

Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) review of the engagement and consultation activity undertaken by NatureScot as the Reporter for the proposal for a National Park in southwest Scotland

April 2025

Content

Executive summary

1. Introduction & Scottish Community Development Centre's role.....	P5
2. Methodology and constraints	P6
3. Nationals Standards for Community Engagement	P7
• What are the National Standards	
• The role of the National Standards in Scotland	
• Are they enforceable?	
4. Were the National Standards principles delivered?.....	P10
5. Assessment using the National Standards.....	P13
• Interviews and Focus Groups Overview	
• Stages of the Engagement for the proposed National Park	
○ A. Planning and Working Together Standards	
○ B. Inclusion and Support Standards	
○ C. Methods and Communication Standards	
○ D. Impact Standard	
6. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	P40

Executive summary

What we did: This independent review assessed the extent to which NatureScot's work conformed to the underlying principles of the National Standards for Community Engagement (NSfCE), identified strengths and weaknesses in what was done, and offered recommendations for future engagement. We conducted this review using desk research views from a sample of stakeholders with diverse perspectives through interviews and focus groups involving 20 individuals across 16 organisations.

What we found: NatureScot's engagement on the National Park proposal achieved very impressive levels of public involvement, exceeding previous National Park consultations. It also achieved very significant reach and levels of participation compared to other public policy exercises including local council and National Health Service consultations.

Strong opinions on the substantive proposal and overlapping views of the engagement process itself, produced differing expectations of the process, and contested views on how questions were posed and analysed. The legislative framework also imposed timing and other constraints on the breadth and depth of the engagement which created some challenges. The consultancy commissioned to organise the public events noted similar issues, although what was achieved in relation to these elements of the consultation was also very positive.

Overall, NatureScot's planning of the work and the mixture of engagement methods employed were considered creative and appropriate, including significant efforts to reach excluded groups using imaginative methods. However, the review identified areas for potential improvement, particularly in capturing the input of socio economically marginalised communities.

Our research concluded that building trust and demonstrating neutrality are crucial aspects of this type of work and the process may have benefited from utilizing more available NSfCE tools such as VOICE. Earlier inclusion of local stakeholders through a local operational steering group in planning could have fostered greater shared ownership of the work, improved outreach and potentially reduced conflict. We also heard from participants express how more collaborative design was limited by lack of time in an externally restrictive timetable.

While efforts were made to engage protected characteristic groups and young people, uptake was varied, and specific contact approaches weren't always able to be followed up when initial approaches did not yield results. Accessibility of information materials was generally fair and imaginative but could be improved further with greater testing of materials and questionnaires and more use of different formats. Socio-economically disadvantaged groups presented specific inclusion

challenges requiring targeted outreach and more accessible return methods for paper surveys.

While NatureScot staff possess many appropriate skills, further training on the NSfCE and other tools and approaches could enhance future engagement. The consistency of data gathering across different engagement and consultation stages on who is taking part could be improved to assess the reach of the work, especially in relation to equalities groups. Explicit use of NSfCE could help promote understanding and trust, and potentially employing more deliberative discussion methods to facilitate informed consideration of diverse perspectives is recommended.

Despite these challenges, SCDC has concluded that this consultation compares very favourably with others and has demonstrated elements of very good practice in the use of the National Standards in Scotland. Although direct comparisons are difficult as very little data is gathered on this, it is our view that the work undertaken by NatureScot exceeds the levels of participation in many processes which seek to “engage” communities and take major decisions based on this. We take the view that NatureScot's commitment to using the National Standards and commissioning an independent review will support learning from this process and enhance future community engagement should the proposal progress.

Recommendations:

Future engagement should be informed by this review and the reflections from stakeholders with specific consideration to the following.

- Systematic and collaborative use of the NSfCE, potentially with the VOICE planning tool, is recommended to build trust through shared ownership with local people and stakeholders in planning and delivery.
- Widening involvement in planning and coordination from the outset is crucial to increase reach and impact, leveraging partner agencies' networks to engage seldom-heard voices and communities' informal connections.
- Targeted engagement with those affected by poverty and low incomes, alongside accessible return methods for paper surveys (like free collection points), are necessary.
- Additional training in community engagement skills and the NSfCE for local staff and those in partner agencies is suggested, especially if collaborative practices are adopted.
- A core set of comparable engagement questions and demographic information should be used across different engagement methods, with any variations being collaboratively informed.

- Exploring deliberative processes, such as citizens' panels and a citizens' assembly, alongside wider consultation, could be a valuable approach for future engagement.

1. Introduction & Scottish Community Development Centre's role

[Scottish Community Development Centre \(SCDC\)](#) is the leading organisation for community development and [community engagement](#) in Scotland. We work at a range of levels including policy influencing, practice development, network development and directly with local people and services through our funded programme delivery and consultancy work.

We currently support a wide range of communities and community anchor organisations to take [leading roles in local regeneration](#) and [community action planning](#) in their communities. We also support community organisations to develop and deliver their own research into issues that affect their lives through our work on [community led action research](#). Over the past 22 years we have played a leading role in developing policy, practice insights and tools for community development and engagement, including the [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) (NSfCE) which are of particular relevance to the delivery of this contract for NatureScot.

Our approach to the brief

NatureScot commissioned SCDC to independently review the planning and delivery of the engagement and consultation activity it undertook as the statutory Reporter for the Scottish Government proposal for a National Park in Galloway. To contribute to this process it was agreed that the research should:

“undertake a short review of NatureScot’s engagement and consultation work as Reporter on the Scottish Government proposal for a National Park in Galloway, and specifically to:

- *assess the extent to which the reporting work met the national standards for community engagement.*
- *identify the strengths and weakness of the reporting work undertaken in respect to these standards.*
- *make any recommendations to improve community engagement as part of any future work required if Ministers decide to proceed with designation following consideration of NatureScot’s advice”.*

SCDC was awarded the contract on the 10th of February 2025 with work commencing on the 12th of Feb. The review and its write-up had to be undertaken between Feb 14th (the end of the formal consultation period) and the end of April to allow for this review to both inform and be presented alongside NatureScot’s advice to Ministers.

Our challenge was to design and deliver a process which addressed the task in this relatively short period of time, including gathering views from desk research and a sample of participants in the engagement with a range of perspectives. The review also ran alongside the detailed analysis NatureScot was undertaking on the responses to the consultation.

The expectations of the reporter are set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. Section 3 and the provisions of Annexe A framed our approach and the design of our methods, within the constraints of time and budget. Although NatureScot were not legally required to use the NSfCE as the framework for the engagement they did do this. We therefore set out to explore the extent to which the Standards:

- Were consciously used to plan and deliver consultation.
- How potential stakeholders were identified and engaged and included in the process.
- What NatureScot's own self-evaluation of the strengths and challenges in the process could tell us.
- Whether the methods used were as good as they could be in enabling views of those supporting or opposing the park and how these were surfaced and explored.
- And to what extent engagement outcomes are framing future engagement and any improvement recommendations that might be required

2. Methodology and constraints

The scope of the review was limited to some degree by available time and resources. We also relied on NatureScot's contact with stakeholders to help identify a potential sample of participants who we then directly invited to take part. NatureScot already held contact information on those involved and circulated our invitation – this was essential given the short window to involve people and ensure that we did not breach the General Data Protection Rules. Having more time and resources to follow up on initial invitations to meet with us may have achieved an improved balance of views from those advocating for different positions. In general, we had more responses to our offer from those opposed to the National Park, or concerned about the process, as their published statements and other contact with NatureScot made them easier to identify. However, it is reasonable to assume that those who were generally happy with the approach to engagement or in favour of the park proposal would be less motivated to provide a view. Despite these challenges and given what we know about the process from the desk research of publicly available documents such as the Reporter plan and internal planning documents we were able to take a

view regarding the planning, we are confident that we have been able to draw reasonable conclusions about the process.

Our methodology involved a combination of desk-based research looking at what was done by whom, when, why and how and the extent to which this was consistent with the National Standards for Community Engagement. This helped us frame our exploration of the process and its implications via key informant interviews/focus groups with those planning and delivering the engagement and with other stakeholders holding contrasting views as far as possible from a range of perspectives, albeit from a small sample.

In total we spoke to 20 individuals across 16 organisations, including the main organisations advocating positions for and against the proposed park. Our sample included the following categories:

- NatureScot staff involved in planning the engagement
- Outside the Box staff involved in facilitating engagement work on the ground
- Institutional stakeholder representing farmers, landowners and regeneration organisations
- Groups advocating for or against the National Park who had views about the process as well as the substantive issues
- Community Councils and community groups

3. National Standards for Community Engagement

What are the National Standards?

The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) are good-practice principles designed to improve and guide the process of community engagement. Each of the seven Standards provide detailed performance statements that everyone involved can use to achieve the highest quality results and the greatest impact. They show what good engagement looks like, and how to do it. The 7 Standards are:

- **Inclusion** - We will identify and involve the people and organisations that are affected by the focus of the engagement.
- **Support** - We will identify and overcome any barriers to participation.
- **Planning** - There is a clear purpose for the engagement, which is based on a shared understanding of community needs and ambitions.
- **Working together** - We will work effectively together to achieve the aims of the engagement.

- **Methods** - We will use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.
- **Communication** - We will communicate clearly and regularly with the people, organisations and communities affected by the engagement.
- **Impact** - We will assess the impact of the engagement and use what we have learned to improve our future community engagement.

The role of the Standards in Scotland

The brief required the National Standards for Community Engagement (NSfCE) to be used to review the activity. A formal review of this kind is very unusual but it is an important development in the way the Standards can be used and we commend NatureScot for using them in this way.

It is important that the reader is clear about the role the NSfCE play in supporting community engagement in Scotland in terms of their legal status and the extent to which they can be enforced. They were developed in 2003/4 by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) with extensive participation from over 500 community and agency representatives. The Standards were first launched in 2005 and later refreshed in 2016 to ensure they remained relevant and effective. Although their role has evolved from this time they remain a voluntary set of principles that underpin good practice for community engagement. Essentially, they assist people and organisations to plan, monitor and evaluate community engagement processes in a way that's supports communities to be involved in local decision making and service planning and help capture learning for continuous improvement of practice.

Their purpose can be summarised as helping promote the Scottish Approach to public service reform and Government's expectations that services work with the communities they serve, involve them in decision making to improve outcomes for everyone. When they were first being developed many communities found it very difficult, or even impossible, to get a seat at the table in order to take part in decisions about policy and services which affect their lives. There is significant evidence that this situation has now improved partly as a result of the NSfCE and also other legislative and policy development e.g. The Community Empowerment Act, The Scottish Approach to service design, local place plans and the place principle. The Standards are central to the implementation of all of these and are widely and publicly accepted as principles by Scottish Government, large public bodies like the NHS, CoSLA and most local authorities as a framework for, delivering community engagement.

SCDC defines community engagement in the NSfCE as follows,

“Community engagement is a way to build and sustain relationships between public services and community groups - helping them both to understand and take action on the needs or issues that communities experience “.

In March 2024 Scottish Government described the NSfCE as follows:

“The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) are Scotland’s good-practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement, and improve what happens as a result. They describe the main elements of effective community engagement, and set out detailed performance statements that everyone involved can use to achieve the highest quality results and the greatest impact....They are intended to act as a central benchmark and ... have been widely accepted by a range of practitioners as key principles for effective practice.”

Are they enforceable?

When they were originally developed in 2003 and then refreshed in 2016, it was generally accepted that they should not be made statutory or compulsory but should build on willing partnerships to listen to communities and act on the results. However, the NSfCE are now cited in several pieces of Scottish legislation such as the Statutory Guidance for the Community Empowerment Act 2016, and the Children and Young People’s Scotland Act 2014 in relation to community involvement in children’s service planning, and in guidance for the Planning Scotland Act 2019. This type of guidance sets out Governments expectations of the implementation of legislation and where the Standards are cited and are part of that expectation.

We understand that where references to the NSfCE are clear and explicit in legislation they may be capable of being used as part of a case for judicial review in relation to some public sector decision making, but this has not been tested in law to date. However, The National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 does not explicitly reference the National Standards for Community Engagement.

Although there has been a great deal of improvement in community engagement since the launch of the Standards, there is still a lot of room for more diligent and consistent use and SCDC are always working to achieve this through advocacy, training and support. As part of a continued process SCDC has recently refreshed the standards and developed [VOiCE \(Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement\)](#). VOiCE supports integrated community engagement planning, monitoring and evaluation.

4. Were the NSfCE principles delivered?

SCDC thinks that this consultation has achieved a great deal in terms of numbers of people able to express a view and make systematic attempts to reach across the area and devise approaches that make it easier for different parts of the population to express opinions. We do think that some things could be strengthened for the future in terms of capturing the input of marginalised communities, where they wish to express an opinion.

At the time of writing, SCDC has not seen the full formal analysis of the consultation responses. While NatureScot has provided us with extracts of the analysis which provide information on the types and geography of participants, it is difficult to take a final position on what we think about the reach of the consultation. From what is already we have seen, it is expected that the analysis of response will confirm a very substantial number of people expressed views relative to other exercises of this type.

Against this backdrop, we welcome NatureScot's decision to make use of the Standards for the planning and evaluation of this process. The best way to improve the engagement experiences of communities is to make use of learning from real world examples. Although the strong feelings involved in the subject matter of this engagement have been challenging, it should be acknowledged that this is the first time that a government agency has invited an independent assessment of an engagement process using the NSfCE and we see this as a significant milestone in the status of the Standards as a tool to protect community interests and improve engagement quality.

Overall, this consultation compares very favourably with previous reporting work and other areas of public policy making at different levels. It has delivered participation at scale, has had robust reach across the area as a whole and has made real attempts to reach those whose voices are often excluded. The mixture of methods used across the engagement and consultation phases of the work compare very favourably with other similar exercises. This does not mean that there is nothing to learn and we believe that by using the NSfCE and commissioning independent assessment of the process NatureScot will be in a strong position to build on this process and potentially broaden and deepen future engagement once a ministerial decision about what designation has been made

A balanced view

Our experience suggests that it can be difficult for people to separate how they feel about the substantive issues in engagement from their feelings about the process by which their views have been sought, gathered and analysed. This is particularly the case in issues where there are directly opposing views being expressed strongly on different sides of an argument and/or where people are very motivated to advocate

for specific positions and see little room for compromise. It seems clear that this has been an issue in this case with significant and effectively expressed criticisms of the process obscuring to some extent the positive aspects of the work to engage local people and gather their views. This report takes a balanced approach based on a review of the strategic and operational planning documents and testimony of key informants who are close to the design of the process or experienced it as participants. It seeks to recognise the scale of the task, the significant achievements made and the learning for future action should Government seek to further engage local people on designation decisions on National Parks. This is developed further in our recommendations.

Comparisons for levels of community engagement in public decision making.

There are clearly strong views locally about what might be the relative weight of particular engagement methods and how these compare with similar exercises. NatureScot identified 52,000 households and business addresses in and around the proposed area as a whole and planned accordingly. We understand that around 5,230 survey responses were received (of which 94% were within or within 30km of the proposed area) and over 1,060 people took part in the programme of 30 formal consultation events. It has been very difficult to find and make comparisons with exercises that are similar enough in scale and purpose to what is being done in the current proposal. We have collated some observations from other forms of broader democratic participation to provide some idea of the wider democratic context.

Previous National Park consultations

The establishment of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park involved a comprehensive public consultation process with 550 responses to its survey element of which 33% were from within the proposed area which had a population of approximately 15,000 people. Since designation, public engagement has been a consistent aspect of the park's planning processes and it led the way in the development of community action planning through its Community Futures Programme. A recent consultation on the National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029 received 233 responses through surveys and emails, with an additional 75 contributions via comments on an interactive map and key sections on Commonplace, totalling 308 contributions.

The establishment of the Cairngorms National Park involved public consultations to gather input on its designation had 850 responses to its survey element of which 40% were from within the proposed areas which had a population of approximately 18,000 people. The consultation for the National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027 received 1,400 responses, nearly five times the engagement of the previous plan.

Electoral turnout

The consultation process in this case was not a first past the post style vote on the proposal to develop a new national park. However, it is worth noting that even in the most recent elections in Scotland, voter turnout is often significantly below numbers eligible to vote. Although not a direct comparison with consultation exercises of this

kind, this may be helpful in thinking about expectations of participation rates in different democratic process.

In the South of Scotland varied across different constituencies and council areas. Here's an illustration using available local turnout figures:

UK parliamentary Election Turnouts July 2024

- Dumfries and Galloway 58.3%
- Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale 61.5%.
- Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock 58.2%

Scottish Parliament Election Turnouts - May 2021

Scottish Parliament election, the average voter turnout in the South Scotland region was approximately 65.3%. This figure is slightly above the national average turnout of 63.5% for that election.

Scottish Local Elections (5 May 2022):

- Dumfries and Galloway Council - Voter turnout varied. The average was just under 50%, with the highest at 53.9% and the lowest at 39.3%.
- East Ayrshire Council: Turnout was 43.7%,.
- In South Ayrshire Council, the voter turnout was 49.7%,

Comparisons in other local public service decisions

Dumfries and Galloway Council conducted its recent Budget Consultation through both an online survey and in-person Community Conversations across all wards. However, the number of participants in this consultation has not been publicly disclosed.

Midlothian Council Budget Engagement reported that nearly 1,700 individuals and organisations participated in their budget consultation. Although it is more straightforward when people express a view on a narrower set of propositions, clearly what has been achieved in terms of participation rates in the process for potential designation of a National Park is considerably greater than this.

North Ayrshire Council Budget Engagement: Over 4,000 responses were received, marking it as the council's largest engagement exercise. Given North Ayrshire's population of approximately 136,000, this represents roughly a 3% engagement rate.

Dumfries and Galloway Cottage Hospital Closures - Over 1,229 people responded to the consultation on the future role of the four Dumfries & Galloway cottage hospitals (Moffat, Thornhill, Kirkcudbright, and Newton Stewart).

We would observe that the total participation levels in the current engagement work generally exceeds those achieved on issues which also involved strongly held views amongst local people.

East Ayrshire Community Action Plans:

In East Ayrshire, Community Action Plans (CAPs) are developed through a community-led process. These plans reflect the needs and aspirations of local people. The process involves community engagement activities such as surveys and public meetings to gather input from residents. There is a recommended minimum participation threshold of 40% to validate an Community Action Plan. But we understand this is currently under review for areas facing particular barriers to participation and the emphasis is on encouraging a broad spectrum of local views.

Clearly, all of these democratic and consultative processes are subject to variations in how people relate to them. For some they will have variable levels of interest or concern about the issues and may experience different factors which encourage or inhibit them from taking part.

6. Assessment using the National Standards

Interviews and Focus Groups Overview

In March 2025, interviews and focus groups were conducted as part of the review of the engagement and consultation process. Participants were initially invited by NatureScot and then coordinated directly with SCDC to arrange suitable times for their participation.

Focus groups, each involving multiple participants, were held at scheduled times throughout the month. Individual interviews were also conducted, with all sessions lasting between one hour and 90 minutes. The discussions were guided by a set of questions informed by the National Standards for Community Engagement, ensuring a consistent and values-led approach.

The findings presented in this report are drawn from the insights gathered during these interviews and focus groups, as well as documentation and additional information provided by NatureScot, the No Campaign, Outside the Box (OTB) consultants, and the Galloway National Park Association. (GNPA) and one individual resident.

Focus Groups Conducted:

- **Delivery and Planning Team:** Included the NatureScot Biodiversity Engagement and Learning Manager and the Project Manager for the Reporter Phase.

- **Stakeholder Group:** Included representatives from VisitScotland, the National Farmers Union (NFU), and the Galloway National Park Association.
- **Delivery and Management Team:** Included representatives from the NatureScot Management Team and Outside the Box (OTB) consultants.
- **Community Representation Group:** Included representatives from Community Councils and the Galloway National Park Association (GNPA).
- **No Galloway National Park Campaigners:** a community group opposed to the proposal.

Individual Interviews: These were a mixture of people who could not take part in the wider focus groups or who were identified as having a particular view about the process that needed to be gathered.

- A representative of the No Campaign
- A young person representing the No Campaign
- A representative from South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE)
- A Community Council representative/local farmer
- A representative from Scottish Land & Estates (SLE)

Stages of the Engagement for the proposed National Park

The Statutory Process

The National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 provides the legislative framework for all National Parks in Scotland, including a menu of options that can be tailored to meet the needs of each specific area on land or sea. It also sets out the statutory process for designating a National Park and the extensive process of consultation required, including the role of a “reporter” who is appointed by Scottish Ministers to provide information and advice on any proposals they make for a new National Park. The Act allows for NatureScot or any other body with the relevant expertise to undertake this role.

The reporting process requires extensive engagement and consultation with those within and nearby the selected area and covers the following matters which are framed by the relevant legislation. [Scottish Government’s requirements](#), as part of its commissioning of NatureScot as Reporter, stated:

7. As set out in Section 3(2) of the 2000 Act, NatureScot is required to consider and report to Scottish Ministers on the following matters:

- (a) the area which it is proposed should be designated as a National Park; (*
- b) the desirability of designating the area in question (with or without modifications) as a National Park;*

(c) the functions which it is proposed the National Park authority for the Park should exercise; and

(d) such other matters relating to the proposal as the requirement may specify

The reporting phase is not the only opportunity to gather residents views and is followed by two other statutory phases of engagement and consultation leading to the designation of a National Park. If, after considering the reporter's advice, Ministers decide to take the proposal forward, they consult for a further 12 weeks or more on a draft designation order which provides the detailed arrangements for the area, powers of the Park Authority and governance arrangements as well as the proposed and name of the National Park. The draft designation order is then finalised for scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament before being approved or rejected. Prior to the statutory process, in 2018/19 and 2023 the Galloway National Park Association had [also consulted locally](#) on its plans for National Park in this area which informed the joint Bid with the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve it made to Ministers in February 2024 which led to the statutory proposal by Scottish Ministers.

Undertaking the reporter role

NatureScot set out its role as the Reporter and how they proposed to approach the process of engagement and consultation in their [Reporter plan](#). Although they sought views on this plan via the NatureScot dedicated website they did not receive any comments.

The reporter plan identified the following three stages of work required:

- **Pre-Consultation Engagement Stage (August to mid-October 2024)**

This phase aimed to raise awareness of the proposal and involve local communities and stakeholders in shaping the consultation strategy. It also contributed to developing draft proposals for the formal consultation. This stage built on prior community engagement carried out by the Galloway National Park Association and the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere in support of their successful nomination.

- **Consultation Stage (November 2024 to January 2025)**

A formal 14-week consultation was conducted to gather public views on the detailed proposals, including levels of support or opposition. This was extended from 12 weeks which had originally been scheduled to compensate for the Christmas holidays which fell during the consultation period.

- **Advice Stage (February to April 2025)**

This stage focuses on analysing the consultation feedback and preparing final recommendations for Scottish Ministers. Oversight was provided by a Project Board, chaired by the Deputy Director of Nature and Climate for NatureScot and including senior members of NatureScot staff, Scottish Government and the two existing National Parks. The NatureScot Board is now scheduled to sign off on the final advice at the beginning of May 2025.

Against this background, we now consider the work NatureScot undertook as Reporter against the National Standards

A. Planning and Working Together Standards - *These Standards are crucial elements of high-quality engagement. The Standards emphasize that engagement should have a clear purpose, supported by sufficient resources to meet objectives, and that all partners involved should collaborate effectively to achieve these goals.*

The Purpose of the engagement

The purpose of the engagement was clearly understood by all participants in both the interviews and focus groups. Interviewees recognised that the consultation focused on whether a National Park should be established in the proposed area spanning Dumfries and Galloway, as well as East and South Ayrshire.

NatureScot's stated aim was to raise awareness of the ideas put forward by the Nominating organisations [Galloway National Park Association](#) and the [Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere](#) and provisionally accepted by the Scottish Government. This phase built on earlier [engagement work](#) during the nomination process which is reported to have spoken to in excess of 2,500 people and organisational representatives at more than 130 meetings.

The overall engagement and consultation process was designed to consult on what people think about the available options, and report back to the Scottish Government with feedback from those who live and work in the proposed area.

The initial Pre-Consultation Engagement stage, which ran from August to mid-October 2024, gathered input through a broad set of questions via an online questionnaire and in-person events where NatureScot spoke to residents and community organisations and stakeholders.

Based on the insights gathered during the Pre-consultation Engagement stage, a specific consultation plan was then developed to explore the key issues. NatureScot planning team described the reporting stage as a 'kind of codesign' for the Park with the community, supporting people to make decisions about the area for the Park, the governance structures and so on. The consultation process was designed with a clear purpose and a commitment to co-designing key aspects of the Park with the community and this is set out in the Reporters role. Some participants in the focus

groups and interviews said that they were more than happy to explore the geography and governance structure options, however others stated that they wanted a straightforward 'Yes' and 'No' option without codesigning the proposed Park or at the very least the 'No' option should be explored in the same detail as the 'Yes' option in questionnaires and in person events.

Some challenges and tensions emerged about the purpose of the engagement from an early stage as different community groups wanted different levels and focus of engagement. NatureScot staff in the focus group advised that the approach to exploring the 'Yes' and 'No' options were not entirely flexible due to the prescribed role of the Reporter arising from the legislative framework. The Act states that the reporting process should involve extensive engagement and consultation with stakeholders in and around the proposed area. This should primarily involve gathering views on whether the area should be designated as a National Park, the powers and functions of the National Park Authority, and other topics outlined in the Scottish Minister's statutory proposal. This included the boundary and the powers and nature of representation on the Park Authority. So as Reporter, NatureScot were required to focus on gauging the levels of support or opposition to this proposal and alternatives to it suggested by local people as well as the detailed arrangements for how a Park could be run if it went ahead.

Balancing these questions proved challenging, particularly as communities and local groups held radically different views on which aspects should be prioritised. It's also important to note that since NatureScot would not be responsible for managing any future Park Authority, it was only able to provide general information on the potential benefits and drawbacks of National Park status. Some participants expressed frustration with this limitation, feeling that more concrete details were needed to make an informed decision about whether to support the proposal.

Planning

The NatureScot Reporter Team coordinated the engagement and consultation activity. Its work was overseen by a NatureScot Project Board comprising senior staff, a NatureScot board member, the CEOs from both existing National Parks and CEMVO and Scottish Government. It also sought input from its [Stakeholder Advisory Group](#) which had been established in 2022 but had been widened following the publication of the proposal to include membership from the SW of Scotland (including all three local authorities, SOSE and local representatives from national organisations such as Forest and Land Scotland, VisitScotland and NFUS). Both the Project Board and the Advisory Group provided advice on engagement and consultation including on engaging those with protected characteristics.

The Reporter plan, as outlined by NatureScot, aimed to reach as many people as possible in the Dumfries and Galloway, East, and South Ayrshire regions affected by

the proposed National Park. The plan also sought to identify less heard voices in the community and provide additional support and resources to ensure their participation. As well as people with Protected Characteristics NatureScot staff identified engagement with young people and people in rural and disadvantaged areas who may be economically challenged and not have transport or the means or awareness of the Park discussions to have their voices heard. Detailed plans for engaging young people and those with protected characteristics were also drawn up and an Equalities and Impact Assessment (EQIA) was also developed alongside the Reporter plan. The NatureScot team, in collaboration with the facilitation consultancy firm Outside the Box, worked to ensure the necessary resources were available to meet the objectives outlined in the consultation period, which ran for 12 weeks, in line with the minimal requirements set out in legislation. This period was subsequently extended to 14 weeks to account for the Christmas holidays. The formal consultation on the potential National Park in Galloway took place from November 2024 to 14th February 2025.

Prior to this, a Pre-consultation Engagement stage (August to mid-October) included an online questionnaire to gather broad input on the potential National Park.

During the Pre-consultation Engagement Stage NatureScot also:

- wrote to all local authorities, community councils and community development organisations in the area proposed in the Bid alerting them of the process the proposal and seeking meetings with them.
- Posted a leaflet to households and businesses about the proposal and held a series of online and in person meetings with local regional and national stakeholders.
- Wrote and provided a briefing to over 250 organisations across these sectors and published education resources for schools.
- Launched the community information hub in Sept 2024 to answer questions, provide key information and provide information about the engagement stages. From 10 September to 28 October **1,237** people subscribed for email updates. These updates were delivered in the form of weekly 'news updates' on common themes that were being raised via the online community hub, summarising responses and highlighting new surveys that had been published.
- Provided a range of information about National Parks and its work as reporter on its [webpages](#), including regular updates and FAQs

During the Consultation stage, two types of questionnaires were promoted: a technical survey (featuring over 40 questions completed by 449 respondents many on behalf of organisations) and a summary consultation (featuring over 10 questions available online and as a paper copy completed by 4,923 respondents), both were available online. An initial information leaflet and an information booklet with a paper version of the questionnaire was also distributed to 52,000 households in the proposed areas.

The dedicated NatureScot Reporter Project team was overseen by a NatureScot Project Board and supported by a Stakeholder Advisory Group made up of representatives from both national and local organisations. While these structures are generally beneficial, SCDC feels that NatureScot would also have benefitted from establishing a local planning group that included community and local agency stakeholders with direct experience, knowledge, and deep connections within the local communities. The Standards see those seeking to engage communities and those being engaged as partners in the process and therefore the building of mutual trust and understanding about the purpose, planning and methods of engagement is a key aim. A broader local planning group could have provided valuable insights into how to plan and execute the engagement process more effectively, particularly when considering local contexts and use of local resources. We recognise that this would be challenging given the strength of local views, but SCDC would always advise that seeking to maximise trust and support in the engagement process should always be attempted.

In the focus groups and interviews with stakeholders, some participants noted that they were informed about the engagement process, but their involvement was limited to providing information, contact details, and keeping their networks updated, rather than being actively involved in designing or ongoing support for the engagement. Greater involvement of local stakeholders might have provided additional perspectives, especially from individuals or organisations with stronger ongoing connections in the community, such as Community Learning and Development (CLD) workers within the local authorities. These professionals have specific engagement skills, significant knowledge of their communities and could have contributed useful insights on how to effectively plan to reach less heard voices and execute the engagement process. In our experiences community led organisations can play a meaningful role at this stage although the polarised nature of the debate may have made this very difficult.

Timing

Most interviewees indicated that the 12-week engagement period, plus an additional two weeks, provided a sufficient timeframe for participants to provide feedback. However, all interviewees acknowledged that the timing of the consultation during the Christmas period posed some challenges, but the two-week extension at the end of the process was seen as a useful way to address this issue. Both NatureScot staff and interviewees agreed that additional time for relationship-building with communities and less heard voices could have been beneficial. Some interviewees suggested that more time might have allowed for stronger connections and a better mutual understanding between the community, NatureScot and stakeholders. Similarly, more time would have been useful to fully engage and develop relationships with young people and those experiencing economic challenges in the community by engaging them through outreach activity.

Participants in the local stakeholder focus group said that the announcement of the proposed Galloway National Park by the Scottish Government in July 24 was unexpected for both NatureScot staff and stakeholders, which resulted in an initial lack of preparedness to respond to queries. One stakeholder noted that the announcement created a "vacuum" leading to speculation and uncertainty due to the absence of a formal or clear response from some agencies. This delay meant that materials about the proposed park were not distributed to households for a significant period following the announcement. Those local people who opposed the proposal were able to use this time to get their message out to the wider community which set an initial tone with limited response from NatureScot or others in the first couple of weeks, which some felt was unhelpful in facilitating a flow of balanced information about the options.

Working with local and National Partners

NatureScot describe positive working relationships with local partners via one to one meetings which kept them informed about the process. From the outset the support of the NatureScot Project Board and Stakeholder Advisory Group was invaluable.

The collaboration between NatureScot and Outside The Box (OTB) was generally effective, with the in-person events evolving as the formal programme of consultation events progressed, following review sessions conducted together. The two teams were able to respond efficiently and produce materials to support the consultation process. Some materials were adjusted based on feedback from OTB, as they gained a better understanding of the information that participants were seeking or wanted to have more opportunities to express their opposition to the proposal.

During the planning phase, NatureScot and OTB worked together to identify locations and timing of the in-person events designed to maximise opportunities for range of people to take part. Five additional events were also added to the original programme in response to feedback.

B. Inclusion and Support Standards - *Effective engagement should involve individuals, groups, and organisations directly affected by the focus of the engagement, while also identifying and addressing any barriers that may prevent less-heard voices from participating.*

NatureScot took steps to identify groups that have traditionally faced barriers to participation in community engagement processes. An Equality Impact Assessment was developed to highlight communities with protected characteristics. Some of the groups identified as less heard locally included young people, minority ethnic groups, and individuals with protected characteristics with separate more detailed strategies prepared for these. NatureScot also identified several barriers to participation, including the time constraints for outreach and relationship-building, rural poverty

and its impact on participation, the broad geographical area to cover, general apathy towards the National Park proposal in some areas and with some groups, and polarization between the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns.

Protected characteristics

These groups may have required additional resources to facilitate their participation in discussions about the proposed National Park. The full list of groups included in the NatureScot Reporter Plan:

- Ethnic minority groups
- Multicultural associations
- Interfaith groups
- D&G Equality and Diversity Working Group
- Older adults
- Disabled groups
- LGBTQ+ groups
- Single-parent households
- Low-income groups
- Carers

The top three priority groups identified were ethnic minority groups, multicultural associations, and interfaith groups. NatureScot sought advice from CEMVO, YoungScot, Youthlink Scotland, RNIB and the D&G Equality and Diversity Group on how to contact and effectively engage these groups and gather their perspective on a proposed Park.

Delivering meaningful involvement from those who may be most excluded is something that is a common issue in most engagement contexts and a challenge faced by all those delivering this type of work. Where it does work it depends on practice which builds trust, a sense of relevance for those being targeted and a real understanding of barriers to getting involved and deployment of resources to overcome these.

There were some positive and creative efforts to engage individuals with protected characteristics, including a radio interview for visually impaired audiences broadcast on RNIB Radio, the production of easy-read materials for people with learning disabilities, and resources designed for use in schools. While these efforts did result in reasonable engagement with young people, overall success in reaching other protected groups was limited. Additionally, there appeared to be no consistent approach across the various engagement methods to monitor participation by people with protected characteristics. Establishing a clear and inclusive monitoring framework should be a priority for future stages of engagement.

Constraints such as limited lead in time, the fact that relevant groups were not meeting during consultation and perhaps limited experience of ways to follow up on engaging those with specific protected characteristics when initial contact strategies do not succeed are often factors which can affect success. SCDC recognise that significant efforts were made to bring people to the table but that more could potentially have been done. We recommend that the EQIA process is used to record what was done and what learning has arisen from this prior to the next stage of engagement being developed.

Young people

NatureScot also identified young people as a priority group for the engagement. To engage them, a youth pack was created during the pre-consultation phase for schools and community youth organisations to use with their members. NatureScot provided this information directly to all secondary schools and youth groups in the proposed area and were invited to visit six secondary schools to talk to the assemblies and provided information. During the school visits, NatureScot staff spoke to the assemblies and engaged more closely with 313 young people in classroom settings to explore some of the consultation themes and enable them to consider their own views on the proposals. NatureScot advise that an additional report detailing young people's responses will be produced as part of its submission to Ministers.

Emails were sent to local and national youth organisations, such as Scouts, Children's Parliament, Scottish Youth Parliament, and local authority youth panels to raise awareness of the proposal, share Park resources and invite them to work with NatureScot. Unfortunately this had limited uptake. NatureScot said in focus groups that "Information was shared through the various established youth networks and some will have used the resources for discussion while others decided to avoid the topic, due to the strength of feeling in the local area."

NatureScot met with 25 young people who were part of the South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) Youth Advisory Forum, East Ayrshire Council Children and Young People Cabinet. As with school visits, sessions began with a presentation to raise awareness of the proposal, the consultation process and how young people can have their say if they wish. Sessions included the same warm up questions as the schools and some of their responses were recorded for further analysis. NatureScot have also reported that attempts to involve the youth panel from the Cairngorm park as a resource for Galloway young people considering what they might want to say about the issues affecting them did not proceed due to concerns that these young people had about the "atmosphere" of the online debate in relation to Galloway and how views about the consultation process locally were being expressed.

While NatureScot has managed to engage with a high number of young people through the school visits in particular, this has not led to direct participation in the consultation survey itself or community events. In SCDC's experience this is not unusual and it is often necessary to devise different approaches to gathering young people's views in work such as the development of action plans. 163 respondents to the Consultation survey identified themselves as being a student or in full time education which is fairly low, accounting for 3.1% of the 5,230 valid responses. NatureScot have used 'student status' and 'in full time education' as a proxy for young people which may not be completely accurate as the term applies to adults as well. This highlights the need for consistent data collection across all methods of engagement. A similar result for young people was recorded for the Pre Consultation Engagement survey (October 24) which showed that individuals aged 16-24 accounted for only 1.7% (13 responses), while those aged 25-34 accounted for 6.9% (51 responses). In contrast, the largest response came from individuals aged 64-74, who made up 50.8% (378 responses). [Information provided by NatureScot taken from the Consultation Stage survey and Common Place Engagement Platform used in the pre-consultation survey]

Likewise, the analysis of the in-person events developed by OTB suggests that a low number of school age young people attended the in-person events. Out of 1,160 people attending these events 11 identified as school children which equates to 0.9% of participants. [statistics taken from OTB report].

Information and Events

Information was made available both online and in printed leaflet format and was generally of a high standard. However, some respondents found the language to be inaccessible. This challenge partly stems from the statutory nature of the questions that needed to be addressed, which made it difficult to frame them in ways that were easily understood by all audiences while still covering what are often quite technical issues. Ideally, this kind of concern could be addressed through early involvement of a local planning group, including community members and other stakeholders, who could help shape questions in a way that is more broadly accessible.

The online consultation portal was launched in September, with separate information and survey leaflets distributed to 52,000 households in early October and November. In SCDC's view, this represents a significant effort to address digital exclusion and ensure wider access to the consultation process.

The extensive programme of formal consultation events was scheduled at central locations within the proposed boundaries and at various times, including mornings, afternoons, and evenings, to accommodate parents with school-age children, older individuals, and those working during the day. In addition to central locations, events were also held in smaller villages to ensure broad community participation within the available resources. A total of 30 workshops were held in locations throughout the

proposed park area and 1,160 people attended these. We consider the number and location of these events to have provided good opportunities for participation across the areas affected by the proposals

The in-person events took place in accessible venues and used materials designed to be clear, and easy to understand. They included high-contrast maps, legible documents, large font sizes, and space for wheelchair users. Additional support was available, such as scribes, assistance with reading materials, translation software upon request, and hearing loops in some venues for video presentations. NatureScot were also present at events to provide answers to specific questions rather than having a facilitation role.

Perceptions of intimidation

One of our focus groups addressed the issues of perceived intimidation at the meetings. It is clear that this process has resulted in active campaigning approaches from those hoping to influence the results of the consultation period in one direction or other from the beginning. This is particularly, but not exclusively, the case on the no side.

Against this backdrop, the design of the community drop-in events tried to create a safe accessible and enjoyable space for people to share and express their views and have their questions answered. This is an approach which is in line with the Inclusion Standard in the NSfCE to create processes where those whose views are sought can provide them in an inclusive context – especially where they may need to overcome barriers related to access, processes and confidence in order to do so.

However, Outside the Box staff reported what they perceived to be “aggressive” and “intimidating” behaviour by some people in a number of events which created an “unpleasant atmosphere”. At some events No campaigners displayed banners outside the venue and no campaign leaflets handed out to people on their way in, this was attempted inside venues in two cases but Outside the Box staff dissuaded this. Staff observed that some people who were undecided or positive towards the proposed Park seemed less likely to complete engagement activities and write comments, especially when there were other people around.

We recognise that there can be a tension between creating a platform for engagement which on the one hand encourages people to take a considered and careful view on the issues and on the other enabling people to robustly express valid and strongly held opinions. SCDC has witnessed this in relation to issues such as housing stock transfers but in general consultation and engagement seeks to encourage a less combative process. We have also observed the increasing role that social media plays, and it is clear that in this consultation some of online content has been accusatory and dismissive of various views in the process. In this context

there does seem to be a danger that processes can have long term divisive impacts on communities and local relationships. We would urge that to avoid either actual or perceived intimidation and prior to any further engagement taking place, greater effort is needed to have conversations amongst stakeholders and campaigners to establish an agreed approach which supports debate but avoids unnecessary and damaging conflict.

Economic Poverty & Rural Areas

NatureScot’s SIMD data recognised regions such as South West Stranraer, Rhins, Machars, Wigtown, North Girvan, Dalmellington, Sanquhar, and the surrounding areas of Newton Stewart fall into the lowest 15%-20% of the SIMD index. This suggests that residents in these areas may have fewer resources to engage, such as limited access to IT and Wi-Fi, childcare, and transportation or that their economic situation means that they have other pressing everyday living priorities. Additionally, Wi-Fi strength in some parts of Galloway is inconsistent.

To address these barriers, NatureScot offered both online and paper copies of the questionnaire to each household and responded to requests for materials in accessible formats, such as large print, high-contrast maps, easy read and audio versions of materials, with some content broadcast on RNIB Radio. Take up of these easy access options was quite low which may indicate that the offer of these resources may not have been reaching those who needed them.

Accessible venues, including in the more income deprived areas were selected for events, and participants were supported in understanding and responding to the questions. The events, which were designed to be visually engaging, attracted a large number of attendees, including individuals who supported and opposed the proposed National Park. According to participants in the interviews and focus groups Outside the Box facilitated discussions well and helped people navigate the questions in a fair and impartial way. NatureScot staff were on hand at these events to help with any technical questions.

NatureScot reached out to a wide range of community groups, but feedback from groups addressing rural poverty was limited, despite the recognition of this as a barrier to participation. These groups, such as foodbanks, family support organisations were not fully engaged as part of the process. There was a noticeable reliance on leaflets distributed to households in economically deprived areas to encourage responses to the survey and attendance at community events, which were primarily advertised online or through local posters as the events were coming closer.

SIMD Quintile	Total Responses by postcode	
1	81	2%

2	771	20%
3	1822	48%
4	904	24%
5	226	6%
Total	3804	

[Table Provided by NatureScot]

While not uncommon for surveys of these types, the preliminary postcode data indicates that those in the most deprived areas did not respond in significant numbers to the questionnaire. From those people who gave their postcode details, the most deprived area SIMD Quintile 1 which accounts for 20% of the most deprived areas in the proposed Park area. The data provided by NatureScot suggests that responses to the consultation questionnaire were most limited among people living in SIMD Quintile 1 areas with only 2% responding. This would disproportionately affect those experiencing the greatest levels of relative disadvantage in areas such as income, employment, health, education, housing, crime, and access to services. However, we note that estimated response rates from quintile 2, were significantly higher perhaps indicating that more people in lower incomes in this quintile used either the online or paper survey. A fuller picture of this should be available in the analysis report on the survey itself and the results considered as part of future engagement planning.

It should be recognised that it can be very difficult to motivate people with other pressing priorities such as food insecurity to go online and/or complete a survey. This is why more specific resources and methods should be used to support those most economically challenged and with fewer resources to engage. SCDC are aware of examples of where targeted Facebook advertising of online surveys, pre-paid envelopes or enhanced collection of paper survey responses by staff or volunteers have produced greater response rates in disadvantaged areas. In SCDCs view the decision not to provide this in areas of greatest need may have had an impact on the survey return rate, especially in the most deprived data zones in quintile 1. We have addressed this in our conclusions and recommendations.

C. Methods and Communication Standards - *these Standards are fundamental components of high-quality engagement. Engagement methods should be purpose-driven, while communication must be clear, accessible, and regularly updated.*

The Pre-consultation Engagement survey was designed to gather input on potential options for the main engagement phase and to explore how well the proposed area aligned with the provisions of the Act, including the extent to which the area met the requirements outlined in the Act.

The Pre-consultation Engagement stage (lasting 10 weeks) and the Consultation stage (lasting 14 weeks, including an additional 2-week extension) employed a variety of methods to reach a broad audience. These methods included online questionnaires, a postal survey, and outreach to key stakeholder groups such as The Biosphere, VisitScotland, Land & Estates, outreach to 53 Community Councils

(CC), 43 Community Organisations and local elected members. Contact was made with all secondary schools, and specific workshops about the proposed National Park were delivered to 6 high schools. Additionally, in person meetings were held in areas within the boundaries of the proposed park. Meetings attended by NatureScot staff include – Girvan CC, Kirkmaiden CC, Stewartry (15 combined CCs) and the Loch Doon Association. They also spoke at the open community event organised by Ted Leeming in November in Newton Stewart attended by over 100 local people.

While they wrote to all of them, NatureScot did not manage to meet with more than half of the 50 plus community councils and local organisations during the pre-consultation stage. This was partly due to the timing of Community Council meetings (mostly monthly) as well the elections which some were having which limited their member's availability and capacity. Logistically, the large number of meetings required to reach all of them was challenging. Additionally, some community councils and local groups chose to organise their own meetings on the proposed National Park, independently inviting both the Galloway National Park Association (GNPA) and representatives of the 'No' campaign to present their views. A list of these joint presentations delivered to community councils is provided below:

- Kirkbean
- Girvan
- Gatehouse of Fleet
- Balmagie (inc's Lauriston and Bridge of Dee)
- Colvend
- Kirkcolm
- Kirkmaiden
- Drummore
- Kirkmicheal

[Information provided by the No Galloway National Park and Galloway National Park Association]

A dedicated website provided information about the proposal, and updates were sent via email to those who requested them. NatureScot also distributed information booklets to local Community Councils and community groups throughout the area.

An online information hub was maintained by NatureScot for anyone interested in the proposal, offering updates and opportunities to share feedback. The Hub included information about Scottish National Parks and details of the engagement process, both online and in person. NatureScot responded to 430 separate emails received, from 244 correspondents (a rough average of 18 per week excluding the Christmas holidays). These were mostly from mid-August 2024 to mid-February 2025, i.e. the end of the consultation period. The majority, 321, were about the process. Many were about infrastructure / investment / tourism (275); there were some (24) about details of the proposed Park.

To maximize outreach, NatureScot delivered an information leaflet about the park proposal to 52,000 addresses during the pre-consultation phase. The leaflet included a link to the NatureScot website and at a later stage a copy of the questionnaire was mailed for those who preferred not to respond online.

In terms of communication, materials presented on the website and in leaflets were reviewed by the NatureScot communication staff.

NatureScot received a large number (5,387) of responses to the consultation survey across three formats:

- A short version with 10 questions, which received 4,597 (85.3%) responses
- A technical survey with 28 more detailed questions, which received 449 (8.3%) responses
- A paper survey with 10 questions, which received 341 (6.3%) responses

Of this total, we understand that NatureScot have assessed that **5,230** are valid responses across all surveys (invalid responses were ones which did not provide respondent information, were duplicates from the same individual or were test surveys). This is a notably higher response rate compared to previous National Park consultations, such as the Loch Lomond & Trossachs (550 responses) and Cairngorms (850 responses). It is important to note that both of these earlier consultations took place several years ago and relied solely on postal responses without the use of online platforms.

NatureScot also offered information in multiple formats, including large print and maps with colour variations and there was a paper questionnaire, and people could also request additional questionnaires for households.

Stakeholders were encouraged to complete the questionnaire as organisations and to advise their members or service users to respond individually, either online or via hard copy.

Some issues identified in the focus groups and interviews regarding the questionnaire and the website included the following points:

- Some people felt that the questionnaire was biased toward establishing a National Park due to the focus on the "Yes" option. The questionnaire explored various operational aspects of the National Park, such as the geographical area, governance structure, and powers (e.g., planning and access). However, some participants felt there were no similar options for respondents who opposed the National Park to propose alternative

solutions that would support local environmental conservation, job creation, and protection of local industries.

- The No campaign argues that the overall structure of the consultation survey was biased, operating on an underlying assumption of support for National Parks. They contend that many questions did not offer a clear option to express opposition. For instance, when asked about preferred locations for the proposed Park, respondents could only choose from the illustrated areas or select 'don't know/no opinion,' with no option to explicitly reject the proposal. In the absence of guidance notes, this design may have led participants to select from the limited options available. In response to this criticism NatureScot noted that it clearly stated on the website pages where the links to the surveys could be accessed and in the household survey that people did not have to answer all questions. In response to correspondence on this issue, they had also confirmed that *if a respondent indicated opposition to the proposed National Park in Question 1, that stance will be assumed to apply to subsequent answers unless explicitly stated otherwise*. The analysis of the data also accounts for this.
- Not all households received a copy of either the information leaflet or the household survey leaflet, due to issues with the Post Office's delivery process. In response to concerns raised over the information leaflet, the Royal Mail informed NatureScot that the leaflets were not a tracked service so they could not provide more information about delivery of this. It seems possible that some households may have overlooked the first smaller leaflet as junk mail as to the best of SCDC's knowledge the Royal Mail record of delivering such things is good, however some further exploration may be useful. For the household survey, NatureScot deliberately choose a much a larger size of leaflet and advertised its delivery online so more people would look out for it.
- The survey leaflet did not include prepaid return envelopes, and there were no local drop-off points (such as at schools, libraries, or post offices) for completed surveys. NatureScot advised that respondents could drop off completed questionnaires at in person events, and nearly all returns arriving without stamps were accepted and postage was covered by NatureScot. NatureScot decided against prepaid postage on the ground of value for money as it would have been difficult to justify the additional printing and postage costs for what they thought was likely to a small proportion of responses compared to the other opportunities that were providing as part of the consultation (see comments above on Inclusion)
- Some respondents reported difficulties navigating the website, with concerns about the presentation and user-friendliness.
- While the consultation paper which accompanied the surveys presented the main arguments that had been made for and against the proposed National Park, the website contained links to materials supporting the National Park proposal but did not include information from the opposing No campaign.

- Some technical aspects of the online maps were challenging to use.
- The technical questionnaire was reported by some participants in the focus groups as overly complex, with concerns about the clarity of language.
- There was some concern from partners that the Stakeholder Advisory Group did not have input into the design of the questionnaire.

Design of In-person consultation events

A key aspect of NatureScot's approach as Reporter was engaging with people directly in their communities. NatureScot team made an effort to attend community meetings and stakeholder events to explain the National Park engagement process and answer questions about the proposed Park. This approach was appreciated by local people, as it provided an opportunity to ask questions and make informed choices.

Between November 2024 and February 2025 Outside the Box facilitated and hosted 30 local community drop-in events across Southwest Scotland and three online events. The goal was to ensure that the events were inclusive and allowed participants to ask questions, learn about the proposal and share their views in a comfortable and supportive environment. Attendees were encouraged to provide feedback on various topics through interactive boards, spaces for anonymous comments, and open discussions.

The activities and information mirrored the information available online via the NatureScot website and the consultation document sent to every household. The activities included:

A welcome desk – where people were welcomed, invited to sign in, the event and activities were explained, and refreshments offered

Park boundary options – maps with 3 options were outlined, and people indicated their preference and left comments via post-it notes

Frequently Asked Questions – 5 of the most common questions were answered, and people were encouraged to add additional questions and comments

Powers of the proposed park – options around planning controls, access and forestry

Proposed role and make up of the park board – options on size and roles, and asking for skills for board members

Wider pros and Cons – outlining the key pros and cons of the proposed Park

SWOT analysis – a facilitated activity where people were encouraged to offer their opinions on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the proposal

H-diagram – a facilitated activity where people indicated, via a red dot, how they felt about the proposal and offered comments on what they liked, did not like and the changes they wanted to see

Flourishing tree – where people were encouraged to share their hopes and dreams for the area if a National Park didn't go ahead.

Priorities – pictures of 14 potential areas where a National Park could be involved. People used sticky dots to give their 3 priorities for the Park.

For each activity people were encouraged and supported to give their views via post-it notes which they wrote on. At these events, individuals who were opposed to the Park were also given the opportunity to suggest alternative ideas for the area.

There were six geographical hubs designed to bring together multiple communities, with a total of 30 drop-in events. These were held in accessible venues such as community centres and church halls, at various times to accommodate different schedules (e.g., 11 am to 1 pm, 4 pm to 6 pm, and 6 pm to 8 pm). The hub events spanned three days, with at least one evening session offered. In smaller towns, the team organised one session and promoted it through local advertising channels like social media, posters, and word of mouth.

The events were conducted in well-known public buildings, ensuring that attendees felt comfortable and the venues were accessible. Outside the Box facilitated discussions in communities with differing opinions, helping participants express their views in an open and supportive manner. The events were well-attended, though some local authorities chose not to promote them, while local venues and social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook were used to advertise the events.

The in-person events attracted over **1,158** participants. The sign in process indicates that they came from a broad cross section of the community. People were asked to identify their interest in the issue and current status as they arrived. Of those who responded to the question at the reception desk it appears that a broad cross section of the proposed Park area turned out. People described themselves in the following categories:

Local resident

795

School children	11
Farmer	97
Local interest	13
Business/Landowner	22
Local group	1
Works locally	29
Councillor	10
Holiday house	3
No category given	141
	1,122

[Categories adapted by SCDC from OTB In-person events report]

Between November 24 and January 25, a number of changes were made to the events in response to experience and feedback. For example, after feedback at the first two hubs additional information boards were produced with the pros and cons of a National Park, and NatureScot provided information sheets using material from the consultation paper on the case for a National Park and a note on the advantages and disadvantages of a National Park for people to read and take home. The exercise on the area boundary was also modified to include a 'no' category of response.

At the events, informal feedback was gathered at the welcome desk from people as they left the events.

Feedback tended to fit into four areas. People said:

- it was useful and informative, and they felt they had a chance to have their say, leave comments and talk with NatureScot staff.
- the information was too vague, and the proposal was unclear making it hard to comment.
- the information boards were too wordy with too much to read and take in.
- some didn't like the dots and post-it notes approach because they felt they were being treated like children. [Information supplied by OTB]

Most people said the events were useful. Outside the Box observation of people at the events was that they welcomed the opportunity to have conversations with NatureScot and Outside the Box staff.

While overall the in-person events were positively received by local people, some attendees felt that there were not enough evening sessions to accommodate people who work during the day, including farmers and foresters. However, the attendee

information above suggests that there was a good cross section of local people. The timing and venues of the events were primarily communicated through the NatureScot website, and some focus groups participants noted that the dark evenings during the winter months may have deterred attendance.

Participants also noted that while the facilitation was effective, some of the materials related to options and legislation were perceived as complex and jargon-heavy, which may have hindered local people from fully engaging. Outside the Box worked to present information in a way that was as clear and accessible as possible and supported people to interpret the questions and respond in their own terms.

A few participants felt that the events were overly simplistic and somewhat patronizing, though the majority found them to be accessible and helpful.

An issue arose regarding the desire expressed by participants during the events for an additional and clear "No" option on the questions which asked for views of the detailed arrangements for the proposed National Park. As a result, the "No" option was added after Christmas to the exercise on the geographic area of the proposed National Park. This did not invalidate the responses previously collected, as these responses were simply recoded to take account of this change. These changes were made to align the engagement process with participant feedback. At each of the 30 events held, the H-diagram exercise clearly allowed everyone to express their support or opposition to the proposal.

Outside the Box provided a feedback form for individuals to share their thoughts on the process. NatureScot also updated its FAQs in response to questions and comments left.

Throughout the process, anyone who wanted to could contact NatureScot directly via a dedicated email account for any specific questions. This was promoted at all of the events if there were any unanswered questions. The dedicated email account received 430 separate emails from 244 correspondents. These were mostly received from mid-August 2024 to mid-February 2025, the end of the consultation period. The majority, 321, were about the process (including, information about location of events) though many also sought more information about the implications of a National Park or its detailed operation. Some correspondents asked several questions or raised different issues across a number of emails. It should be noted that in terms of the inbox as an indicator of engagement 30 people were responsible for sending 173 emails and 3 people sent 50 of them. This may be due to some of these individuals operating in a representative role.

Participants in the SCDC focus groups and interviews predominately agreed that the in-person events generally worked well and provided a good opportunity for people attending to have their say. While the engagement process was well-received

overall, there were suggestions that more time could have been allocated to explain the purpose of the engagement and to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the options and the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved. Holding the engagement during the spring or summer months might have improved attendance, as colder and dark winter evenings may have been a deterrent for some individuals.

D. Impact Standard - *is a vital element of effective engagement practice. It emphasises the importance of assessing what has been learned through the process in order to improve future engagement activities and strengthen overall practice.*

Survey Responses

Overall, NatureScot received a strong and encouraging level of response to the Consultation surveys, which were offered in a variety of formats to ensure broad accessibility. These included a short version aimed at providing an easy entry point for the general public, a more detailed technical version for those wishing to engage in-depth with the proposals, and a paper version to reach individuals with limited or no access to digital platforms.

The decision to provide information in multiple formats for the survey was a helpful strategy for maximising outreach and encouraging participation from a diverse range of respondents. This inclusive approach helped remove barriers to engagement, ensuring that more people—regardless of their background, level of knowledge, or access to technology—could contribute their views.

In total, NatureScot received 5,230 valid responses across all formats of the survey. This represents a particularly high level of engagement when compared to other public consultations and engagement processes conducted across Scotland in recent years. The volume of responses indicates strong public interest in the proposal and highlights the effectiveness of the engagement strategy in reaching a wide audience.

Timing

With the benefit of hindsight, additional time at the outset of the engagement process would have been valuable for several reasons. It would have allowed for stronger relationship-building with communities, particularly with young people and groups whose voices are often less heard—such as ethnic minority communities and those

experiencing economic hardship. Greater time could have supported more targeted outreach and more inclusive participation.

The initial period following the announcement of the successful proposal could possibly have been more effectively used, with a lack of immediately available materials and a delay in clear messaging to some local stakeholders. This gap in communication made it harder to engage effectively in the early stages. Having prepared information and communication materials ready from the start could have helped set the tone, explain the process, and foster early understanding of the approach being taken.

More time would also have allowed for clearer explanation of the consultation strategy, helping to shape conversations constructively rather than allowing polarised positions to take hold so quickly. Early preparation could have enabled stakeholders to feel more involved from the outset and given them the opportunity to consider and articulate their views in a more informed way.

While the Government's ambitions to designate a new National Park during this Parliamentary term limited the time available for preparatory work, it should be recognised that the proposal led from significant engagement work that had gone into the bid. The development of a strong "no campaign" in the weeks following the announcement of the proposal by the Minister also significantly shaped the nature of debate locally. Despite these observations, it's clear that a more proactive approach in the lead-up to the consultation could have supported a wider, more informed and more inclusive dialogue from the beginning.

Collaborative planning

NatureScot could have strengthened the overall engagement process by adopting a more co-designed approach. While having a dedicated Reporter Project team overseen and supported by the Project Board and stakeholder advisory group, the process may have benefited from establishing a dedicated local planning group composed of stakeholders with lived experience, strong community ties, and in-depth knowledge of the local context.

A locally grounded planning group could have brought valuable insights into the design and delivery of the engagement, ensuring that strategies were better aligned with community dynamics and expectations. By involving a wider range of local voices from the outset including representatives from grassroots organisations, community councils, and local service providers NatureScot may have been able to tailor its approach more effectively and build stronger relationships with the communities most directly affected by the proposal. Given the size of this area and the number of communities within it, SCDC recognises that this would have required a very significant exercise to do this effectively.

Feedback gathered through interviews and focus groups indicated that while some local stakeholders were kept informed about the engagement process, their role was largely limited to sharing information, providing contact lists, and circulating updates through their networks. Some did not feel they were given the opportunity to shape or influence how the engagement was planned or delivered.

Greater involvement of local stakeholders in the design phase could have added important perspectives, particularly from those with specialist knowledge and community engagement expertise. For example, Community Learning and Development (CLD) professionals working within local authorities are well-placed to support inclusive and participatory approaches. Their established relationships with diverse communities, local resources, along with their practical experience in facilitating dialogue and engagement, could have significantly enriched the planning process.

In future consultations of this scale and importance, embedding a stronger co-design approach to consultations with a diverse group of local partners could help ensure that engagement strategies are both inclusive and responsive to the needs and realities of local communities.

Data collection strategies

It is important to collect demographic data and use a consistent approach to collect it across all engagement methods to ensure meaningful analysis of participation. In this case, it appears that NatureScot took different approaches for gathering demographic data during the Pre-Consultation Engagement and Consultation stages. Additionally, slightly different demographic information was collected differently at the 30 in-person events, further contributing to inconsistency in the overall dataset which we imagine would be challenging to analyse fully.

These variations make it more challenging to assess which population groups who engaged with the process and, crucially, who may have been underrepresented. A more unified and standardised method for collecting demographic data—regardless of platform or engagement format—would enhance the ability to analyse participation patterns, identify gaps, and inform future engagement strategies to ensure greater inclusivity.

Communication

This Consultation process underscored the critical importance of maintaining a neutral stance in the presentation of information, the design of surveys, and the facilitation of community conversations. In any consultation—particularly one involving a proposal as potentially transformative and emotive as the designation of

a National Park, perceptions of bias can quickly influence public trust and participation.

NatureScot faced a particular challenge in this regard, as many local residents and stakeholders assumed that, given the organisation's environmental remit, it would naturally lean in favour of the Park proposal. Despite this, SCDC feels that NatureScot managed to navigate the process with a commendable level of neutrality, ensuring that materials were presented in a largely balanced way and that opportunities for all perspectives to be heard were built into the engagement process.

While some criticism of NatureScot's approach remains—an expected outcome in any high-profile public consultation—it's worth noting that few other organisations would have had the capacity and expertise to manage such a complex and large-scale engagement process as efficiently and effectively. This was achieved within the constraints of a prescribed engagement and consultation stage, with a 12-week consultation window (extended to 14 weeks) and with limited resources, making what has been achieved all the more notable.

Moving forward, continued efforts to demonstrate transparency and impartiality will be vital in building trust and encouraging inclusive dialogue, especially if the proposal progresses and public scrutiny remains high.

Less Heard Voices

NatureScot made efforts to reach a broad range of community groups as part of the consultation process. However, engagement with groups working directly with individuals and families experiencing rural poverty was limited. Despite recognising that economic disadvantage can be a significant barrier to participation, organisations such as foodbanks, family support services, and other frontline community-based groups were not fully involved in the engagement strategy. Their absence meant that the voices of those of the most affected and potentially impacted residents were underrepresented.

There appeared to be a notable reliance on leaflets delivered to households in economically deprived areas to promote the consultation and encourage attendance at community events. While this form of outreach is valuable, it may not have been sufficient on its own—especially when not complemented by more direct, relationship-based forms of engagement. In many cases, events were also primarily promoted online or via posters distributed closer to the date, which may not have reached individuals who are digitally excluded or less likely to engage with formal publicity materials.

Postcode data collected through the Consultation questionnaire reinforces this concern. Among those who provided their postcode, participation from residents in SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) Quintile 1 areas—the 20% most

deprived areas—was notably low. These communities often face systemic challenges related to income, employment, health, education, housing, crime, and access to services. Their limited representation in the consultation response suggests that additional targeted efforts would have been needed to support their involvement and ensure their views were captured meaningfully.

Moving forward, deeper partnerships with trusted local organisations that serve these communities could help build trust and open up more accessible, relevant pathways for participation, particularly in areas experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

Further analysis of the Consultation data is needed to fully understand the level of engagement from young people, beyond the presentations delivered in secondary schools and the limited outreach to youth organisations within the proposed National Park area. Although NatureScot expressed a clear commitment to prioritising the involvement of younger demographics, the data from the Pre-Consultation Engagement stage and the Consultation survey offers little clarity on whether these efforts led to meaningful participation.

Data from the Commonplace platform, which hosted the Pre-Consultation survey, shows that only a small proportion of respondents were aged 16–24, accounting for just 1.7% of responses (13 individuals). Similarly, those aged 25–34 made up only 6.9% (51 individuals). In stark contrast, the highest level of engagement came from those aged 64–74, who represented more than half of all respondents at 50.8% (378 responses). This skew towards older age groups raises questions about whether the methods used were accessible, appealing, or relevant to younger people, and whether further targeted strategies could have been employed. 163 respondents to the Consultation survey identified themselves as being a student or in full time education (an assumed proxy for young people) which is fairly low, accounting for 3.1% of the 5,230 valid responses.

As the full demographic breakdown from the formal Consultation stage becomes available, further analysis will be important to assess whether participation from young people improved, particularly in terms of completing the questionnaire or attending events. Understanding the barriers that limited their involvement—and identifying what worked in the few instances where engagement was successful—could help inform future efforts to involve younger voices in significant public consultations such as this.

Engaging young people meaningfully is not only a matter of representation; it is also critical to ensuring that long-term decisions, such as the designation of a National Park, reflect the interests and aspirations of those who will be most affected by them in the years to come.

Community Engagement Skills

To strengthen future engagement processes, it is recommended that NatureScot builds on investment to date in its already experienced staff group, including its training on conflict avoidance, by investing in advanced training for more staff in the planning and delivery of effective community engagement. Even if the organisation is not directly responsible for delivering all aspects of the engagement itself, having a solid contemporary understanding of emerging elements of good practice in community engagement would be invaluable. This knowledge is particularly important for designing inclusive processes, selecting appropriate methods, and ensuring that different voices especially those from less heard or underrepresented groups—are meaningfully involved. It will also be important should future activity involve more deliberative methods

Effective community engagement goes beyond simply informing the public; it requires careful planning, relationship-building, and the ability to adapt methods to suit a variety of audiences and contexts. By equipping more staff with a wider set of skills and tools, NatureScot can build confidence in its approach and enhance the overall quality and inclusivity of its engagement work.

There are several well-established resources and frameworks available to support this, such as the VOiCE (Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement) tool, developed in Scotland to support high-quality engagement practice. VOiCE helps practitioners plan, monitor, and evaluate their engagement activities, and encourages reflection on what works, why, and how improvements can be made. Training in tools like VOiCE, is important should NatureScot wish to continue using the National Standards for Community Engagement as a planning, delivery and evaluation framework. These and other relevant models would support staff in embedding meaningful, evidence-based engagement practices across future projects.

Investing in this type of training would not only improve the quality of community involvement but also help build trust, transparency, and stronger relationships with the public and stakeholders – particularly if some of the training work included local people and organisations.

New Legislation – Natural Environment Bill

This Bill seeks to broaden the statutory purposes of National Parks to place greater emphasis on biodiversity enhancement, nature recovery, and climate action. It also proposes a new duty for public bodies operating within National Parks to align with Park aims and plans, thereby strengthening collaborative working. Introduced after

consultation, the Bill when it becomes law could have a significant bearing on the overall context and outcomes of future consultation. It has also been claimed that it undermines the recent work undertaken as it includes proposals that were relevant to the questions that consultees were asked to provide views on. The Scottish Government will need to carefully consider the potential implications of the Natural Environment Bill on the future consultation process should designation proceed.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Below are the summary conclusions we have drawn as result of:

- a desk review of documents such as the project engagement plan, the EQIA and tools and documents related to planning and delivery of the engagement and consultation; and
- dialogue we then had with engagement planners and a sample of participants.

Conclusions	Related Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Levels of involvement: NatureScot have made very significant progress in involving local people in the decision making about designation which compares very favourably with other park designations and large-scale public consultations. We should say that reliable figures for levels of engagement in public policy are not routinely gathered, analysed and published however comparisons we did identify point to significantly lower rates of involvement in these consultations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further work should be done to determine benchmarks for similar types of decision making across Scotland and the UK to more fully assess the reach of this engagement. <p>This review and other stakeholder reflections should inform the planning of future engagement.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time constraints: There were challenges arising from the legislative framework for the designation process in terms of the consultation questions and the timing of the various stages which has set some limits on what could be achieved in the planning and delivery of the consultation work. This has had some implications for public perceptions of the process by some local people and been challenging for those delivering the engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration of how time was used at various stages of the process e.g. between the appointment of the reporter and the delivery of the engagement should be reviewed to capture any learning that could be used in future exercises. This should include consideration of other SCDC recommendations regarding a more collaborative approach.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of NatureScot: Despite some local views to the contrary, we think it is clear that as a government agency operating on environmental issues that Nature Scot are a perfectly acceptable choice for government to appoint to the role of Reporter in a similar way that the Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate regularly runs consultations on relevant policy, or that Councils and the NHS consult local people about funding priorities and service planning. This is a legitimate role of Government agencies and has value for money implications when compared to some suggestions about possible roles of independent enquiries. However, it does mean that maximum effort is needed to build mutual trust and shared accountability in the neutrality of the messaging about specific proposals. We can see that it will be challenging for an agency with a role in supporting national Parks more generally to easily demonstrate its neutrality in a particular consultation on a particular location. From our perspective, it should not be necessary for them to demonstrate “neutrality” on the concept of national parks given their wider role. As far 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We suggest that systematic, collaborative and transparent use of the NSfCE are a way of building this trust, including on the question of Neutrality. This does require more of a shared role with local people and other stakeholders in the planning and delivery of engagement to widen its ownership as we suggest below.

<p>as we can see the materials shared in the area to help enable the consultation are very careful to emphasise that local people should decide what they think about the proposal to locate the Park in the area and there is good evidence of planning to try to ensure their role was one of information giver not opinion former.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making use of the Standards: Our dialogue with those planning and delivering the work confirms that the design of the engagement used a systematic approach guided by the National Standards for Community Engagement in terms of who needed to be engaged, the contact strategy, methods and how to reach population groups whose voices are often not heard. However, the approach did not utilise all of the NSfCE support materials designed to ensure that all key issues are covered, for example the NSfCE planning tool VOICE which is a means of addressing the Standards systematically and recording and reporting on the methods, outcomes and learning from the process. This is not unusual but given the challenging and contentious nature of this engagement/consultation it may have helped to have done so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We would recommend the use of VOICE in future as a record of all planning in a format that supports collaboration and maximises transparency as it can be shared easily with partner organisations and community reps, especially if our suggestion of collaborative planning is accepted for any future phase.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative planning: We think that it would have been advisable to widen the planning discussions to a Local Stakeholder Group at the earliest stage in order to try and build a sense of shared ownership of aims and methods, as well as mobilise a wider range of potential help in targeting the engagement to vulnerable populations. Although timescales could have made this quite difficult, this could have involved local authority colleagues from CLD and other disciplines like libraries and schools, the third sector interface and possibly some community reps from representative organisations and those leading on the main positions in the debate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We recommend that any future engagement is deemed necessary, NatureScot should seek to widen involvement in the planning and delivery of the process as noted to help improve the reach and impact of the work and attempt to agree how the process should be conducted in a way that encourages maximum support and participation. • Such a process will take time and would need to support those involved to focus on the task and recognise that the rights to participate should shape processes and methods, rather than how they may feel their individual arguments are served.

<p>This would require creating collective buy in to the process of engagement – including by those with different views on the issues and this is a necessary first step. A process of this kind provides an opportunity to jointly state how people should approach the engagement, treat each other respectfully and avoid any perceived institutional bias or perceptions of intimidation from those advocating different positions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It should be recognised that to involve community reps in this way requires different views to be surfaced and reconciled in a process where those with differing views still feel able to own and defend.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods used: We feel that the methods used were fundamentally sound and it is clear that the NatureScot Reporter Team sought to maximise opportunities to enable people to participate, particularly geographically, but also in communities of identity. In our experience the numbers of people who did take part was much higher than other activity we have supported or observed in other areas, and we imagine the analysis of engagement data will confirm this. The spread of promotional work, numbers of well attended local meetings and the work to raise awareness of the survey were evidence of this. <p>In general we favour a collaborative approach to all aspects of the design of methods including surveys etc in order to create a better process. This was not deemed to be possible in this instance nor were methods able to be stress tested eg by piloting the survey. This seemed to be largely due to constraints of time and whilst this might be unwise, it is not unusual.</p> <p>Clear attempts were made to identify and seek involvement from those with protected characteristics including young people. Assuming contact information was correct it is unclear why there was a relatively low uptake of opportunities for some of the dialogue with these harder to engage groups and this requires more discussion with partners than this review allowed. Young people’s voices were heard to some degree via representative organisations from several of the local authority area.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the reach of the engagement and consultation further is best served by widening the partners involved in its planning and co-ordination at an early stage as described earlier. • Bringing partner agencies to the table can help build sustained contact activity with seldom heard voices through existing networks and build trust in the process. Bringing communities also helps mobilise informal networks which can boost more formal contact. It also allows more perspectives to be brought to discussions on the efficacy of methods and consideration of how they might be tested.

<p>We did note the promotion of engagement opportunities to those with protected characteristics did not seem to specifically seek views from their perspective eg as disabled people with access challenges to the countryside or as BME communities who often feel uncomfortable in rural contexts where they can feel more visible. This may have been one way to increase the relevance of the exercise for them in addition to seeking their view as residents who also had protected characteristics, this review has not had sufficient time to explore this issues in depth and it may be something for local partners to consider in future.</p> <p>Material was prepared in a number of accessible formats and was sharable with those who need access to this. We have seen evidence of a planned approach to doing this and samples and links to the materials. It is less clear whether this process was explored for every group with protected characteristics and how some accessibility decisions rather than others – eg there are no BSL clips.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In general the scope of communication in the press, online and by direct mailing to households was of a fairly high standard. It is always challenging to produce written material in a form that is helpful for all potential readers and there was room to improve this to some degree had some testing taken place. The technical survey and some of the material on the website of a technical nature was not easily accessible for all who may have wanted to express a view and again some degree of testing of this material might have been useful if time allowed. This type of issues often requires people to be supported to raise their understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific Inclusion challenges: There are some issues which could have affected the reach of the work in more socio economically disadvantaged locations. These are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In relation to low income households we suggest more could have been done to establish contact via organisations such as food banks, Citizens Advice Bureaux or Housing Associations welfare rights or tenancy sustainment staff or Health Centres and GPs. This may have helped ensure people were more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging those most affected by poverty and low incomes can be sensitive work and often traditional means are ineffective. We suggest future engagement could build on the networks and relationships mentioned in our conclusions to seek

<p>aware of the opportunity to give their views and encouraged to respond even though it will not be the most pressing issue in their lives. Outside the Box did promote local events via posters and fliers locally which was a positive exercise but we understand that some potential partners e.g. libraries were not willing to put these up.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Since digital exclusion is a provable phenomenon we commend the decision to produce information in paper formats and make this available to people in their own homes. However, where paper surveys are distributed to those on low or very low incomes, their value is undermined if there is no affordable way for people to return them without incurring significant costs when there are many pressures on their resources. Therefore we do think that other solutions should have been in place for this rather than requiring people to meet postage costs of the paper survey. We think a freepost return envelope would have been one way to maximise access and increase responses and help secure the value of investing in the direct mailshot itself. However since we appreciate that costs are a factor there are other possible methods included in our recommendations on this issue. 	<p>wider involvement of possibly targeted engagement with those in these life circumstances so that their views can be taken into account.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensuring that people can complete their input to the process by use of things like paper surveys should be made as easy as possible. If issues like postage costs are an issue than work with partner organisations to maximise the number of free local collection points such as libraries, GPs surgeries, health Centre and Schools available over a longer period of time is worth considering provided arrangements can be made to handed responses securely. It may also be possible for door-to-door distribution and collection of surveys by partner staff or volunteers in areas where there are barriers to other methods of engagement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knowledge and skills for engagement: Although NatureScot staff were not operating in facilitation roles during the consultation events, it was clear that many appropriate skills available to NatureScot team were being successfully mobilised. By using an external contractor and the specialist teams within NatureScot augmented overall skills for engagement design, making contact locally and explaining the underlying issues in the consultation to those who required information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We would suggest that training in community engagement skills and use of the NSfCE is considered for NatureScot staff, and other partners, should our other recommendations for collaborative practice be accepted. ● This could focus on any areas that self-evaluation work identifies as benefiting from learning from this

<p>We did feel that to make best use of the NSfCE in terms of planning work and engaging others in it some training on the standards and the use of VOICE could be useful for the future work and possibly in considering how to better engage equalities groups.</p> <p>This was also a very contentious subject with strong views expressed about the process requiring a level of planning on how to work with some very strongly held opinions at events and how these could encourage or inhibit people generally to contribute. We know team members undertook some training in conflict management and reflecting on how this equipped them for the circumstances described at some of the public events would be useful.</p>	<p>experience to date.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In situ training of this kind could potentially also be part of a real world planning process of another stage of engagement should this proceed, therefore maximising the value of any investment in this.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of data gathering: In looking across the early promotion of the opportunities for communities to bid for potential designation, the engagement stage of the process and the consultation process itself, different tools and categories have been used to track local people’s views at different times. Although this is appropriate, in some ways and we have looked at how these have specific utility in specific circumstances, we do think that perhaps more could have been done to agree common approaches to gathering information in terms of the consistency of questions in the online and face to face events and in the demographic data gathered throughout the process as a whole. <p>It is clear from the engagement plan and the EQIA that there were ambitions to reach a wide range of groups including equalities groups. However neither the survey nor the public events were able to gather much information on those taking part with protected characteristics, although both have produced some data on participation by postcode which can be analysed by SIMD. The lack of a method to invite participants to complete a return on specific demographic factors makes it quite difficult to track whether ambitions in the engagement plan or EQIA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A core set of questions on what people think of the designation proposals is key. How these are asked in different contexts may be slightly different to enable methods to be used which are more inclusive and accessible to a wider group of people. • Although this approach is valid every effort must be made to ensure that any variations in design achieve comparability in the analysis of people’s views. • This includes any collaborative design process or local steering group being kept informed and involved in any changes to methods that might be needed as a process develops. • We suggest that if possible an equalities monitoring tool is developed with involvement from local partners and communities to ensure that future engagement is capturing important information of this type.

<p>had been achieved. This is not unique to this exercise with many communities and some agencies seeking to balance the need for this data with the very real challenges of convincing people why it is needed, however resolving issues of this kind are important where processes have ambitions to be fully equalities aware and remove barriers to involvement.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposals for future engagement approach: If a further phase of engagement is required, we believe that the NSfCE can be used to build on experience to date and plan it. The Standards can help promote mutual understanding and shared expectations amongst community and institutional stakeholders and achieve wider support and trust in the processes, even where there may continue to be disagreement on the way forward. <p>By creating structured and respectful engagement processes, the NSfCE help different voices to be heard and acknowledged. They can be used in difficult dialogues like, planning decisions, but are more often used when participants approach dialogue with more of an open mind about the outcomes. In contexts where feelings run high a new phase of use of the Standards could help to create clear process for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying stakeholders and methods to engage them • Building trust • Ensuring transparency • Creating space for discussion, trade-offs and negotiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Standards support continuous improvement of engagement, especially when tensions are high or unresolved. Using the standards in highly contentious contexts, requires intensive early work across the stakeholder landscape to build trust and a sense of common purpose. The next stage of work will therefore need to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What lessons have been learnt from the current process ○ How issues raised need to shape future engagement ○ Whether legitimate concerns and issues raised by communities can be satisfactorily resolved • Should a decision be made to move to the next stage of the designation process we propose that co-design based planning should be used to design and deliver it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible future engagement: If the process proceeds to further engagement on the designation decision we suggest that a more deliberative discussion of the issues would be appropriate. Deliberative processes aim to involve the public in decision-making in a meaningful way, allowing participants to learn about a topic, consider different 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firstly, we would suggest that a local steering group including local people and wider stakeholders could be supported to explore the concept of deliberation and how it might link to wider consultation in future.

perspectives, and develop their thinking together.

Key Features:

- **Structured Discussion:** Deliberative processes often involve structured discussions, facilitated by trained professionals, to ensure a fair and productive exchange of ideas.
- **Informed Participants:** Participants are provided with information and resources to help them understand the issue at hand.
- **Multiple Perspectives:** The process encourages participants to consider different viewpoints and values.
- **Learning and Reflection:** Deliberative processes create space for learning, reflection, and the development of informed recommendations.

- We suggest that three stage deliberative process could be considered with a series of events where a sample of individual local citizens selected by sortition from a mixture of stakeholder groups and residents can hear and commission evidence from witnesses and cross examine them to develop ideas and proposals. This could have a number of potential elements:
 - deliberative citizens panels exploring agreed topics linked to the existing questions.
 - A local citizens assembly taking preliminary decisions based on further discussion of reports from the panels.
 - A wider consultative process led by the reporter but working with the assembly to gather final views on the support or otherwise for the proposals.

