Spinner at cultural heritage event © Josie Slade

Event report – exploring a cultural heritage network for the Cairngorms National Park

Cairngorms National Park
Pàirc Nàiseanta a' Mhonaidh Ruaidh

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Date published:

5 December 2025

We would like to extend our thanks to all those who attended and contributed to the cultural heritage event in October. Particular thanks to the short-term working group for sharing their time, expertise and wealth of knowledge to plan this event.

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1. Background

1.1 Strategic context

The Park Authority has a statutory role to provide leadership and support to all those involved in the Cairngorms, working in partnership with a range of communities, businesses, non-government organisations and public sector partners to deliver practical solutions on the ground. This work is coordinated through a five-year National Park Partnership Plan, which sets out how all those with a responsibility for the National Park will work together.

The importance of the cultural heritage of the Cairngorms National Park is a key element of the current Partnership Plan, with a specific objective (C10) to 'safeguard and promote the National Park's cultural heritage and provide opportunities for everyone to experience and learn about the National Park's outstanding historic environment, history and culture'. The Partnership Plan sets out three actions to be delivered by 2027:

- Develop a Cairngorms cultural heritage network, building on the success of the Badenoch: The Storylands project, Tomintoul and Glenlivet Landscape Partnership and Cateran Ecomuseum.
- Provide grant funding for community heritage projects that contribute to a cultural heritage network.
- Heritage Horizons: Cairngorms 2030 programme.

This report – together with the launch of a £50,000 Communities and Cultural Heritage Fund (funded by the Park Authority and delivered by Cairngorms Trust) at the cultural heritage network event in October – represents a key deliverable against those actions. The Park Authority has also committed to fund a follow-up meeting in March 2026 and will again look to weave cultural heritage into the development of the next Partnership Plan, which starts in 2026.

1.2 Developing a cultural heritage network

In December 2023, the Cairngorms National Park Authority appointed the Scottish Community Tourism Network CIC (SCOTO) to explore the potential for establishing a cultural heritage network for the National Park. The network would be designed to bring

people together and add value to those most closely involved in cultural heritage across the National Park.

A key conclusion from the SCOTO Report was that a face-to-face event would be welcomed and would enable cultural heritage practitioners to come together and network in a way that is helpful to them. In response to this, the Park Authority committed to supporting the organisation of an event / gathering of this nature and subsequently engaged a short-term working group of nine cultural heritage practitioners to develop the event.

The interactive face-to-face event took place on 9 October 2025 at Boat of Garten Community Hall and brought together 65 people, all involved in or passionate about cultural heritage in the National Park.

1.3   This report

This report provides a record of the event, collates findings from the breakout sessions and themed discussion groups (see appendices), and considers the next steps in light of those discussions.

1.4   The event

The working group agreed that the event should fulfil four specific purposes:

1. To provide effective networking for people engaged in local cultural heritage.
2. To consider ideas and opportunities for future networking and collaboration in person and online.
3. To listen to and hear from people engaged in cultural heritage and help develop a shared voice for cultural heritage matters across the National Park area.
4. To consider strategic cultural heritage matters and how to influence future policy, funding and practice.

Through a combination of key speakers and facilitated breakout and themed discussion sessions, the working group designed the event to:

*   Explore and better describe the Cairngorms National Park cultural heritage landscape, build enthusiasm and a shared voice for cultural heritage.

- Start shaping a cultural heritage network and provide a collecting point for those interested in actively following up.

The programme for the day – along with presentation slides, findings from the breakout sessions and themed discussion groups and showcase posters – can be found in the appendices. Also included for information are collated responses from feedback forms.

2. Feedback on the event

2.1 Delivering against agreed purposes

Feedback forms were received from 19 of the 65 attendees on the day. The compiled feedback is shown in figure 1. This indicates that purposes 1 to 3 were met, ie providing a platform for networking, collaboration and developing a shared voice for cultural heritage.

Participants feeding back were less content that strategic cultural heritage matters were adequately considered. This could indicate that additional focus is required in this area and, if desired, this could form part of the agenda for the proposed meeting in March 2026.

In addition, 100% of respondents said that they would be interested in follow up activity. Additional feedback information from the event can be found in appendix 2.
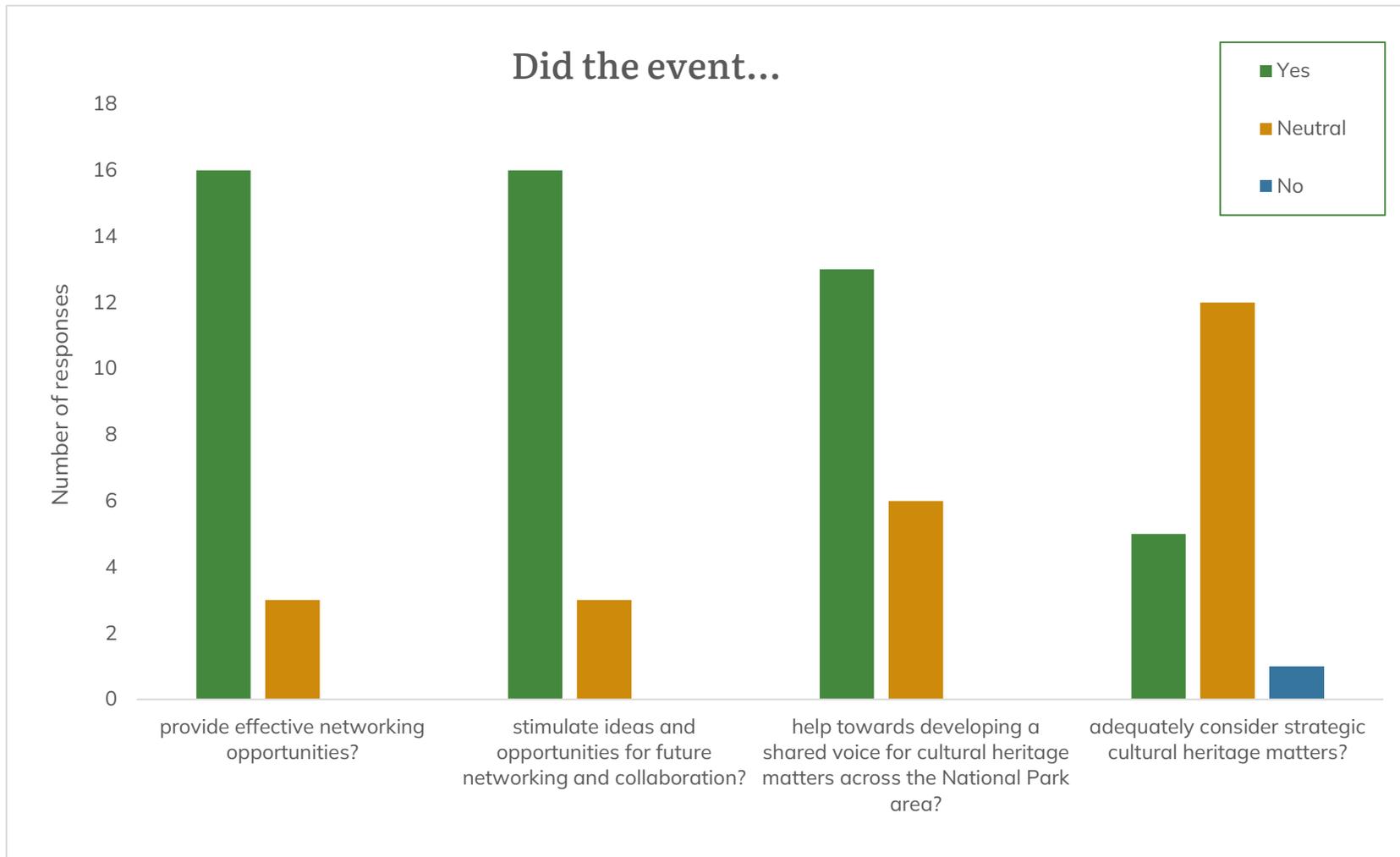
Figure 1 – Participant feedback on the four specific purposes of the event

2.2 Breakout sessions – celebrating, sharing, inspiring and engaging with others

These sessions built on the feedback received from the preparatory work survey and reflect the areas of interest that survey participants identified. The topics considered in the breakout sessions were:

1. Community archives.
2. Peer-to-peer support, information sharing, network resources, events and learning exchanges.
3. Business opportunities and access to new markets.
4. Marketing and promotion of cultural heritage activity.
5. Collaborative funding opportunities.
6. Lobbying and a single voice for the sector.
7. Conserving traditions and traditional ways of life.
8. Attracting and retaining volunteers, and engaging young people in cultural heritage.

These sessions – discussing and exploring key themes in cultural heritage – were well received, with participants providing feedback rating these either very useful or useful (appendix 2). This gives a good indication that sharing experiences and working through issues to find solutions is a valuable aspect of a potential network. This also echoes the initial findings in the preparatory work.

Some common threads running throughout the session outputs (compiled in appendix 3) were the challenges of volunteer fatigue, and finding and retaining volunteers. This also ties in with another thread on how best to engage and enthuse a younger demographic.

The comments compiled were wide-ranging and, as well as being a record for individuals who participated in their chosen sessions on the day, they could prove to be a useful reference point when progressing individual projects or agreeing the potential scope of a future network.

2.3 Themed discussions – shaping a cultural heritage network

The themed discussions explored what practitioners are looking for from a network (figure 2) and how that network might be set up and sustained (figure 3). You can view all the written comments made on the day in appendix 4.
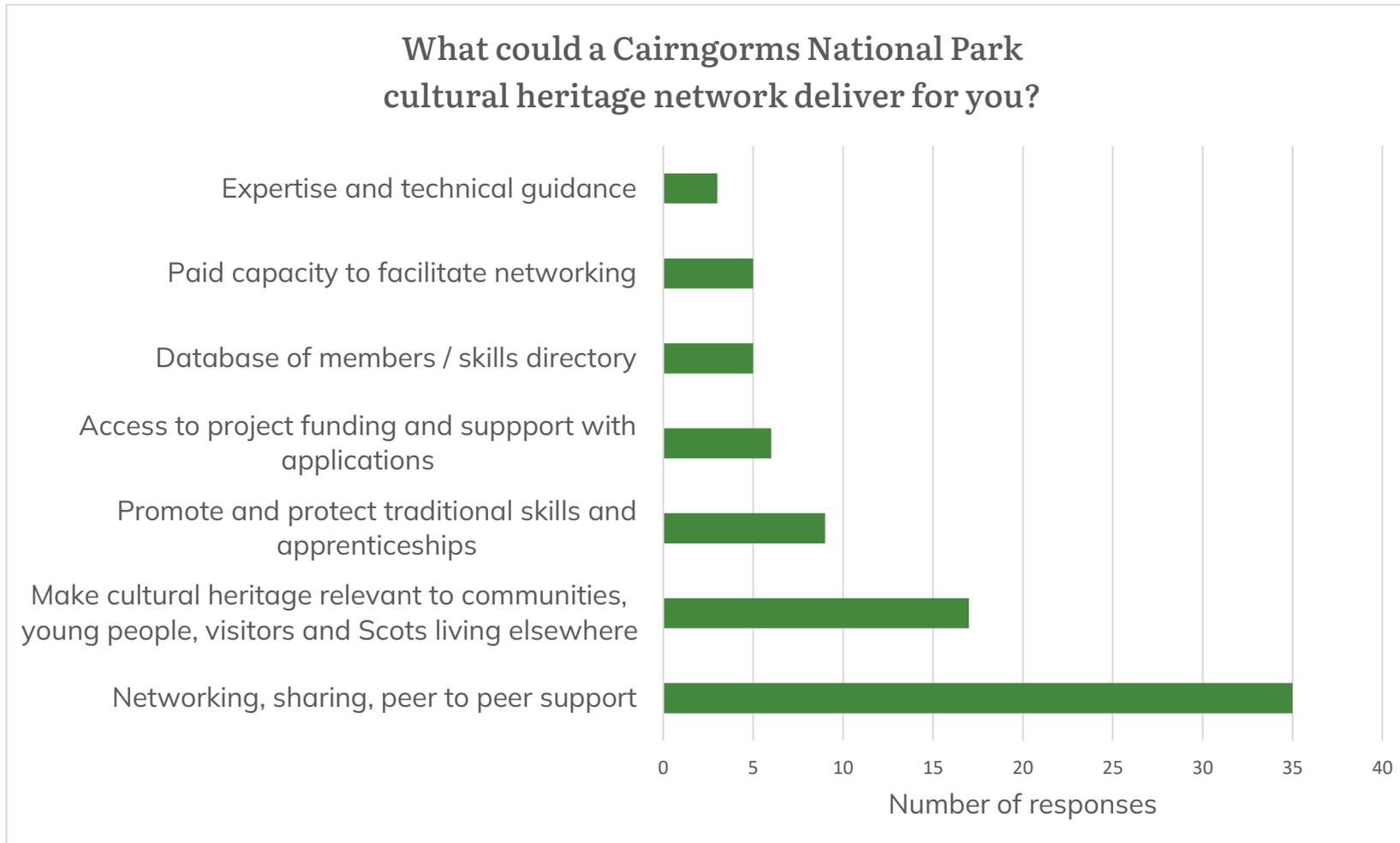
What could a Cairngorms National Park cultural heritage network deliver for you?

Figure 2 – What cultural heritage practitioners are looking for from a cultural heritage network

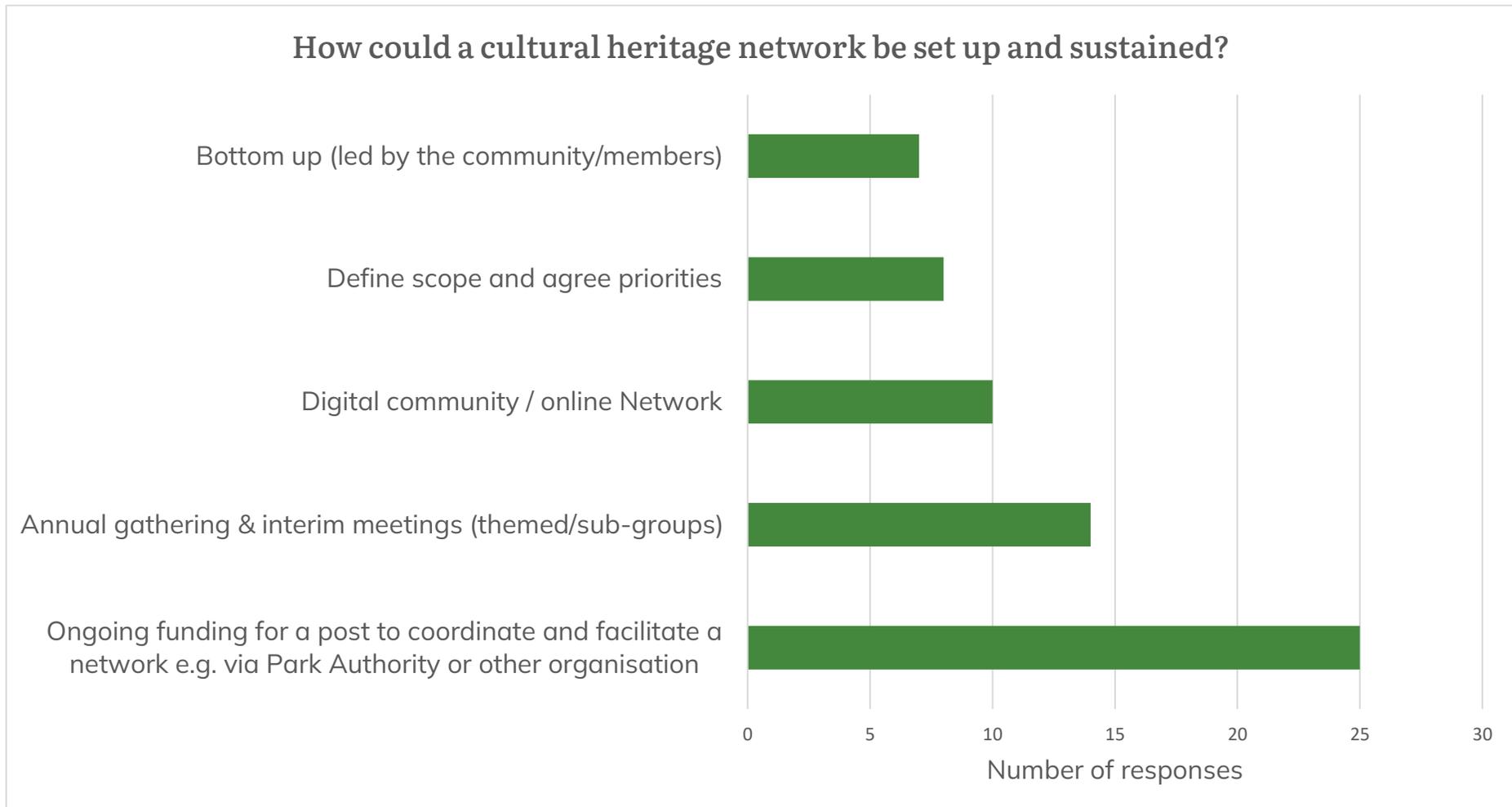## How could a cultural heritage network be set up and sustained?

Figure 3 – Respondent views on how a potential network might be set up and sustained

2.4   What could a cultural heritage network deliver for you?

Networking, sharing and peer-to-peer support was the highest rated desirable for a network, with 35 comments made on this (figure 2). Making cultural heritage relevant to communities, young people, visitors and Scots living elsewhere was rated the next most important, with 17 responses.

Promoting and protecting traditional skills and apprenticeships (nine responses), access to funding and support with applications (six responses), having a database of members and a skills directory (five responses), paid capacity to facilitate networking (five responses) and expertise and technical guidance (three responses) made up the rest of the responses.

2.5   How could a cultural heritage network be set up and sustained?

The compiled responses in figure 3 indicate what practitioners considered necessary for a network to be set up and sustained. The most common response was to suggest that a dedicated resource is required to coordinate and facilitate a network, both to help set it up and to sustain it going forward. This reflects the preparatory work undertaken by SCOTO in 2023, which found that 64% of survey respondents would not be interested in joining a steering group to develop a network.

The other key considerations for a network put forward, in order of number of responses, were: an annual gathering and interim meetings (14 responses); having a digital community or online network (10 responses); the need to define the scope and priorities of a network (eight responses); and the network be led by its members (seven responses).

2.6   Delivering against event outcomes

The short-term working group identified seven outcomes they would like to see from the event and the table below sets out the activity undertaken to deliver for them.

	Desired outcome for the event	Steps taken to deliver
1.	Effective face-to-face networking and learning has provided opportunities for ongoing networking and collaboration.	The event provided these opportunities through talks and discussion sessions. Business cards for all attendees were

		provided to proactively encourage sharing of details with each other. Attendees were also given the opportunity to share email addresses a few weeks after the event (if they wished to do so).
2.	Participants have been able to listen to and explore solutions to current issues in local cultural heritage and consider next steps.	The breakout sessions discussed and explored key themes in cultural heritage. The discussion sessions explored a cultural heritage network. The breakout sessions and discussion sessions were considered very useful or useful by 100% of participants who provided feedback after the event (see appendix 2).
3.	Community archiving has been explored to help develop a means to share and access cultural heritage material generated from past and future projects and initiatives.	Community archiving was explored with a keynote talk and a Cairngorms snapshot presentation, and it was a topic discussed at a breakout session.
4.	The need for guidance and direction for future cultural heritage projects is understood to ensure effective use of time and resources.	This was discussed in the breakout and discussion sessions.
5.	The opportunity has been provided to develop a shared voice and strengthen connections for cultural heritage in and around the National Park and to understand the future opportunities for strategic influence.	This was a key purpose of the discussion sessions.
6.	A structure is provided for considering and agreeing next steps.	The closing session of the day reflected on what was achieved and the commitment by Park Authority to organise a follow-up meeting. This report also considers the next steps (see section 3 below).

7.	A permanent record of the event and key outcomes is produced.	This report and appendices will be a permanent record of the event.

2.7 Enabling networking after the event

The Park Authority provided a mechanism at the event for sharing contact details on the day using business cards, which were provided to all in attendance. In addition, some participants highlighted that they wanted to keep in touch by email and the Park Authority subsequently shared a link to a data sharing form, with contact details due to be shared with others who signed up for the event after this report is published.

3. Next steps

From what we heard on the day from feedback forms, breakout and discussion sessions, there is a lot of passion from practitioners to not only conserve the cultural heritage of the Cairngorms National Park but also to provide opportunities for everyone to learn about and experience it.

The aspiration to develop a cultural heritage network for the National Park came across strongly throughout the day, with multiple views on who this should be for, what it could deliver and how it could be sustained (figures 2 and 3, appendix 4). There is some way to go with its development, but there was a clear steer that the Park Authority should take a leadership role on this.

The importance of community archives was also a theme that came across strongly in the breakout and discussion sessions and the talks. Participants identified a need to ensure the safekeeping of the many disparate archives, collections and digital community projects that have already been created. They also highlighted the urgent need to collect a record of memories from residents now in their 80s and 90s. This is a theme that touches all communities across the National Park and one which, if approached in a holistic way, could strengthen the link between the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

At the event in October, the Park Authority committed to organising a follow up meeting in March 2026. Given the feedback received, this is likely to be a shorter and more targeted gathering. There are some key points which practitioners may wish to consider at this meeting:

- Strategic cultural heritage matters – what should be the priority / priorities for cultural heritage in the Cairngorms? For example, community archiving, how to engage and enthuse a younger demographic, securing funds etc.
- Defining and agreeing the scope and priorities of a cultural heritage network.

In January 2026, the Park Authority will canvass for a suitable date, location and topics that can be dealt with at the March meeting. This will take the form of a short online survey and will be distributed to all those who attended the last event, plus all those who have signed up to hear more about the topic thus far.

4. List of appendices

Appendix 1 – event programme
Appendix 2 – feedback form summaries
Appendix 3 – breakout session summary sheets
Appendix 4 – themed discussion summary sheets
Appendix 5 – presentation slides
Appendix 6 – showcase posters