannot succeed without the adoption of a partnership approach.

The recently launched “Wildfires in Northern Ireland Strategic Framework 2025 – 2030” provides strategic objectives for such a group, however local solutions, co-developed by local landowners will be key to the success of any plan within Sperrin AONB.

Upland management of the Sperrins comes with many challenges, given the difficult terrain and remote access. Land abandonment has become an increasing problem in recent years, an issue closely linked to these challenges as well as wider problems within the farming sector such as succession planning. Land abandonment directly increases the Wildfire risk within the AONB, given the lack of grazing and therefore heather control. “In the absence of appropriate vegetation management, risks associated with wildfires may increase mainly because elevated fuel loads enhance the likelihood of fire events occurring and their degree of severity and impact on upland ecosystems.”⁵⁹



Wildfire in Northern Ireland Strategic Framework 2025 - 2030

⁵⁸ DAERA, Hill Farm Centre | Glenwherry | Antrim Hills | Sheep - CAFRE

⁵⁹ McAdams, (April 2024), Changes in Upland Biodiversity resulting from Agriculture in NI - A literature Review for the Office for Environmental Protection

Management of upland areas was identified throughout the consultation process for inclusion within the action plan, with measures such as fencing and innovative solutions such as GPS collars all suggested for consideration. As well as increasing wildfire resilience, addressing land abandonment and supporting the reintroduction of appropriate levels of grazing will also support biodiversity recovery in these upland areas.

The Sperrins Partnership will continue to engage closely with local landowners, farmers, and the wider community throughout implementation of the action plan.

A range of workshops, training and events will be offered throughout the Sperrins, complementing other provision both at a community and statutory level.

The Sperrins Partnership will also promote the work of other organisations for example, the Big Butterfly Count and the All-Island Pollinator Strategy.

The second objective within the first aim is to “Promote Sustainable Land Management and Conservation within the AONB”. It contains four actions, again all very much interlinked. The first action will promote sustainable agricultural practice and biodiversity through an annual programme of workshops and training. The Sperrins Partnership will map existing provision by other organisations and fill any identified gaps. Feedback from the consultation process for example highlighted the need for face to face training and workshops at a local level. Many farmers referenced the recent Soil Nutrient Health Scheme training, and the requirement to complete it either online or in very large groups, therefore impacting their clarity and understanding of the scheme. Given the regional roll out of the programme and the resources available this was the most practical approach to delivery. However, this highlights an opportunity for local landscape management bodies to support existing provision.

Several farming participants for example, referenced the need for follow up workshops at a local level that provided an opportunity for questions and answers.

While the upcoming Farming with Nature programme is still under development, the Sperrins Partnership will encourage participation in Agri Environment Schemes through the AONB Action Plan. The establishment of thematic groups within the Agri Environment Scheme provides an opportunity for farmers in the Sperrins to identify training and other opportunities that meet their local needs.

The need for such groups is something that emerged particularly strong throughout the consultation and working group sessions and as such has been included as a specific action. Farmers felt that regional policies and programmes did not accurately reflect or take account of the needs of hill farmers, such as those within the Sperrins. Many referenced the lack of a dedicated sheep scheme within the current Agri-Environment Scheme, and several participants referenced the cessation of the Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme, which provided payment to farmers in Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDA) as compensation for the additional costs related to farming their land.

The Sperrins Farming Group will provide an opportunity for farmers in the area to come together and engage collectively with relevant stakeholders.

This will also help to facilitate another action under the objective, i.e. the farm diversification visits. Trips will be held to other farms within the AONB, throughout Northern Ireland and cross border, serving as an educational opportunity for farmers to learn from one another. These best practice visits may include the promotion of different farming techniques for example, or opportunities to diversify the farm business be it through the development of social farms, or private enterprises. The Sperrins Partnership will work closely with the group and relevant stakeholders including UFU, the National Sheep Association, Rural Support, NIAPA, and CAFRE.

The Partnership will also continue to engage with local farming groups, attending meetings, local shows and marts. The presence of sufficient staff on the ground will be a key contributory factor to the success of these actions, and indeed the success of the overall plan.



Sperrins Partnership at Balmoral Show 2025

AIM 2: PROTECT, ENHANCE AND PROMOTE THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT WITHIN SPERRIN AONB

The second aim of the management plan ‘Protect, Enhance and Promote the Historic Environment within Sperrin AONB’ relates to the conservation of cultural and built heritage within the AONB. As highlighted in the previous chapter heritage emerged as a consistent theme from the outset and throughout the consultation process.

The second chapter explored the rich and diverse historic environment within Sperrin AONB. The range of actions included under this aim therefore have been identified to promote this historic environment and to ensure that it is preserved for future generations.

Specific actions under the first objective ‘Value, protect and enhance built heritage within the AONB’ include the establishment of a heritage working group, an audit of existing heritage assets and signage, exploring the potential for access to heritage and the creation of new trails, the establishment of a heritage map and the identification of built heritage at risk.

The Sperrins contains some of the most archaeologically significant sites within Northern Ireland, however much of this heritage is under threat. A lack of awareness, access or sufficient investment have hindered conservation efforts and resulted in many archaeological sites being deemed as at risk. The AONB management and action plan provides an opportunity to address these concerns through working in partnership.

Throughout the AONB a variety of local historical groups exist, each with a wealth of knowledge regarding heritage in their own locality. Bringing these groups together will enable sharing of information and facilitate a comprehensive mapping exercise of the location and condition of heritage assets within

the AONB, thus contributing to the other actions. Given the vast size of Sperrin AONB, local knowledge is key. As well as helping to identify specific sites for inclusion within a heritage map, local knowledge and connections will also help to advance discussions on potential access.

Given that the majority of land within Sperrin AONB is privately owned, creating access to heritage assets and potentially new trails will involve close engagement with farmers and landowners. This will be an ongoing process throughout the duration of the management plan, ensuring that any landowner concerns are adequately and respectfully addressed should they wish to explore potential access opportunities.

The second objective under this aim ‘Champion and promote the cultural heritage of Sperrin AONB’ contains a variety of actions again designed to promote and preserve heritage, specifically, the intangible cultural heritage of the Sperrins.



The Garvagh Pyramid, Garvagh Forest

The important tradition of storytelling and oral history will be explored and crucially projects will focus on recording and archiving information to ensure that it is retained for future generations. This will involve working closely with local community organisations, historical group and the NI Community Heritage Archive, currently managed by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council's Museum Services.

The townlands connection action will consider the relationship between people and place, at a very local level. It will explore the origins of townland names and their correspondence to the landscape. Within the Sperrins, such names often have origins in the Irish language. The importance of the Irish language within the AONB was a consistent topic throughout the consultation process, therefore a specific action has been included within the plan for Irish language projects. Similarly, the importance of local heritage projects also featured regularly during the consultation exercise. With that in mind, and again, recognising the importance of a local approach, a small grants programme has been included within this aim. This will enable the delivery of a variety of projects at a local level, all designed to promote a collective awareness of the historic environment of Sperrin AONB.

A collective approach will also be taken to the final action within the aim – the delivery of regular events, including an annual Sperrins Festival. Given the large size of the AONB, it may be necessary to rotate the festival around different areas each year, but the common approach will be promoting the AONB as a whole. Local communities will be actively involved in the design and delivery of the festival to ensure that it reflects their own needs, while also attracting visitors to the area. Together the range of actions within this theme, will consider the interplay between the natural, built and cultural heritage in the AONB. Our historic buildings and monuments tell a story of our past, of the landscape that we live in, and of the local customs and traditions of the communities who have lived here for generations. Similarly, many aspects of our cultural heritage have been impacted

by the existence of built heritage within the landscape. There are both tangible and intangible connections. By creating greater awareness and therefore appreciation of heritage within the AONB, the actions will help to protect and conserve the historic environment of the Sperrins.

To deliver this aim, the Sperrins Partnership will work in collaboration with a range of partners including local landowners, community organisations and networks, historical groups and statutory partners such as DfC's Historic Environment Division and the Ulster Archaeological Society.

Throughout delivery, the plan will complement existing provision, take account of local projects and plans including council's heritage plans.



AIM 3 - PROTECT AND CONSERVE THE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER OF SPERRIN AONB FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The third aim of the AONB management plan focuses on the landscape character of Sperrin AONB. In terms of previously identified themes, this aim cuts across a number of thematic areas including Environment and Heritage. As highlighted throughout this document, the principal reason for AONB designation in Northern Ireland is the 'exceptional landscape character' of an area 'and its nationally significant scenic value'. It is therefore crucial that the landscape character of Sperrin AONB is preserved.

The first objective of this aim is to 'Monitor landscape character changes within the AONB'. This will be achieved by undertaking a fixed-point photography project throughout the duration of the five-year action plan. This action will involve identifying key sites within the AONB and photographing identical locations within the site on a regular basis, covering each season. Fixed point photography has been successfully implemented in other AONB as a tool to measure landscape change – be that improvement or decline.

The 'Eyes on the Bog' project developed by the IUCN UK Peatland Programme is another example of how fixed-point photography has been successfully used as a tool to illustrate the impact of peatland degradation and monitor the effectiveness of habitat restoration and sustainable management.⁶⁰

The project will allow tangible changes to the landscape character of the AONB to be recorded, and measures put in place where possible to address potential negative changes. It will also enable a visible evaluation of habitat restoration measures over the course of the action plan, providing rationale for where future resources should be directed going forward.

The second objective of this aim takes account of the impact that traditional heritage has on the landscape character of the AONB. The objective to 'Promote Traditional Heritage Skills' includes an action to establish and deliver traditional heritage and craft projects across Sperrin AONB. Feedback from the consultation process has highlighted that many of these skills are being lost, therefore the projects will include education and training on skills such as stone wall creation, traditional farming methods, conservation of farm buildings, thatching and hedge laying. The learning and development of such skills will contribute to the conservation and restoration of vernacular buildings within the Sperrins, given traditional construction methods and techniques. Furthermore, the action will have an additional economic impact, in that it will promote future employment opportunities for participants.

⁶⁰IUCN UK - Eyes on the Bog | IUCN UK Peatland Programme

AIM 4: ENCOURAGE SUSTAINABLE USE AND ACCESS OF SPERRIN AONB WHICH PROMOTES THE WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The fourth aim of the management plan to ‘Encourage sustainable use and access of Sperrin AONB which promotes the wellbeing and resilience of local communities’ has four objectives which include the communities who live in the Sperrins but also current and potential visitors to the AONB. The aim primarily covers the thematic areas of community, tourism and environment.

The first objective ‘Support initiatives that enhance the health and wellbeing of communities within the AONB’ incorporates three specific actions which emerged strongly throughout the consultation and action planning process. The inclusion of a small grants programme that will be delivered through a community participatory budgeting model was cited as a fair and transparent mechanism to deliver funding at a community level. Four grants will be available each year to projects that use the AONB as a tool to promote health and wellbeing, or projects that themselves promote the natural, built or cultural heritage of the AONB. Examples of good practice in other areas, including council community development programmes demonstrate the success of the participatory budgeting model in encouraging greater engagement and ownership.

The second action under this objective similarly featured strongly at a consultation and action planning stage. It involves a small grants programme targeted specifically at the farming community, with the aim of tackling levels of isolation, loneliness and poor mental health among farmers in Sperrin AONB. A substantial number of consultation participants emphasised the mounting pressures facing the farming community. Given the nature of the industry many farmers work alone with social opportunities such as local marts and shows having diminished in recent years. Levels of social isolation and

loneliness are compounded by additional pressures such as financial strain, succession planning and other factors including most recently changes to inheritance tax. This action will complement existing provision at a community level and also the work of delivery partners such as Rural Support. Adopting a small grants approach will again encourage a greater level of engagement and ownership.

The final action under this objective includes the delivery of a range of outdoor recreation wellbeing initiatives, including those aimed at marginalised and underrepresented groups such as disabled people, the elderly, women, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As well as reflecting feedback gathered consistently throughout the consultation exercise, this action also addresses recent research including the *People in the Outdoors Monitor for Northern Ireland (POMNI) 2025*⁶¹, which identified the additional barriers facing these groups when accessing the outdoors. The management plan will therefore adopt an equitable approach to promote balanced and inclusive access to the AONB.



Walking in the Sperrins

A range of targeted projects will be delivered through the Sperrins Outdoor Recreation Officer, all designed to improve levels of physical and mental health and social wellbeing.

These projects will include a diverse range of activities, creating opportunities for physical exercise as well as a chance to connect with other people and the natural environment of the AONB.

A similar approach will be adopted under the second objective of the aim, which encourages ‘Greater access to Outdoor Recreation opportunities within the AONB’. It includes a commitment to review and update the current Sperrins Outdoor Recreation Action Plan, (2013), with a goal of increasing outdoor recreation opportunities and improving access to the countryside for all. As identified in the second chapter access within the Sperrins is limited given the predominantly private composition of land ownership within the AONB. Legitimate landowner concerns including livestock worrying, littering, damage to property and liability have acted as a deterrent to potential access. The need to increase access throughout the AONB was highlighted throughout the consultation process however it should be noted that this will be dependent on landowner agreement. The Sperrins Partnership will engage with local farmers and landowners to explore options to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities within the AONB. This may include the use of permissive path agreements, for example. The partnership will work in conjunction with local councils and other organisations such as Outscape where relevant.

⁶¹Outscape, 2025, *People in the Outdoors Monitor for Northern Ireland (POMNI) Available - The People in the Outdoors Monitor (POMNI)*

The delivery of an annual Sperrins Youth Ambassador programme has emerged following the success of an ongoing pilot project in the area and the implementation of similar projects in other landscapes. It also reflects substantial feedback gathered during the consultation that highlighted the need to engage with young people. As well as promoting the health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor recreation, the Sperrins Youth Ambassador programme will also incorporate skills development and volunteering opportunities. The inclusion of accredited training within the programme will contribute to the personal and educational development of participants, while the programme generally will help explore potential future employment pathways within the outdoor recreation and environmental sectors.

The final two actions within the objective include the work of the Sperrins Partnership at a broader level, whereby they will attend and input into meetings designed to cultivate outdoor recreation opportunities at a regional level, these include the National Outdoor Recreation Forum, and The Outdoor Partnership (TOP) stakeholder meetings.

This collaborative approach will be critical to the delivery of the third objective “Promote Sustainable Tourism within the AONB”.

From the outset of the consultation process the aspiration to sustainably grow the tourism offering of Sperrin AONB, emerged as a significant and consistent element of the feedback collected. A balanced approach, promoting socio-economic opportunities while considering potential environmental ramifications was favoured. Feedback from both the consultation and action planning working groups reflected that efforts to promote tourism within the Sperrins can be quite fragmented, owing largely to the vast size of the area and its spread across four local council. Many participants cited previous attempts particularly ‘Sperrins Tourism’ and more recent projects such as

the Sperrins Giants Sculpture Trail as examples of best practice. The first action within this objective, establishing an eco-tourism focused working group emerged following feedback that a coordinated and collaborative approach was critical. This is also reflected in the final action which includes engagement with councils tourism teams and Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI). As well as exploring opportunities for joint training and funding, this collaborative approach will also contribute to the creation of AONB branding and subsequent marketing and promotion efforts. As a key delivery partner, the Sperrins Partnership have continuously engaged with TNI throughout the development of the management and action Plan. TNI’s progression of the “Destination Stewardship” framework provides an opportunity for the Sperrins to be marketed as a defined geographic destination.

The Destination Stewardship model will enable a community centred approach that incorporates priorities outlined above. At the time of publishing this management plan, the outcome of the Destination Stewardship plan is unknown.

In today’s tourism sector, there is a clear emerging priority on tourism growth defined and informed by environmental sustainability - See Department for the Economy’s (DfE) 10 -year Tourism Vision & Action Plan. Considerations such as biodiversity, landscape sensitivity, and habitat protection should all be key considerations for future tourism growth. This plan, in line with DfE’s 10-year Tourism Vision & Action Plan and partner council tourism related strategies, will advocate for a stronger focus on sustainable visitor management where needed, by addressing visitor dispersal, seasonality, infrastructure pressures, and the protection of sensitive sites through low-impact design and responsible visitor messaging.



Biking in the Sperrins



Darach, The Guardian, Mullaghcarn, Gortin Glen Forest Park

This plan will aim to leverage the Sperrins’ cultural and heritage assets including archaeology, traditions, and local identity—to develop a distinctive, year-round tourism offer that extends beyond weather-dependent activities.

There is a need to greater support tourism and heritage enterprises, particularly in experience development, packaging, digital marketing, online booking, quality standards, and appropriate accommodation provision. A coordinated destination marketing and communications approach could be established, supported by a high-quality digital platform to promote and book experiences, and to position the Sperrins as a cohesive destination in national and international markets.

Finally, the development of gateway sites and visitor hubs will be considered to improve arrival points, manage visitor flow, encourage wider exploration, and increase length of stay.

The final objective under this aim encourages “Responsible use of the AONB”. It will include the production of educational resources and the delivery of training and awareness raising sessions, covering key issues such as littering, water safety and responsible use of the countryside. Instances of livestock worrying and nesting disturbance have been identified as substantial concerns that limit potential access to the countryside. If access is to be granted, it is key that users adopt a responsible and respectful approach for example parking in suitable locations, taking home litter and ensuring that dogs are kept on leads when necessary. The presence of an ‘AONB Ranger’ on the ground was identified as a tool to encourage responsible use, however given the size and remote nature of the area a number of Rangers would be required. Nonetheless, the Sperrins Partnership recognise the importance of having staff on the ground and will therefore explore funding opportunities for such posts.



Sperrins Partnership, Guardians of the Sperrins Project 2025

AIM 5: RAISE AWARENESS OF THE AONB AND PROMOTE APPRECIATION AND PRIDE IN ITS LANDSCAPE, AND NATURAL AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT.

The fifth aim of the management plan focuses on raising awareness of and promoting appreciation and pride in the AONB. It links to the ‘Community theme’ that emerged during the consultation stage. To achieve this aim two objectives have been identified.

The first objective ‘Raise awareness of the AONB among local communities’ includes a series of actions that promote community engagement with the Sperrins Partnership and the AONB in general. These actions will build upon the success of previous projects such as the Youth Voice Event and Guardians of the Sperrins Project.

Consistent feedback from both the consultation and working group sessions emphasised the importance of youth engagement. Many participants expressed a view that young people had become disconnected with nature and that if future generations are to protect the AONB, then they must first and foremost have a greater awareness and appreciation of the landscape. The Sperrins Partnership will therefore prioritise youth engagement, working with local primary and secondary schools as well as youth groups.



Sperrins Youth Voice Event, Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh, March 2025

In addition to this, the Sperrins Partnership will continue community engagement at a broader level, attending local events and engaging with community groups, clubs and the wider public, in an effort to raise awareness of the AONB and encourage involvement in projects and activities. The circulation of a newsletter will provide relevant updates on a quarterly basis, with more regular AONB updates and information provided on social media channels and through the Sperrins Partnership website.



Guardians of the Sperrins Project 2025

These actions contribute to the second objective of aim five, ‘5.2 Raise awareness of the AONB among stakeholders & the wider public’.

As well as engaging with the public in general, the Sperrins Partnership will make a concerted effort to engage with other stakeholders including statutory agencies to ensure ongoing commitment to delivery of the AONB management and action plan. This approach will also be undertaken by Sperrins Partnership Board members who will be encouraged to champion Sperrin AONB on an ongoing basis.



Guardians of the Sperrins Project 2025

AIM 6: ADOPT A COLLABORATIVE AND PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO AONB MANAGEMENT

The sixth, and final aim of the Management Plan considers the operational and governance structures of the Sperrins Partnership and the wider political environment in which Landscapes Management in Northern Ireland operates.

The first objective is to ‘Pursue a Governance structure that promotes inclusivity and best practice’. As well as committing to a model of partnership working and a coordinated approach to AONB management, a review of the internal governance structures of the Sperrins Partnership will also be undertaken. In addition to considering considering the composition and roles of the Management Board, this review will also consider staff resources. Given the substantial size of the AONB and the extensive action plan that has emerged, the Sperrins Partnership are aware that additional staff resources are required. Funding opportunities for additional staff will be explored as a matter of priority. This particular action is also relevant to the second objective of the aim ‘Promote a collaborative and coordinated approach to landscape management’. The momentum gathered recently by Landscapes NI has enabled a focused advocacy for stronger AONB protection and sufficient core funding to landscape management bodies within Northern Ireland. The Sperrins Partnership, through continued membership of Landscapes NI will continue to lobby for appropriate legislation and the requisite funding to deliver the AONB Management Plan sufficiently and effectively. Furthermore, the Sperrins Partnership will advocate for a just transition programme that

ensures local communities and landowners within the Sperrins are sufficiently considered, supported and compensated for their role in nature recovery projects. The importance of which was stressed repeatedly throughout the consultation process, with participants referencing the need to take account of the indigenous people of the AONB, with particular regard to the “International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” and the “Universal Declaration on Human Rights”.



Landscapes NI Conference 2024, Launch of Manifesto for Landscapes in NI



Key Speakers at Sperrin Youth Voice Event 2025

Chapter 6

Delivery and Monitoring of the plan

6.1 Implementation of the Management and Action Plan

This plan has been developed following an extensive consultation process. It marks the first ever management plan for Sperrin AONB and therefore is a major milestone for the area and the communities who live in the Sperrins. The plan covers the ten-year period from 2026 – 2036 and is accompanied by a five-year Action Plan for 2026 – 2031.

Although the Management plan has no statutory remit, it provides an agreed and evidence-backed framework for all stakeholders to work to. The Sperrins Partnership are the principal delivery mechanism; however, the success of both plans is dependent on a collaborative, partnership approach among all stakeholders identified therein.

Continued community engagement will also be a critical element to the successful implementation of the plan. While the Sperrins Partnership acknowledge that the plan may not satisfy the aspirations of all, given that it has no statutory remit, if successfully implemented it will have a profound impact on the conservation of natural, built and cultural heritage in the AONB.



6.2 Resources

Successful delivery of this ambitious plan is dependent on adequate funding, resource allocation and the continued support of all delivery partners. Current funding sources include a contribution from each of the four partner Councils and a five-year grant (2023 – 2028) from DAERA's Strategic Strand Environment Fund. The need for additional staff to assist delivery and continued engagement is an urgent priority for all partners and therefore identifying and sourcing funding will form a critical element of our ongoing work.

As highlighted in a previous chapter, the Sperrins Partnership will also continue to advocate alongside other landscape management bodies for core funding. A partnership approach will be adopted at all times to ensure efficient use of resources and effective, coordinated programme delivery.

6.3 Monitoring and Review

Although developed for the defined time period set out above, both the Management and Action Plan are living documents and will therefore respond and adapt accordingly to emerging needs and priorities. The plan overall plan will be reviewed on an annual basis, with performance assessed and an annual report produced. This report will be a publicly available document, accessible via our website, with printed copies on request. The Sperrins Partnership are committed to inclusive and transparent implementation and review, and therefore continuous engagement will form a core part of our work throughout the lifespan of this plan.





SPERRINS PARTNERSHIP

For further information please visit:
www.sperrinspartnershipproject.com
or email info@sperrinspartnershipproject.com

