

# THE SOUTHERN UPLANDS PARTNERSHIP

## Annual Report 2016/17

April 2017



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## Annual Report 2016/17

The Southern Uplands Partnership (SUP) was started by local people keen to keep the communities and countryside of the south of Scotland alive and healthy. The Partnership represents all sorts of people, as well as government bodies, agencies and Councils. Anyone who is committed to the future of the south of Scotland is invited to join and get involved.

2016/17 has been another year of progress on many fronts under difficult conditions! The economic slow-down has continued to make it hard to get funding for projects. The LEADER Programme has remained a major source of support for project work, but the time required to secure and then administer these funds is greater than ever and we are thankful that we have Sheila Adams on hand, with her experience and endless patience, to do what is necessary. Scottish Natural Heritage has continued to support our work which we very much appreciate, especially at a time when its budget is being so heavily reduced. We must also thank many other members and supporters who make donations and pay subscriptions, without which we would rapidly cease to exist.

We are fortunate that we have an active Board of Directors that has met three times during the year, and the Working Group six times, with Directors regularly representing SUP and its interests, both at meetings and in helping to deliver strategic pieces of work. We published our 15th set of accounts, with an Annual Report, showing a stable financial position (see [www.sup.org.uk](http://www.sup.org.uk)).

During the year, the Partnership employed two full time core staff (Pip Tabor and Ed Forrest), one part time core employee (Sheila Adams) and an additional six project staff (two full-time, four part-time) who deliver specific projects. In the 2016/17 financial year, the Partnership attracted £290k for specific project work and a further £79k for strategic and core work. These funds came from a wide range of sources.



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## REFLECTIONS OF OUTGOING CONVENER

Looking back over my six years as Convener of the Southern Uplands Partnership (SUP), the first thing that strikes me is just how much has been done and achieved in that time. We have nursed the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere through two phases of its development; helped communities in the Ettrick and Yarrow Valleys to explore and at least to some degree find solutions to their problems; established the principle and addressed the practicalities of a creating a Solway Coastal Trail; delved into the options for delivering high speed broadband to remote rural communities; conceived and run Britain's first Wild Film Festival and much, much more.

Not every project that we have undertaken has proved a long-term success but very few can be seen as short-term failures.

What is more, all this has been achieved in many ways against the odds. Public funding has been ever harder to come by. The competition for money from other sources has grown ever more intense. Whilst the reserves that we were fortunate enough to have accumulated in the earlier and more financially benign years of our existence have cushioned us to some extent, it has demanded all the creativity and ingenuity of our staff to prevent us slipping gradually towards the oblivion that has been the fate of many other similar bodies.

There has of course been a price to pay for living as opportunistically as we have had to do. Our periodic efforts to prioritise our activities and focus on the most strategically important issues have not been worthless: they have helped us to chart our broad course and sometimes to decide between competing calls on our limited time. But at the end of the day we have had to follow the money and our programme has been driven at least as much by the priorities of potential funders as by our own. Fortunately in most cases there has been no real tension between the two.

I personally regret the fact that one consequence of these financial constraints has been that SUP has not been able to completely fulfil its original ambition of facilitating discussion about, and exploring possible solutions to, the key strategic challenges of the day. Drawing on the knowledge and expertise of our staff and Board members, we have responded to numerous public consultations and even managed to host events devoted to exploring some of the most momentous issues. But we have not been able as fully as I would have liked to contribute to wider national debates as "the voice of rural south Scotland".

Despite this, SUP remains to the best of my knowledge an initiative without any real parallel across Scotland. This was recognised by the Scottish Government when, for example, it appointed our Manager, Pip Tabor, to the Land Reform Review Group. It is reflected in the requests that we receive from them and from bodies like the Scottish Rural Parliament to help them with local engagement and the seeking out of rural views.



These achievements have only been made possible by the continuing support that we have received from Scottish Natural Heritage, as a stalwart key funder. For this I have to thank particularly the personal interest and commitment shown by its recently retired Area Manager, Chris Miles. Dumfries and Galloway Council too have been immensely helpful in recognising and rewarding the contribution that SUP can make to its ambitions even in times of extreme financial pressure. These crucial sources of funds have been given by a handful of loyal business supporters and several, hugely appreciated, anonymous donations.

For project funding, successive LEADER programmes have been a major, if at times administratively infuriating, source. I myself am immensely sad that these programmes are unlikely to be with us much longer as a result of what I regard as a disastrously misguided decision in the EU referendum. To my mind the benefits of access to this and other EU funding streams has by no means been purely financial; those arising from the exchange of ideas and experience, and opportunities for personal development, have been at least as great. Unless we fight determinedly to retain similar links, the loss will be a grave one.

The challenges of Brexit are of course not confined to the project sphere. There is now a greater need than ever to re-think our whole approach to public policy in what for many established rural businesses, especially in the farming and land managing sector, is likely to be a very hostile environment.

As I hand over the reins at SUP, I have every confidence that it will maintain and indeed re-double its efforts to ensure that the south of Scotland contributes fully to the required debates.

My conviction on this score reflects my knowledge of both the staff and the Trustees of the organisation. It has, in Pip Tabor, an intensely dedicated, knowledgeable and highly creative leader of a very talented team, invaluable augmented in my time in post by the administrative skills and experience of Sheila Adams. We are equally fortunate to have Ed Forrest as the co-ordinator of our work on behalf of the Biosphere Partnership. They, along with Mark Pollitt and others in what is now becoming the South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre and in the Biosphere Team will certainly not let SUP down.

Throughout my time the SUP Board has likewise been rich in imaginative, forward-thinking individuals, deeply committed to the cause that it is pursuing. It has been not just a privilege but a genuine pleasure to work with them in taking forward SUP's mission of sustainable, better integrated rural development, rooted firmly in the region's wealth of natural assets.

I have no doubt that with all these people involved, I step down as Convener with SUP as well equipped as it can be to face the challenging times that undoubtedly await us. I wish it every success.

**John Thomson**

**Southern Uplands Partnership Convener 2011-17**



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## Projects

### Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere

Interest in UNESCO Biospheres is steadily growing - the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere was the first in Scotland and the third in the UK when it was designated in 2012, however there are now two in Scotland and there are six in the UK with a seventh in Ireland and a number of other regions considering applying for the status. In recognition of the growing interest, the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere (GSAB) hosted a major conference of all existing and aspirational UK and Eire Biospheres which was the first time that they had all come together to exchange ideas and learn from each other's experiences on how the Biosphere message can be taken forward locally and nationally.

Through attendance at similar international Euro MAB conferences, links have been made with a number of other Biospheres in Europe and further afield, and this has resulted in us becoming a key partner in a new project looking at Sustainable Heritage Areas Promoting Ecotourism (SHAPE). As a result, the GSA Biosphere has been growing in stature and reputation.

The Biosphere project that we have been managing for the last three years has now come to an end having made great strides in laying firm foundations for the future. The good news is that our partners have been sufficiently impressed with the outcomes to agree to a new five year funding package. This will give continuity to the delivery, albeit with a reduced team of a part time co-ordinator (Ed Forrest), part time project officer (Marie McNulty) and finance /administrative support (Sheila Adams). For a limited period we will also be able to keep the Natural Heritage team going. The key priority will be to identify new funding opportunities to consolidate and expand the Core team through the delivery of further Biosphere projects. At the same time, the Biosphere Board is being restructured to enable easier and more direct decision making which will also create an opportunity to welcome new members to the Board.

### Wild Film Festival



The first Wild Film Festival Scotland took place in March 2017. With a line-up of speakers including Simon King, Iolo Williams and Sacha Dench, the Festival attracted a lot of attention and some good audiences who came from as far afield as Macclesfield, Ulverston, Teeside, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Once they were with us they were subjected to the passion and knowledge of our local speakers who enthused about what the region has to offer.



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We will carry out a full evaluation on the event before deciding whether to try to repeat it in 2018, but early indications are that it was enjoyed by all and that it has helped raise the profile of Dumfries and Galloway as a great place for nature. We still hope that we will be able to re-energise **Wild Seasons** in the near future although this may be more as a website that creates links on where to go, what to see, and when to see it for wildlife.

## South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre (SWSEIC)

Dumfries and Galloway Environmental Resources Centre (DGERC) continues under the management of Mark Pollitt. It is currently in the process of rebranding itself as a South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre (SWSEIC) which reflects the broadening of its remit to include the Ayrshire region.

Under the auspices of SWSEIC, the **Where's Wildlife in Ayrshire** project went live in October 2016 with the appointment of Aisling Gribbin. This project is designed to engage with people throughout Ayrshire and encourage them to get involved in learning about their local wildlife, recording sightings and collecting information about where different plants and animals live. Aisling is working with local wildlife enthusiasts of all abilities – beginners and experts – and is helping to create a focal point for local environmental data. A key part of the project focuses on training communities and individuals to gather information about local wildlife. Over the next two years the project will be out and about, attending events and running its own programme of events throughout Ayrshire which will provide people with new skills and opportunities to find out about their local wildlife. Courses will run throughout the spring and summer months covering reptiles, butterflies and dragonflies.

Not only will the project seek to get people out recording, it will also help to “mobilise” historic records for Ayrshire, which have often been untouched for years. We have already managed to access over 30,000 records for Ayrshire from an old Recorder 2002 database, which we are gradually re-importing into our modern database “Recorder 6”. The project has also recruited a volunteer to assist with digitising paper records lurking in the vaults of the Scottish Wildlife Trust. It is an exciting time for the Where's Wildlife in Ayrshire project, and we are well on target to hit our aim of mobilising 100,000 records!

## Ride Scotland's Horse Country

Back in 2004, South Scotland Countryside Trails / Tweed Trails was an innovative project that sought to promote equestrian tourism in the Southern Uplands. The project put in place 350kms of off-road trails suitable for people to walk, cycle or ride. Since completion, the trails have been well-used, but primarily by local people. The lack of an ongoing marketing project meant there was no dedicated support for businesses to develop tourism based on the trails. A partnership of Future Hawick, British Horse Society Scotland and the Southern Uplands Partnership has started to address this issue by developing a business development project that will seek funding from the LEADER Programme and Scottish Enterprise.



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## Community Broadband

Rural Community Superfast Broadband (or the lack of it) continues to be a major concern. Throughout the year we have been working with a number of communities, under the guidance of Community Broadband Scotland, to try to develop a project that will get future-proof, fast broadband services to communities that are too far away to be of interest to the private sector (the cost of delivering a service will never be covered by the few users that will benefit). The complexity of the project has been amazing, and the ground continually shifts, but we have made progress, and it looks as if something will actually happen later this year. Frustratingly, there has been no funding available to cover the huge amount of development work that has been done by a small group of volunteers, ably led by Callum Hay. SUP has been able to offer support and we have fronted a number of fund applications which will hopefully allow the next phases to be carried out by paid staff. We are very grateful to Scottish Borders Council which has provided a community grant to help cover the cost of expertise and consultation work.

## Euro Rural Tourism



The idea of giving holiday makers an experience of rural life has been developed by \*seven countries under the banner of Euro Rural Tourism. SUP was the Scottish partner in this and we have worked with colleagues in France, Spain, Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Croatia to develop local packages. With the National Trust for Scotland and Galloway Holidays, we developed a holiday centred on Castle Douglas and this has now been promoted at trade events in France and Spain. Participants will get to undertake conservation activities at Threave, work with a local artist, try out cheese making, visit a brewery and go

on a night safari. Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Natural Heritage supported the project which also got EU funding. We hope it will get some buyers and start a trend for such holidays, which could bring benefits to a wide range of rural businesses and accommodation providers. You can see the results of the work at <https://euroruraltourism.eu/en/> and the Galloway holiday can be seen at <http://gallowayholidays.co.uk/tours/176/euro-rural-tourism>.

## Commissioned Work

### Dumfriesshire East Community Benefit Company

We are also now working with the Dumfriesshire East Community Benefit Company, setting it up as a SCIO and developing a rationale for applicants to its Community Benefit Fund from Ewe Hill Wind Farm, with an eye to supporting more strategic uses that will generate long term benefits for the communities.



## South West Scotland Coastal Path

SUP continues to work in partnership to realise shared ambitions for a South West Scotland Coastal Trail in Dumfries and Galloway. That partnership working has resulted in Dumfries and Galloway Council's Access Officer, Bryan Scott, securing funding to implement the results of the survey and negotiation work led by SUP on the Rhins a couple of years ago. The project is for £1m of route creation, interpretation and development of associated businesses infrastructure to support the new long distance path. It is hoped that work will commence in the autumn of 2017.

## Other Project Input

SUP has also been able to assist a number of local groups as they develop project ideas. We helped the South Scotland Golden Eagle project with a public consultation exercise. We have scoped out project feasibility ideas for the Cree Valley Community Woodland Trust to take over their local youth hostel and we worked with the Galloway Fisheries Trust to explore a number of different project development ideas and potential funders that might support them.

## National Parks in Southern Scotland?

There is growing interest and support for the idea of national parks in South Scotland. A Borders group is arguing for a Park to be established on the Scottish side of the Cheviot Hills extending perhaps as far as Langholm. In Galloway, there is a campaign for a Park centred on the same area as the Biosphere. SUP has contributed to both debates. We have also continued to lobby for more to be made of existing designations such as the National Scenic Areas and the more recent Wild Land Areas. If we don't tell the world we have areas of wildness and of scenic beauty, it is of little surprise that most people concentrate on those areas of Scotland where these characteristics are heavily promoted.

## Land Use Strategy

Brexit is likely to have as big an impact on the land and the way it is used as Foot and Mouth Disease had back in 2001. The ending of the CAP and the subsidy regime it has delivered will be a major shock because there will almost certainly be significantly less funding. At the same time, the pressure to increase woodland cover is stronger than ever, and there is a danger that declining marginal farms will be snapped-up by forestry companies. There is nothing wrong with the ambition to increase tree cover, but it needs to be the right kind of tree in the right place. The Land Use Strategy that was piloted in the Borders offers a potential way of helping to guide land-use decisions to maximise environmental and public benefits and we would very much like to see this approach developed further and extended across the Southern Uplands.

The above work is only possible because of the support we receive from our members, Patrons and partners. We thank them all warmly for their support and look forward to their continued involvement.



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