

Belfast Hills Partnership Resilience Review



Terms of Reference of this report:

This report has been produced by Judith A Annett Countryside Consultancy in response to a tender for the provision of a review of the resilience of the Belfast Hills Partnership Trust (referred to hereafter as Belfast Hills Partnership or BHP). The Belfast Hills Partnership has secured funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to undertake an evaluation of the organisation in relation to its resilience. This assesses the current condition of the organisation, how it works with its partners and how to make the most of future opportunities.



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Executive Summary

The resilience of the Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP) has been independently assessed looking at its current condition, how it works with its partners and how to make the most of future opportunities. A very brief outline of some of the key issues under each of these themes is highlighted below:

Current Condition

This assessment of the organisations ability to withstand threats, respond to opportunities and adapt to changing circumstances indicates that the Belfast Hills Partnership is currently in a strong position, with a relatively healthy bank balance (including unrestricted reserves) and a team of dedicated, skilled staff in place. Despite two major funding crises the organisation has grown enabling it to better fulfil the aims and objectives of the Partnership.

Care must however be taken to ensure that the various partners who were involved in setting up the organisation remain committed to that vision, and that the strategic vision and strategic partnership working elements are not lost in the midst of the various practical projects being undertaken on the ground.

There is no room for complacency and staff must continue to work with partners, proving BHP relevant in an ever changing environment.

Partnership Working

As the name Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP) would suggest, partnership working is fundamental to everything that it does. BHP was set up to provide a coordinating mechanism and voice for the whole area. The recent decision of Lisburn & Castlereagh Council that Councilors should not act as directors of bodies such as BHP will negatively affect the strength of the Partnership, particularly if the other Councils follow this decision. Asking stakeholder bodies to recommit to the Belfast Hills Programme may help strengthen the partnership.

The Landscape Partnership Scheme (2012-2018) succeeded in both strengthening working relationships with existing partners and widening the extent of partnership working. The agreed 10 year legacy plan has provided an important agreed agenda for the hills and surrounding communities enabling work to continue on the ground. The volunteering team is integral to much of the practical works being undertaken and their continued support should be embedded within the organisation.

Within the BHP Board there is a good spread of expertise. Trustees should feel that they are able to lead and direct the charity in its purposes; for example learning from other similar organisations through study visits would be of benefit.

A wide range of issues and priorities were outlined for the Belfast Hills area during the consultations. These issues should be used to form the basis of a new landscape scale project that involves partner organisations, local people and visitors to the area in making positive differences.

To prevent competition for dwindling resources with current partners', greater joint working should occur. This could be achieved by forming a Projects Development Forum where partners jointly discuss, develop and deliver projects which meet the needs of the Belfast Hills together.

Future Opportunities

The Belfast Hills Partnership has a strong track record for successfully delivering projects. This success however should be better communicated with both partners and the wider public to enable such successes to be built upon. There is a need to meet with other similar landscape management groups to share best practice within the group and potentially submit joint future bids.

The various consultations highlighted the need for a new project to address issues such as loss of wildlife, flytipping/littering, wildfires etc. which incorporates volunteering, training and youth education. The future viability of upland farming was also a key issue for concern; BHP should consider the development of a farming review and scheme looking at both urban fringe and upland farming in the Belfast Hills to identify opportunities and implement measures to relieve pressure on hill farmers.

The majority of funds raised by BHP are through applications for grant aid and is restricted funding. Securing unrestricted funding will provide the organisation with a greater buffer against unexpected circumstances as well as enabling grant match funding. A number of different avenues for securing funding were outlined including service level agreements, developing the Friends Group, securing local business support etc.

Working in partnership with the various statutory bodies, local landowners and businesses is a powerful mechanism for tackling issues that BHP may have no direct power or responsibility for.

The Natural Capital elements of particular relevance to the Belfast Hills are carbon storage, water quality, flood mitigation, biodiversity, food production and recreation. These benefits should be emphasized when highlighting the importance of the Belfast Hills.

A series of 28 recommendations have been produced as a result of this study and should be used by the Board and Staff of the Belfast Hills Partnership to direct future work. Such work must be done within the constraints of staff time and financial resources.

Summary of Recommendations

Assessing current condition

1. In which areas are we truly resilient and which not?

Question 1 Recommendation 1 – Aligning Baseline Targets with NISRA data

The current Base Line Targets are a challenging list of measures, many of which require original research to procure data. There would be merit in aligning evaluation with some measures that are now routinely reported on by NISRA as part of monitoring for community plans or by DAERA NI and others in monitoring against Programme for Government objectives. BHP could then identify objectives that are specific to the success of its own programmes. It is possible to obtain data on request from NISRA against the PFG and Community Planning targets based on interrogation of data within the nearest administrative boundaries contained within the Belfast Hills Partnership area.

Question 1 Recommendation 2 – Supporting the Volunteering Programme

The current volunteering programme within the Belfast Hills Partnership and the level of work being undertaken by the volunteers is one of the organisations strongest assets which give BHP a high level of resilience and should be expanded where possible. However it must be noted that this group does require staff management to recruit, manage and maintain this group. There has been some money set aside to support a Volunteer Officer through the Landscape Partnership Schemes 10 year maintenance pot, however this money decreases with time. This means that after 2020 further funding will need to be secured to enable volunteering to be supported at the same level as currently.

Question 1 Recommendation 3 – Partners recommitting regularly to the strategic role of BHP

Whilst currently strong the Belfast Hills Partnership is facing a number of potential threats which may in time affect its capacity to secure funding for programmes and to deliver programmes. The Trustees should ensure that Partners are aware of and recommit regularly to the strategic role of the Partnership in the hills. A memorandum of understanding as used within the Dublin Mountains Partnership between at least the Statutory Partnership members would be an appropriate type of mechanism requiring refreshment and recommitment on a regular basis.

Examples of strategic roles of BHP:

1. Drawing up strategic plans and positions for the Belfast Hills as a whole, merging and agreeing actions between other bodies (e.g. visitor and environmental management, recreation, biodiversity)
2. Producing a strategic framework which strengthens and supports partner work in addressing common issues (climate action, managing anti-social behaviour, dealing with fly tipping, reducing the impacts of waste transport on the roads network and public safety)
3. Delivering programmes on behalf of Partners where this is the most effective delivery method.

Question 1 Recommendation 4 – Responding to opportunities in accordance with BHPs strategic aims

One of the great strengths of the organisation is that due to its relatively small size and independent nature it can quickly adapt and change. It is however recommended that BHP needs to constantly align what it is doing with its strategic aims and objectives as outlined within its Memorandum and Articles of Association.

Question 1 Recommendation 5 – Increasing links between BHP and Planning/Community Planning

The community planning process is an important driver of policy that has overlapped with some of the aspirations that community consultations in the Belfast Hills have produced. This has become clearer through increased community contact and participation as a result of the Landscape

Partnership. There is a more apparent link between the aspirations of the communities and the developing Local Area Plans, the actions of statutory bodies involved in community planning and the Programme for Government. As a geographical coordinating mechanism for public benefit it is important that Belfast Hills Programmes look at how to provide cohesion in the way that this work impacts on the area and adds value rather than duplicating effort. One method of achieving this is to ensure that baselines and targets are seen and presented in relation to the outcomes and indicators that NISRA maintains to track the success of community and statutory body aspirations.

The BHP should arguably have more contact with community planning and local area development planning through elected representatives on the Board, through participation of community planning staff in the BHP forward planning process, and through regular contact during the current development planning stage. In doing this BHP should have regard to the legal requirement for a charity not to engage in political activity.

Question 1 Recommendation 6 – Ensuring Local Plan Consistency at the boundaries

It is recommended that NIEA and the BHP engage in developing a shared picture for consistency in landscape management across local authority boundaries in the Belfast Hills.

Question 1 Recommendation 7 – Seeking Statutory Consultee status

It is arguable that the BHP should seek the status of statutory consultee in the community and local area planning process or make a formal link with bodies that are statutory consultees in the environment and countryside policy sector. This recognises the importance of development plans to managing special landscapes (e.g. CNCC, relevant landscape staff in NIEA). This proposal is made in the light of the origin of the Belfast Hills Partnership set up by NIEA and Local Authorities to coordinate approaches to management of the hills.

Question 1 Recommendation 8 – Undertake Ecosystem Services Mapping

An initial step may be the production of a more detailed Belfast Hills Carbon Storage map in conjunction with RSPB, making partners and planners aware of the significance of this aspect of the hills. This should be the beginning of a natural capital and ecosystem services mapping exercise for the Hills. Other areas to consider mapping are flood mitigation, biodiversity and recreation.

Partnership Working

2. How best can we maintain the working methods and outcomes of our BHP Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) and carry these forward in this rapidly changing world?

Question 2 Recommendation 1 – Retaining Statutory Board Representation

Consideration should be given to holding a meeting(s) of the Trust's Statutory body directors and observers to examine the issue of whether Councilors continue to sit as Trustees on the Board, and make proposals as to how the Statutory bodies stay in partnership through BHP and retain their decision-making roles and influence going forward.

Question 2 Recommendation 2 - Increasing Commitment of Stakeholders

That stakeholder bodies are asked to make a recommitment to the agreed Belfast Hills Programme. This could be via a new signed memorandum of understanding for the programme of work. Adjustments should be made to the statutory body member/observer list to reflect current departmental responsibilities or there could be a formal subcommittee structure to allow representation by a wider set of bodies as required – e.g. to coordinate responses to issues such as road verges, water quality, environmental advice, fly tipping, and subsidies to farmers and landowners for measures to manage the natural capital of the Belfast Hills landscape.

Question 2 Recommendation 3 - Including the volunteer group as a core cost of BHP

The BHP Volunteer team has shown a capacity to deliver strongly on the charitable purpose of the organisation and staff involved in animating and managing this resource should be considered as a core element when applying for funding. There would be a case for reviewing the volunteer group and how it operates with partners organisations in the BHP to establish where joint objectives can be met through the maintenance and further development of the volunteer group.

3. How can we best upskill and inspire Board members and partners?

Question 3 Recommendation 1 – Increasing Governance Training for Trustees

All trustees to have initial governance training at the outset. They should have an annual opportunity to repeat this and regular reminders of the importance of understanding the governance of a charitable body.

Question 3 Recommendation 2 – Undertaking Good Governance Health Checks

The Good Governance Health Check¹ should be accessed by the Directors and they should self-assess against this and produce recommendations for change. The Trustees should feel that they are able to lead and direct the charity in its purposes ably assisted by the very professional staff, rather than relying on them entirely for advice and recommendations.

Question 3 Recommendation 3 – Learning from Others

Trustees should stay abreast of developments elsewhere and learn from other examples of managing urban fringe issues, including visits to initiatives elsewhere with similar objectives or which face similar issues to the Belfast Hills Partnership. This should facilitate and encourage a strategic partnership approach to urban fringe issues.

4. What are the issues facing the Belfast Hills & what are the priorities of our partners in addressing these?

Question 4 Recommendation 1 – Communicate the purposes of BHP clearly

The Belfast Hills Partnership is seen by consultees in a range of different ways- some see it as an operational body in their own area, while others see it as a strategic body working to coordinate partner actions, innovating and drawing attention to the benefits of caring for the Belfast Hills and its people. It would appear that even within the key partners there has been some knowledge fade about the status of the BHP as a strategic body tasked jointly by stakeholders. Trustees and staff should ensure that all parties are fully aware of its purpose and that the membership of BHP evolves with changing circumstances and changing statutory drivers of recreation, environment, community and industry in the hills.

Question 4 Recommendation 2 – Consider Changes to Articles of Association carefully

Whilst there was some comment about the restrictive nature of the Articles that govern the BHP and its decisions. It is recommended that any changes are made in the light only of an informed discussion between existing and potential new stakeholders. The current structure has succeeded in keeping all important stakeholders at the table to date.

¹ <https://www.diycommitteeguide.org/sites/default/files/downloads/2019-02/Revised%20Governance%20Health%20Check%20Feb2019.pdf>

5. How do we work with current partners to prevent competition for dwindling resources?

Question 5 Recommendation 1 – Enhancing joint working with partners

It would be of benefit to both BHP and partner organisations if greater joint working occurred. The formation of a Projects Development Forum where partners discuss, develop and deliver projects which meet the needs of the Belfast Hills together (this may be in the form of joint projects or simply advice and support) should be investigated. This could result in shared staff members supported by a number of organisations as well as the production of common plans and approaches e.g. alien species

Future opportunities

6. How do we maximise our use of current skills, experience and reputation?

Question 6 Recommendation 1 – Working in partnership with other similar purpose bodies, sharing learning, key skills and messages.

Belfast Hills Partnership is a member of the Northern Ireland Protected Areas Network (NIPAN) which has not convened for two years. There is also a developing network of current and former HLF Landscape Partnership schemes to discuss good practice and issues such as legacy. Several of these are also members of NIPAN. The BHP will be more effective as a member of a regular forum to discuss partnership approaches in achieving landscape scale objectives for a variety of purposes. There would be value in BHP taking the initiative to reconvene a professional network for those engaged in landscape scale schemes with multiple objectives.

Question 6 recommendation 2 – Working with member organisations to develop a communications strategy or audience development strategy.

It is important for the BHP, based on its own purposes, to identify key audiences, key messages to each audience and key mechanisms for getting the message across. Different messages will be required for Key Partners, Stakeholders, people the BHP works with practically on the ground, statutory bodies, elected representatives etc. BHP should seek a specific funding element within core costs for communication. It will be best for this strategy to be developed with BHP member organisations which have the required skills and to be devised together in a participative process.

7. What issues were not addressed in our work to date for the future protection and enhancement of the area?

Question 7 Recommendation 1 – Developing new projects to address problems & opportunities

A new project should be worked up which seeks to address factors such as the loss of wildlife and landscape quality due to the impact of humans on the area via flytipping/littering, wildfires etc. This should include maintaining access and improving the aesthetic appearance of the Belfast Hills area. This should incorporate volunteering, training and youth environmental education; supporting local people to take real ownership of the area and the work being undertaken.

Question 7 Recommendation 2 – Land ownership opportunities considered

Within the current economic climate there may be more land available for sale within the Belfast Hills Partnership's operational area. Careful consideration should be taken regarding the benefits of safeguarding areas of the hills through ownership of the land versus ongoing costs and liabilities of land ownership.

Question 7 Recommendation 3 – Strengthening the Strategic role of BHP

BHPs strategic role should be re-emphasized, revisited and strengthened by reaching a stage where the current Directors in local authorities have a full knowledge of the BHP and its agreed purpose and the role of their organisations within it. An important first step will be to ensure that the current position where Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council have been provided with legal advice that Councillors should not sit as Directors/Trustees of BHP is questioned. It appears from reading the Memorandum and Articles of Association that it is the founding organisations that are members of the BHP and can therefore nominate trustees/directors, and that therefore creating a separation between Councils and the BHP is not technically possible. The Trust should take its own legal advice to ascertain whether the organisations are the Partnership members or the Trustees themselves.

Question 7 Recommendation 4 – Widening Statutory involvement in BHP

In order to address these issues a new set of statutory bodies will be required to work with the Partnership and the BHP should consider amendments to its structure to allow e.g. ARC 21, Department of Infrastructure (roads or Sustainable Transport), Tourism NI (or tourism within BCC) and Sport NI (or the National Outdoor Recreation Forum) to play a part in strategic decision making for the Hills. One statutory body directorship is currently unfilled due to the merging of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Councils. The directorship to be nominated by the Quarry industry is currently also vacant and would allow for an ARC 21 inclusion.

8. How do we specifically make our upland farming more resilient?

Question 8 recommendation 1 – Helping relieve pressure on farmers & farming families

The Belfast Hills Partnership should consider the development of an urban fringe and upland hill farming review and scheme to identify opportunities and implement measures to relieve pressure on farmers and farm families created by urban impacts. This review should include issues such as succession, market links between city and farm and the potential for a demonstration urban fringe mixed farm project.

Question 8 recommendation 2 – Ensuring strong policy Linkages between UFU and BHP

The UFU as an organisation is a nominating member for 2 directors to the Belfast Hills Partnership. The farming directors of the BHP have been good attenders and very interested and engaged in the work of the Partnership. It is important to the resilience of BHP that the UFU remains engaged with the organisation in a way that allows for discussion of wider policies. The company secretary should ensure that close links are retained at a policy level in all organisations that nominate directors so that the strategic role of BHP in the area is more effectively taken forward.

9. What opportunities are there for income generating activities?

Question 9 Recommendation 1 – Having a clear rational for events

A very clear rational needs to be in place for running events/courses, as they are labour intensive and costly to the organisation. When BHP started running events in the hills there were very few other events in the area available to the public, while now there are a wide range of regular events being provided by partner organisations. Even fairly high event prices are unlikely to cover staff time costs but may prevent low income families from coming along. However having to pre pay a small event charge could be advantageous as it may put people off from not showing up at events which they had booked on.

Question 9 Recommendation 2 – Options for growing the income.

Options for increasing unrestricted funds which can be used for the general purposes of the charity and therefore which increase both resilience and effectiveness include:

- Asking for a higher contribution to unrestricted funds from all sectors in membership to reflect the fact that costs have increased over the life of the Partnership or securing the participation of an additional relevant statutory source e.g. in recognition of the waste management, tourism, recreation and agri-environment and rural development role played by the charity
- Providing a more active 'Friends of the Belfast Hills' Organisation with a membership donation and with the capacity to support the work of the BHP in practical or financial ways. The current Friends group is relatively inactive
- Increasing the payments to the BHP from landfill tax sources or contributions from industry in Belfast and its Hills in recognition of the important landscape setting for business or through corporate social responsibility commitments
- Appointing a fundraiser with specific giving targets (although the giving market is crowded and the charity message may not appear as a high priority to general givers)
- Seek specific Corporate Social Responsibility policies in relation to the Belfast Hills from businesses in the Hills and in the wider NI area. This could be particularly where businesses own and manage lands in the hills or where the waste stream ends up in the Hills (this could be taken forward through Business in the Community NI as a part of its work towards developing a circular economy or work towards Business and Biodiversity awards)
- Creation of a general Good Works Fund for developers e.g. wind turbine projects / Companies CSR monies to put money into – unrestricted but only practical works, volunteering support etc.
- Developing a communications strategy to ensure that the charity's key messages reach a wider set of people who can help achieve the mission

Options for increasing restricted funds with the potential for a contribution to core costs include:

- Development of a fly-tipping fast response service on behalf of Councils and the Waste regulator within a service level agreement
- Development of a strategic recreation management capacity and activity and a ranger service function for the hills on behalf of local authorities within a service level agreement
- Working with others to raise the profile of the Hills as a green lung for Belfast and as a source of horticulture and food products
- Raise awareness of the contribution the Belfast Hills makes to Natural Capital / Ecosystem Services e.g. reducing the effects of climate change and seeking a major Programme to promote land uses that keep carbon locked in soil and vegetation
- Seek greater recognition of the peacebuilding potential of the hills through youth outdoor learning projects
- Build on the reputation of the Belfast Hills Partnership and its capacity to bring people together to work on hills issues
- Develop a Belfast Hills Visitor Vision and Strategy and identify the role of the Belfast Hills Partnership in its delivery (engagement with Sport NI , Health Trusts and Tourism NI, in addition to the Councils)

Options for increasing the asset base of the organisation:

- Purchase of nature conservation or amenity lands in the hills to solve strategic recreation issues (this could also be achieved through giving a higher profile to the potential of legacy and memorial giving to the charity)
- Identification of high net worth individuals with links to the Belfast Hills and work with them to identify potential opportunities for giving to specific projects that meet the strategic needs of the hills.
- Development of a business sponsorship prospectus for the Hills– potentially with Business in the Community NI – identifying financial and in-kind sponsorship opportunities. Including the greening of businesses in the hills.

10. How do we manage difficult and visible issues for which we little power, influence or responsibility?

[Question 10 Recommendations – Making the most of strategic contacts and members to influence the management of the Hills](#)

More should be made of the existing policy links with the Councils, potentially through an annual meeting with a range of relevant staff to develop joint projects to tackle issues such as flytipping/littering together, with BHP providing man power through volunteers, a positive social media marketing campaign and a schools and community education programme. Inputting into the Council Development plans will also influence the future placement of high structures near the hills and the ability of companies to extract minerals from the area.

The Councils have statutory powers to safeguard current public rights of way and public paths and to develop new paths and open country access through agreement or the making of orders; balancing the needs of the public with the views of landowners. It has proved difficult to achieve consensus within the Belfast Hills Partnership on long term recreation and access objectives. Working with Councillors and council Access Officers to look strategically at access in the hills will be important e.g. reopening Glenside Community Woodland and achieving long distance paths & links. Updating the Belfast Hills Recreation Strategy via a working group would help bring focus to this issue.

It may be of value to form a working group looking at the industrial use of the Belfast Hills, with agreed 'green routes' in the area where HGVs do not go. Strengthening links with local businesses should be undertaken, potentially using Business in the Community as a partner in this process.

There should be continued support to the Belfast Hills Farmers in explaining issues to DAERA regarding loss of ANC and other such grants to ensure the viability of farming in the uplands, including potential future EFS scheme payments for landscape scale management of their upland sites. As this is an issue wider than just the Belfast Hills reconvening the NI Protected Areas Network (NIPAN) may be of benefit. This could coordinate action on landscapes and make the case for land uses that have high carbon sequestration; provide attenuation of flooding, and landscape and heritage features to be conserved as part of environmentally sensitive farming rather than solely lands with high nature conservation value.

BHP has proved itself on a regular basis as being an excellent educator, undertaking activities such as the John Muir Award in the Belfast Hills area to help transform the mindset of young people about the value of their natural environment. As much of the antisocial behavior issues are associated with young people, continued efforts are required looking at issues such as flytipping, littering, wildfires and vandalism.

Another role for BHP is to continue reporting and lobbying about issues, highlighting the problem to those who do have the power to affect change and challenging them to act; while offering to help where and how it can.

11. Does a Natural Capital approach really bring benefits in practice to new projects? If so how in practice do you calculate it? Are there examples of successful projects?

[Question 11 Recommendation 1 – Retaining and maximizing Natural Capital of the Belfast Hills](#)

The Belfast Hills Partnership should seek to retain the land cover types in the hills that provide the most valuable ecosystem services to the surrounding area. Mapping of land cover/use and monitoring change on a regular basis is the key to retaining natural capital, together with identifying the services the land cover and soil types provide.

Moving to agri-environment schemes that compensate for the retention of non-economic land uses by farmers in order to provide public goods such as carbon sequestration and storage, flood attenuation, biodiversity, recreation and well-being services will be an important outcome for farmers in the hills.

Identifying land uses that can produce more than one kind of service is also key- for example, new woodland planting can provide carbon uptake, recreation, wellbeing and in time a renewable economic asset; upland pathways that do not affect biodiversity or water retention enable land to provide an additional service.