



involve

Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund



Cairngorms
National Park

Pàirc Nàiseanta a'
Mhonaidh Ruaidh



Final report
August 2026

Welcome

Between March 2025 and June 2026, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, co-design panel members and Involve collaborated to design the new Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund.

This report outlines the origins of the work and the process that the collaborators went through from discovery, recruitment, co-design and the final fund design.

Who took part in the process

- 18 members of the panel – people who live in, work in or have a strong connection to the Cairngorms National Park.
 - Colleagues from across the Cairngorms National Park Authority.
 - An accompanying advisory group drawn from across the geography of the National Park and beyond, with a wide range of relevant backgrounds.
 - The Involve facilitation team.
- 

Contents

Executive summary

1. Introduction
2. Discovery and scope of the project
3. Recruiting the co-design panel
4. The co-design sessions
5. Co-design techniques
6. The co-design panel outputs
7. Next steps



Above: C2030 Communities fund panel at Newtonmore © Cairngorms National Park Authority

Executive summary

The Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund is the work of 18 panel members, supported by Cairngorms National Park Authority Grants, Engagement and Communications colleagues.

Between March 2025 and June 2026, the participation charity Involve led a series of phases comprising discovery, design, recruitment and finally co-design. The output of this process is a £1 million fund designed by 18 people who live in, work in or have a strong connection to the Cairngorms National Park.

The co-design included everything from eligibility criteria to maximum award amounts, how the money would be distributed and how success would be measured.

249 people expressed interest in taking part in the panel. The final panel was drawn from 17 different council areas across the Cairngorms and beyond.

The guiding question for the process was: **How should this fund work, and how do we make sure communities are genuinely in control?**

Panel members came together over nine sessions: three full days in person in the Cairngorms and six online sessions taking place in the evenings (to fit around panellists' work and home commitments).

The panel decided that grant funding needed to be simpler, more accessible, transparent and encourage more first time grantees.

They first decided that anything could be funded as long as it was within the four Cairngorms 2030 themes. There would be a minimum 10% of the overall fund projects that prioritise Equity Diversity and Inclusion.

Then they decided that there should be three different grant sizes available: small (£500 - £5,000), medium (£5,001 - £50,000) and large (£50,001 - £100,000).

The panel designed a different process for each grant size. The most simple small grants would have a presumption to say 'yes!' to all applications, providing they meet minimum criteria. More involved medium and large grants would require a recruited decision-making panel, made up of people with a close connection to the Cairngorms.

The Park Authority would support applicants through the process and ensure funding opportunities were effectively communicated, including case studies of successful grantees.

Over the next few years the process will be tested, evaluated and refined to ensure that it best meets the needs of local communities.

Introduction



About Cairngorms 2030

An introduction by the
Park Authority

Cairngorms 2030 is an ambitious programme that will see the Cairngorms become the UK's first net zero national park, turning all the talk about tackling climate change into positive action on the ground.

The Park Authority's ambition is to focus on the innovative, collaborative and transformational changes required to tackle the nature and climate crisis.

Cairngorms 2030 is on a larger scale than anything previously attempted in the UK, and aims to inspire rural and urban communities throughout Scotland and beyond.

The programme's vision is that, by 2030, the Cairngorms National Park will be an exemplar of people and nature thriving together in a rapidly changing world.

Cairngorms 2030 is supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, with thanks to players of the National Lottery.

It is one of five projects awarded a total of £50 million as part of the Heritage Horizons Awards. All five projects share qualities of huge ambition, significant collaboration and the prospect of life-changing benefits for people and places.

More information on the Heritage Horizon Awards is available on the [Heritage Fund website](#).

The roots of the C2030 Communities fund

An introduction
by the Park Authority

People coming together to make a difference is a familiar story in the National Park, whether that is log banks being set up for neighbours struggling to heat their homes, or community garden projects that create peaceful hideouts for people and wildlife alike.

This initiative aimed to build on that work and take it to a whole new level.

In March 2026, 18 people — selected anonymously by independent charity Involve to reflect a range of communities across the National Park and beyond – came together for the first time to form a panel, working together to design a new £1 million Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund from the ground up.

This included everything from eligibility criteria to maximum award amounts and how the money was distributed.

From the outset, we were aware that what the public sector perceives as relatively simple processes can in practice feel inaccessible, cumbersome and lacking in relevance for the people they are designed to benefit.

Through listening, engaging and co-designing the grant scheme with people who live in and love the National Park, we believe a truly innovative method of grant funding has been realised.

Over the next few years the process will be tested and refined to ensure that it best meets the needs of local communities and the wider aims of Cairngorms 2030, whilst also meeting the needs of our funding partners The National Lottery Heritage Fund. We're really excited to see the community's ideas put into action on the ground.

Who are Involve?

At [Involve](#) we have been running participatory processes across the UK since 2003, working with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and members of the public to create, advocate for and deliver new forms of public participation that re-vitalise democracy, improve decision making and enable people to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

We are realistic about the challenges faced by democracy, but optimistic about how to overcome them. We are committed to ensuring our democracies are vibrant and fit for the future by putting people at the heart of decision making.

We work across the UK and internationally, with offices in Belfast and London. Many of our staff work from home across the UK or in a hybrid pattern, rather than being based at one of our offices, and we meet up regularly as a team.

We believe that decision making across the UK needs to be more:

Open – so that people can understand, influence and hold decision makers to account for the actions and inactions of their governments;

Participatory – so that people have the freedom, support and opportunity to shape their communities and influence the decisions that affect their lives; and,

Deliberative – so that people can exchange and acknowledge different perspectives, understand conflict and find common ground, and build a shared vision for society.

There are a huge number of democratic innovations – from citizens' assemblies to crowdlaw, citizens' initiatives to co-production and co-design – that put people at the heart of decision making by modelling these values.

The co-design methodology

Involve were commissioned by the Cairngorms National Park Authority to support developing a grant fund using participatory democracy methods. Involve suggested a co-design panel.

Co-design allowed for a collaborative process between citizens from various backgrounds and lived experiences, actively designing the grant fund with the assistance of colleagues from the Park Authority, who brought their professional experience in funding policy and mechanics to the table.

Co-design created space for the emergence of a design that was directed by the members of the panel, with specialist advice and enabling boundaries provided by the Park Authority and others.

Co-design minimised the initial boundaries and pre-defined structures around which decisions need to be made and when. This supported members of the panel to take a more active role in decision making at every step of the process, from ideation to creation of the final fund structure and governance.

The aim was to create a grant fund that was more accessible and better served the needs of communities.

So what was the co-design panel?

The co-design panel was made up of people who live in, work in or have a strong connection to the Cairngorms National Park.

We specifically focused on recruiting people who had previously been under-represented in traditional grant funding processes.

This panel worked together on the design and structure of the grant scheme, the principles, decision making and governance. The process included learning about current funding availability, so that the panel could design something that fitted within the existing complex funding landscape.

The designed fund would be rolled out across the Cairngorms, enabling funding to be distributed in a new way that involves even more people in the process than ever before.

Our guiding question

When co-designing, a guiding question gives the panel a shared focus throughout the process.

It helps participants stay oriented when discussions get complex.

It also provides a touchstone for checking whether the panel's decisions are addressing what they were brought together to do.

The guiding question - drafted by the Park Authority and Involve at the start of this co-design process - was:



How should this fund work and how do we make sure communities are genuinely in control?



Steps in the process

Phase 1, Discovery phase (March – August 2025)

This involved framing what the fund is about, the boundaries that the co-design would work within and who needed to make decisions during each phase of the project.

Pre-engagement work and advisory group formation (July – December 2025)

Pre engagement work was carried out by the Park Authority to test messaging about the co-design work and build relationships before launching the design process.

An advisory group was established to hold Involve and the Park Authority to account on engagement and design of the process. They did not have any role in decision making itself, but instead acted as a ‘critical friend’ to sense check our approach to the sessions.

Recruitment of the co-design panel (January – February 2026)

The Park Authority advertised the opportunity to be on the codesign panel via a multi-channel campaign including social media, in-person events and postal drops, collecting expressions of interest via an online form.

Involve then ran a selection process and onboarded a diverse group of people who live in, work in or have a strong connection to the Cairngorms.

Co-design panel sessions (March – June 2026)

From March-June 2026 we ran nine co-design sessions where the panel learned about funding, discussed methodologies and processes and came to final decisions about how the Communities Fund should look.

During session 9 the Park Authority presented back their implementation plans and sense checked them with the panel.

Who else was involved?

The advisory group were drawn from across the geography of the National Park and beyond, and with a wide range of backgrounds, including:

Participatory democracy experience, process integrity and a strategic perspective.

Local expertise including farming, local business, community group, equalities, barriers to participation and youth engagement.

Participation in the advisory group was voluntary and they had no direct delivery responsibilities. They did not have the ability to 'override' the codesign panel decisions.

Instead they made recommendations on the codesign process, accessibility and democratic integrity.

From a governance perspective, the Park Authority ensured regular updates to both their own governing board, as well as the Cairngorms 2030 programme funders NLHF.

After each phase outlined above, the proposals were shared with the Park Authority Board, to update the project risk register and share progress. This was in addition to monthly updates to NLHF.

Discovery phase

Discovery phase – March to August 2025

Between March and August 2025, Involve and the Park Authority spoke with people across the Cairngorms from different audience groups at events and through individual conversations.

This work helped us (Involve and the Park Authority) to refine the boundaries of the fund and understand more about four key elements of the fund.

The key elements identified through discovery were:

Features of the fund

Purpose and ambitions

Measures of success

Potential challenges



Features of the fund

The fund was designed to distribute around £1 million, with a focus on the vision and aims of Cairngorms 2030. It would have multiple models rather than a single structure. There was openness to different options for different sizes / strands of funding within an overall fund, addressing the diverse needs across different geographies, communities of interest and backgrounds.

The fund needed to be easy for communities to apply to, and be run by communities rather than agencies.

The fund was co-designed with targeted recruitment across six key audience areas for Cairngorms 2030 (community groups and residents, farmers and land managers, interest groups, local businesses, under-represented groups and young people). Participants were selected via random sampling. Members of the co-design panel were paid for their time to reduce barriers to involvement.

Purpose and ambitions

The fund is a key element of Cairngorms 2030, designed to empower communities by putting local people at the heart of decision making and giving them more say in future funding decisions.

It aims to shift power to communities to address climate action across four core themes: empowering communities, transport, landscapes, health and wellbeing.

This will make climate action tangible and locally relevant.

The ambition extends beyond 2030 to inform the next National Park Partnership Plan, with participatory approaches becoming embedded in ongoing National Park operations rather than remaining separate.

Measures of success

Success would be measured against the Cairngorms 2030 vision and should be connected to the [programme themes](#).

The Park Authority would pilot new models of participation and learn what they can do to make climate impacts personal to residents. There would be an option to capture ‘stories of change’ throughout the process and not just end-point metrics. Success also included creating sustainable models of funding that could withstand ‘peaks and troughs’ and work effectively for 10 years into the future.

Challenges

We heard about several challenges that could have an impact on participation work across Cairngorms 2030, including power imbalances and the risk of extractive consultation.

There was tension around geographical boundaries and formal partnership arrangements. For the process, there was concern about avoiding consultation fatigue with people having to ‘repeat themselves’ across multiple engagement processes. There was also the challenge of reflecting such a large landmass with diverse communities, including the risk that existing funding might ‘get lost’ against a larger £1 million pot.

There was also a need to clarify what would happen beyond the end of the programme in 2030.

At the end of the discovery phase, Involve and the Park Authority did the following:

We agreed a clear fund framing and underpinning narrative for the fund, establishing boundaries and the fund's relationship to tackling the nature and climate crisis.

We rapidly explored the approach to engaging with different audiences and established the advisory group.

We examined a range of methodological options with the Park Authority to better understand interest and feasibility of different pre-engagement models.

Involve supported the Park Authority team to build confidence and skills to continue leading engagement with residents, starting with community conversations about the co-design process and how to frame it in recruitment.

We launched recruitment in January 2026, with the approach and participant targets finalised after conclusion of wider community conversations about fund framing.



Recruiting the co design panel



Recruitment process

The aim was to bring together a panel made up of 18 members of the public who reflected a mixture of different experiences and backgrounds. The task was to balance the need for a breadth of experience with the need to have a panel size able to build relationships, enabling discussions with disagreement and trade off discussions on the way to decisions.

Recruitment covered the full geography of the National Park, as well as people from the six key audiences of: community groups and residents, farmers and land managers, interest groups, local businesses, under-represented groups and young people.

The expressions of interest process

In order to reach as many people as possible, the Park Authority started with the overall framing of the fund and spoke with people in communities to understand why would be relevant to a local resident or grantee, and why they would get involved.

The Park Authority then took a varied approach to raising awareness of the opportunity to be part of the co-design panel. In particular the Park Authority:

- Specifically targeted **local media titles**
- **Ran a targeted digital campaign**, including hyper-local social media advertising in specific locations
- **Asked partners to spread the word**
- **Sent a postcard** to every household in the National Park plus nearby settlements such as Aboyne, Alford and Pitlochry (circa 31,000 residents in total)
- Did engagement through **community events** etc
- **Sent out reminder communications** as the application deadline approached

So who applied to be a part of the co-design panel?

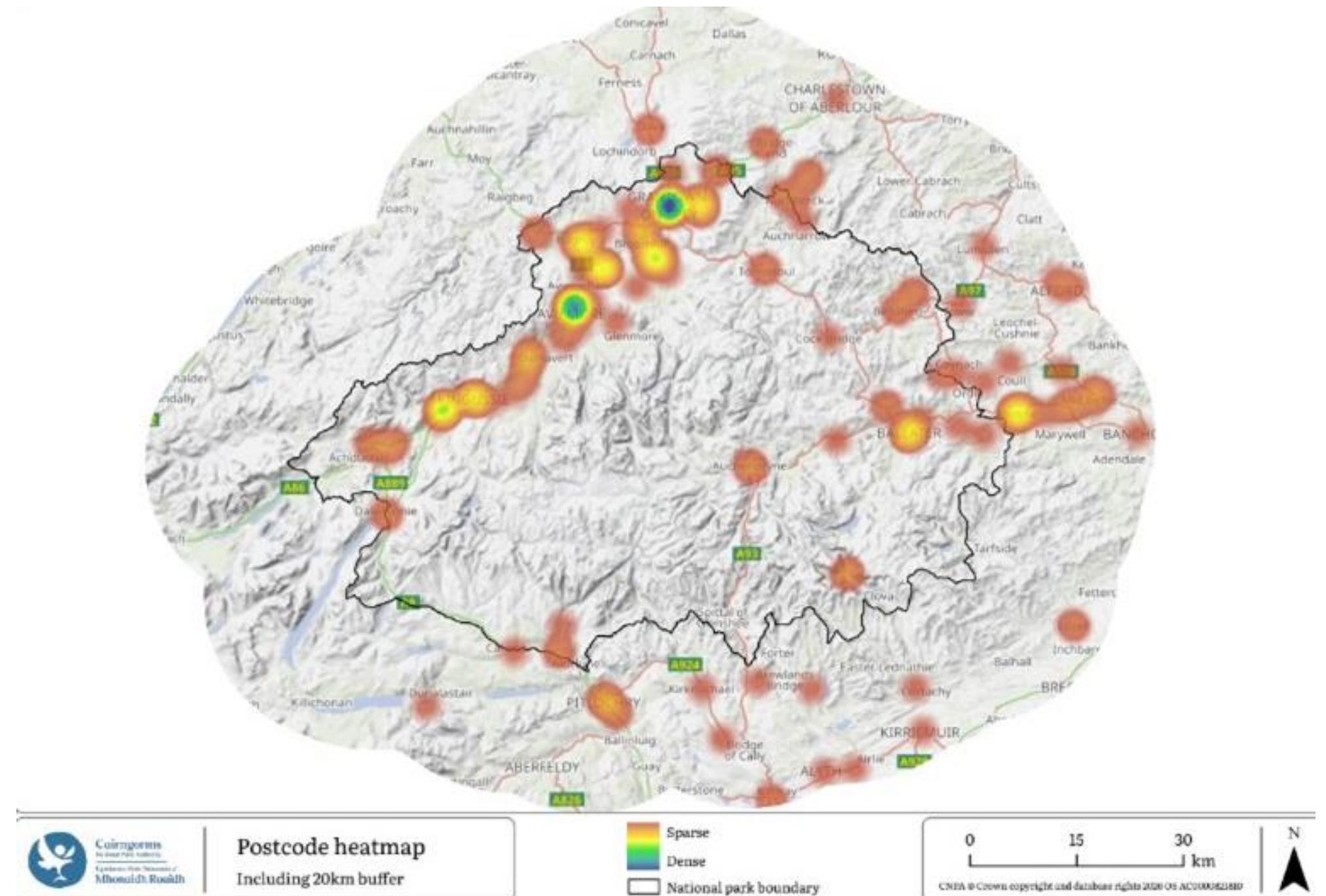
We had 249 individual expressions of interest from people living, working in or with a strong connection to the National Park.

120 people had ‘never or almost never’ previously engaged with the Park Authority.

This included 7.5% ethnic minority applicants, 11% LGBTQ+ and 13.6% disabled people. All of these figures are higher than the equivalent census figures.

Expressions of interest came from across the geography of the Cairngorms, as can be seen in the heatmap on the right.

Every community of the National Park was represented, from Blair Atholl to Aviemore and Ballater.



How were people selected?

Involve completed the selection process through random, anonymised stratified sampling. This meant doing a random selection within pre-defined groups. These groups were: audience, age, gender and geographic location (via postcode).

Involve first filtered the expressions of interest by audience and used a random number generator to select three people in each audience group.

We then reviewed the selected group based on location, age and gender. Where we needed more balance in any one of these categories, we randomly selected from those over-represented and removed them.

We then randomly selected replacements from those under-represented.

For example, we concluded after initial random selection that we had over-represented for people ages 25-54 and under represented for people aged 55+ across the panel. We therefore randomly selected from those 25-54 and removed some proposed panellists. We then re-selected from those 55+ and from the audience groups that we have removed panel members from.

With recruitment processes that are open routinely for six weeks, there is often some natural drop off when people who express interest are no longer able to make all of the dates when they are selected. This results in re-selecting. This affected fewer than 20% of panellists during this process.



Supporting participation in the panel

Making it possible to take part

We organised a mix of online and in-person sessions so that panellists weren't asked to travel long distances across the National Park more often than necessary. Where evening online sessions did happen, we kept them to a strict 2.5 hours with breaks.

We talked to every panellist before the process began, so we understood what support each person needed to take part, rather than assuming a single approach would work for everyone. This could mean anything from printed materials to seating arrangements - tailored to what each person told us they needed. Venues for in-person sessions were chosen for their accessibility.

Reducing practical and financial barriers

Panellists received a stipend of £20.17 per hour for their time and contribution. Travel to and from sessions were reimbursed, and we arranged lifts where these were needed.

For online sessions, we lent laptops to anyone who needed one, and provided tech support throughout.

Payment was also offered to cover other needs that came with taking part, including caring responsibilities.



The final panel

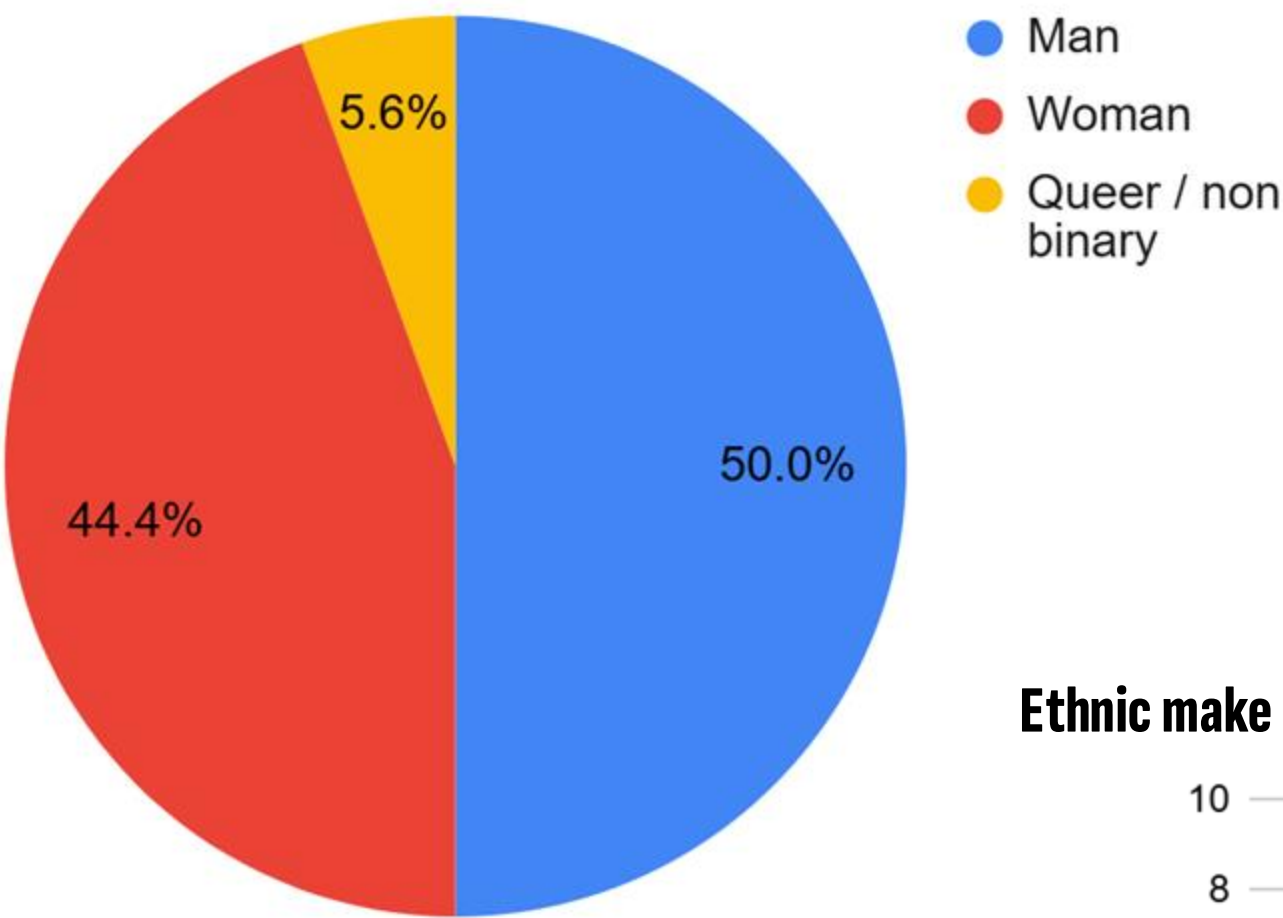
Through the expression of interest process we collected contact details and demographic data. This data was used for the purposes of recruitment selection and contacting members only.

Panel members are from across the Cairngorms and wider, coming from the following community council areas:

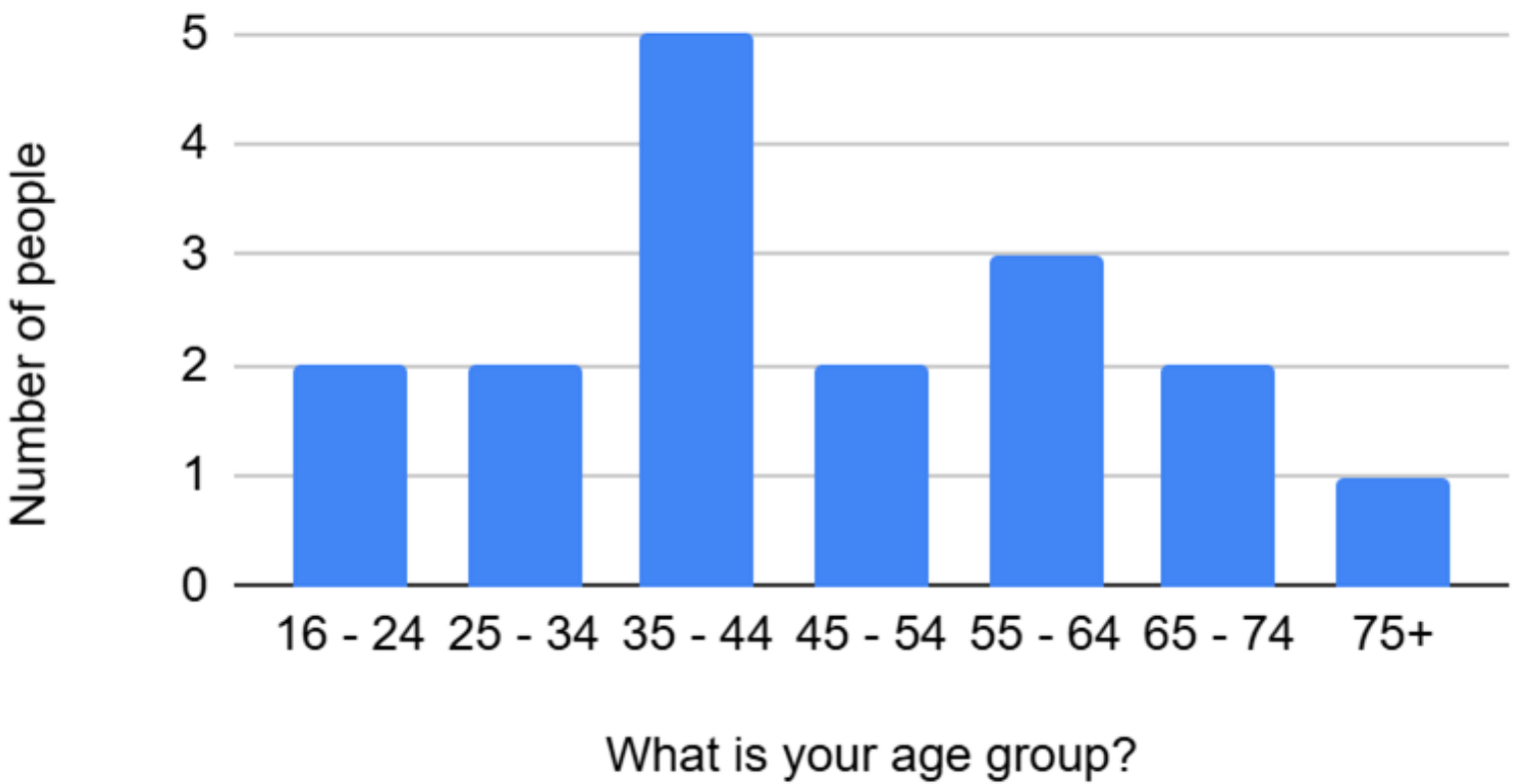
1. Aviemore and Vicinity Community Council area
2. Ballater, Crathie and Braemar Community Council area
3. Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council area
4. Boat of Garten Community Council area
5. Cromar Community Council area
6. Donside Community Council area
7. Glenlivet and Inveravon Community Council area
8. Grantown and Vicinity / Dulnain / Cromdale and Advie Community Council areas
9. Greater Glasgow
10. Inverness area
11. Killiecrankie and Fincastle Community Council area
12. Kincaig / Kingussie Community Council areas
13. Kirriemuir Landward East Community Council area
14. Laggan / Newtonmore Community Council areas
15. Mid Deeside / Torphins Community Council areas
16. Mid Deeside Community Council area
17. Nethy Bridge Community Council area

The final panel in charts

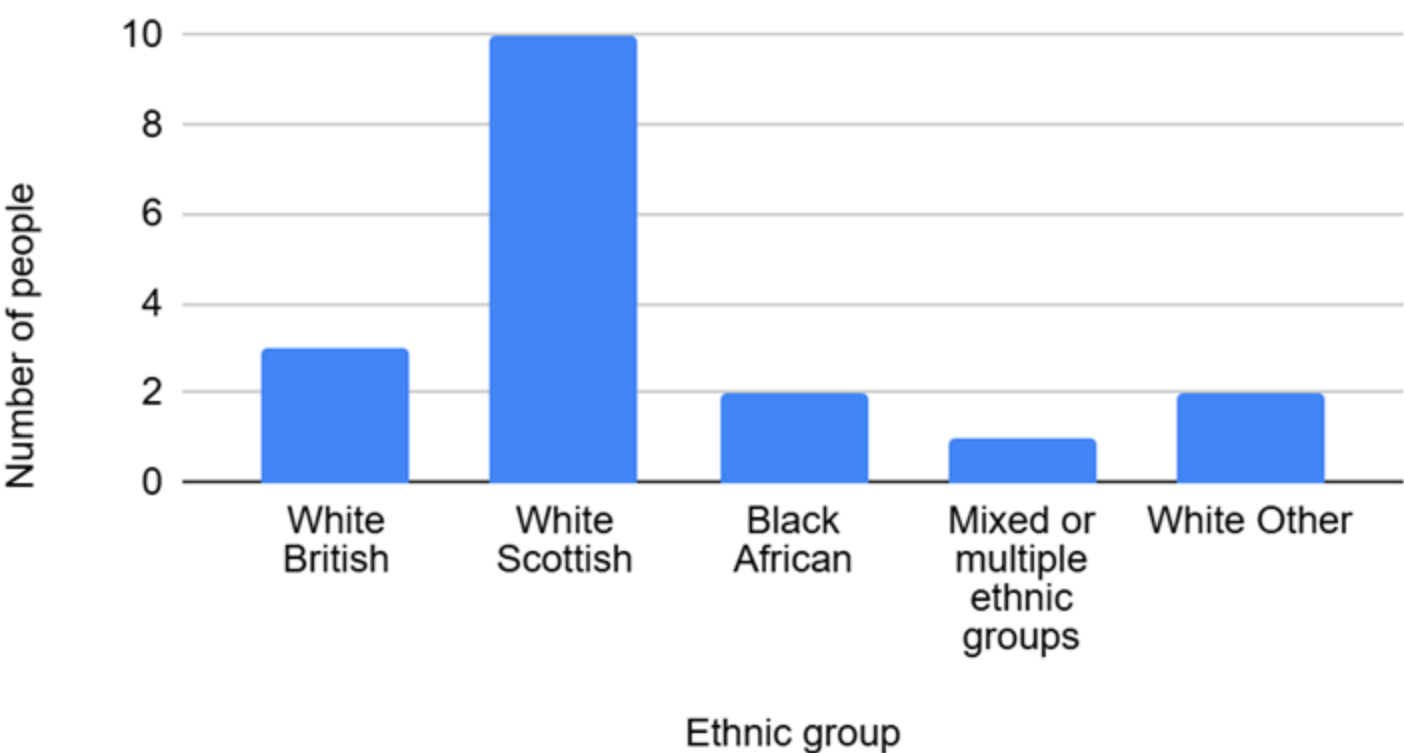
Gender of panel members (coded from free text answers)



Ages of panel members (census-based drop down list)



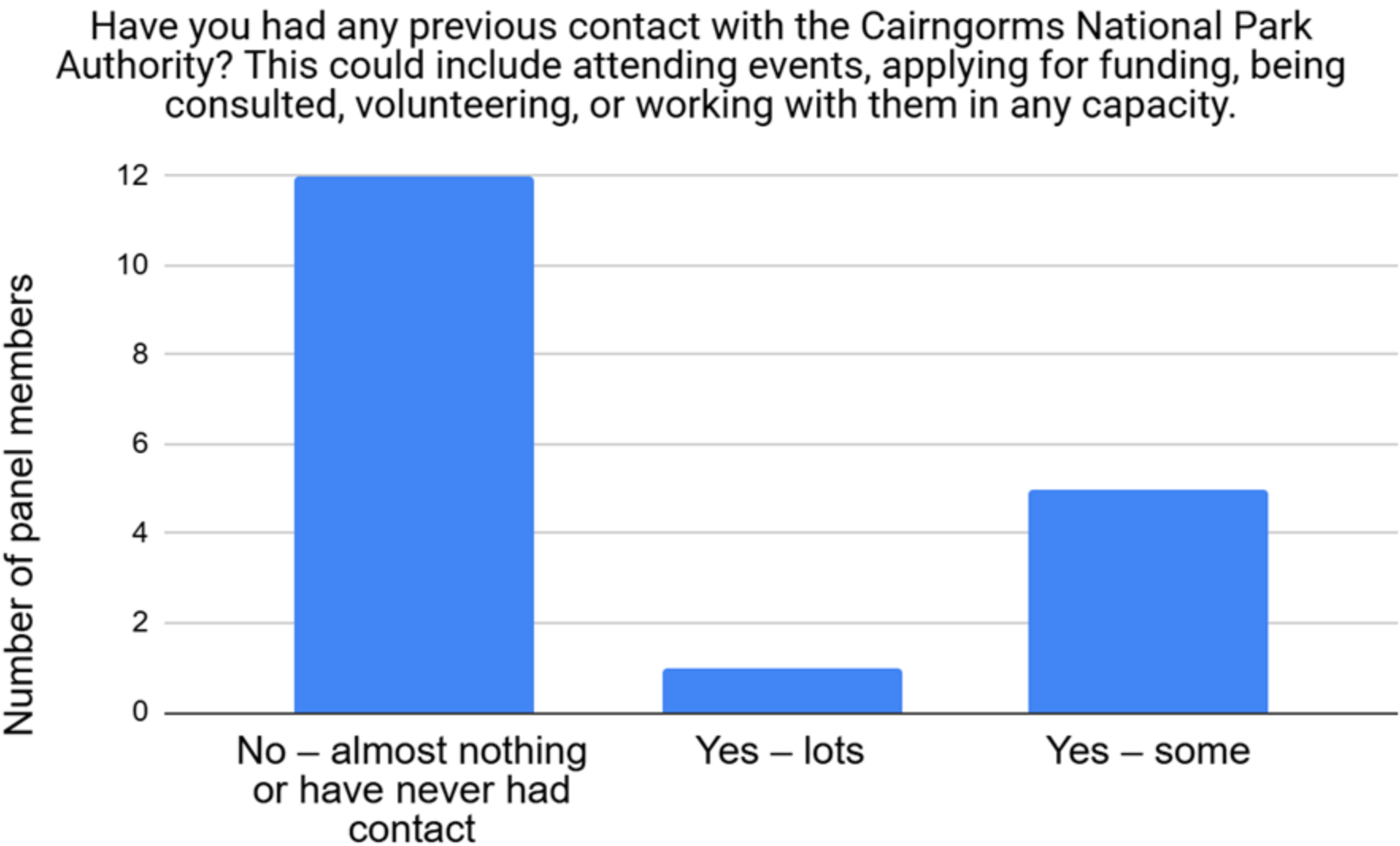
Ethnic make up of panel (census-based drop down list)



Panel member previous experience with the Park Authority

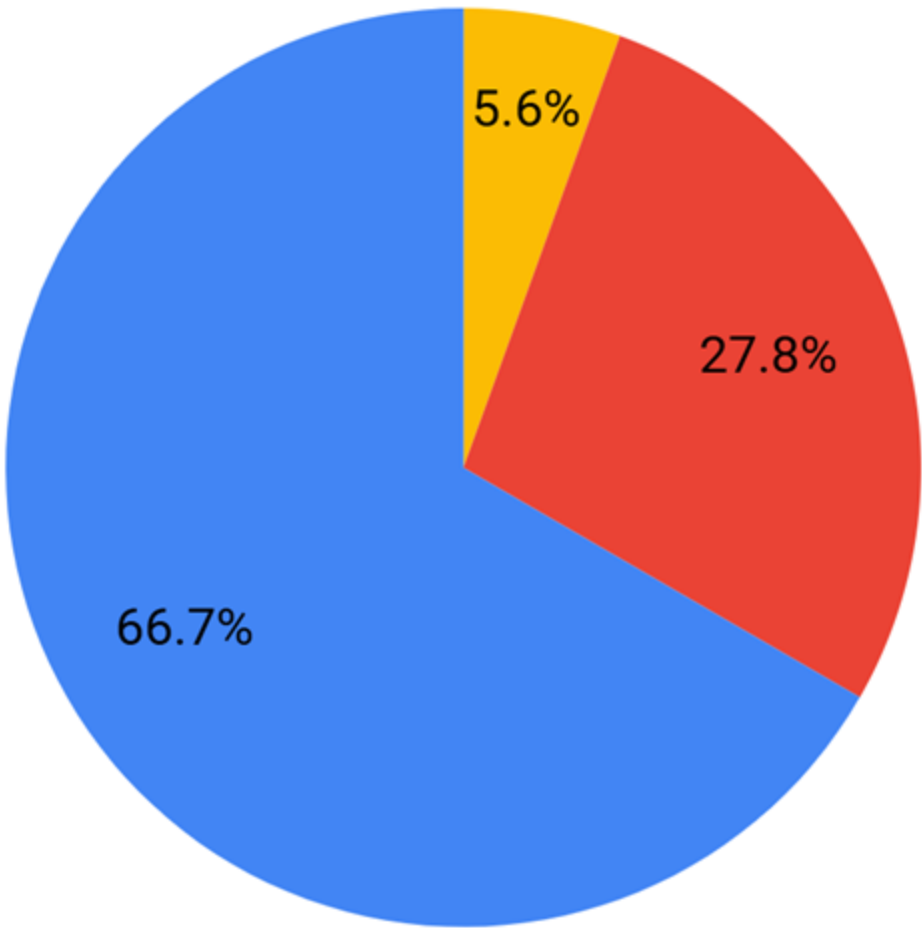
A key aim for recruitment of this co-design panel was to reach people who had not previously been involved with the Cairngorms National Park Authority's work.

The charts below show the numbers of panel members that had previously been involved with funding or any other sort of contact with the Park Authority.



Have you been involved with community funding before?

- Yes – in the National Park
- Yes – outside the National Park
- No





The co-design panel sessions



Above: The co-design panel in Newtonmore © Cairngorms National Park Authority

Our journey in three phases

Foundations

Sessions 1-3

Build understanding, hear from communities, agree principles, decide on funding structure

Design

Sessions 4-6

Design eligibility, applications and the decision-making process

Finalise

Sessions 7-9

Confirm all decisions, finalise the fund, prepare for launch

Our journey: Foundations

1. Online



Session 1 - Welcome and introduction - Wednesday 25 March 2026, 6-8:30pm

Session 1 was an online welcome webinar that opened the co-design process for the Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund panel. It brought together the panel members for the first time, alongside the Involve facilitation team and the Park Authority, to set the tone and agree ways of working together.

The session introduced panel members to their role as co-designers, gave an overview of the fund, and explained what the process will involve across the following months. Session 1 was about information and connection - giving people the chance to meet one another and begin to form the working relationships that the rest of the process depended on.

2. In-person



Session 2 - Exploring the fund and context - Saturday 28 March 2026, 9.30am-5pm

Session 2 brought the full panel together in person at Boat of Garten Hall for a full day of exploration and learning. Participants heard from the Cairngorms Trust on the funding landscape, received a full account of the fund's constraints from the Park Authority and NLHF, and listened directly to voices from people in the communities they are designing the fund for (all of whom had previously applied for funding, both successfully and unsuccessfully).

By the end of the day, the panel had a clearer picture of the landscape they were working in and a set of principles to guide their work together.

3. In-person



Session 3 - Defining the funding pots - Wednesday 25 April 2026, 9:30am-5pm

Session 3 was a key session of the process. The panel arrived after a month-long gap, re-oriented to their Session 2 work, and then moved through a structured arc from exploration of funding models to some decisions.

The morning used small group work to examine different funding structures, their trade-offs and who they include or exclude. The afternoon brought the full group together to make up to three binding decisions: the number and shape of funding pots, the allocation of the £1 million across those pots and some prioritised funding areas within this agreed structure.

Our journey: Design

4. Online



Session 4 - Participatory approaches and decision making - Wednesdsay 6 May, 6-8.30pm

Session 4 was a knowledge-building and bridging session. The panel explored the range of participatory decision-making approaches through case examples and breakout discussions, then applied that learning to the Communities Fund, imagining what processes could look like for different processes of small, medium and large grants (which was decided in session 3). The session closed by surfacing the 'practical unknowns' that Sessions 5 to 7 needed to address. At this point, Involve also introduced the first follow-up survey to capture the panel's insights and ideas before more detailed design work.

5. Online



Session 5 - Eligibility and applications - Wednesday 13 May 6-8.30pm

Session 5 was a design session. The panel has spent Sessions 1 to 4 building context, agreeing principles, deciding the broad fund structure and exploring how other participatory funds work. Session 5 - 7 worked on the detailed design.

The session started with the survey results from session 4 as the working material for the evening. The surveys, used from session 4 on, guided the group on areas of emerging consensus and areas where questions remained. Decisions in this session about EDI built on the panel's own language from previous sessions, and the Park Authority's NLHF application commitments, to agree a working definition.

Session 5 also looked at structural decisions, looking at three specific proposals from the survey in sequence. The panel also discussed the decision-making approaches that could be used for different grants, using a shortlisting method to narrow options before discussion, reducing the risk of the group going in circles. The session did not resolve all decisions and a follow-up survey was to continue the decisions into session 6.

6. Online



Session 6 -Focus on the decision process - Wednesday 20 May, 6- 8.30pm

Session 6 built directly on the survey results from session 5. The panel worked through four connected blocks in a sequence designed so that each one informed the next: grant sizes and windows first, then eligibility and EDI to establish who the fund is for and how inclusion is built in, then a shared definition of community, and finally the decision-making design itself.

The panel worked in breakout groups of six throughout, with sharing between groups after each block. The follow-up survey for session 6 helped the panel to make decisions that could not be resolved in the room.

Our journey: Finalise

7. In-person



Session 7 – Participatory approaches and decision making – Saturday 30 May, 9.30am–5.30pm

Session 7 was a full day in person, building directly on the survey results and the outputs from Sessions 5 and 6. The day was structured around the applicant journey – who applies, what they apply for, how they apply, how decisions are made and what happens after – with draft materials from previous sessions pinned around the room.

The session started with a recap of the journey so far and a summary of survey responses, followed by a brief Park Authority update on what has been confirmed as feasible and any proposed alternatives to consider. The morning was about process design: three parallel groups worked through process options A, B and C in rotation, building and refining a draft design for each grant size.

After lunch, the panel reconvened to resolve outstanding issues. We had aimed to test the complete design against real scenarios and develop the early outlines of how the fund would be communicated to different audiences; however, we did not have time for this on the day. We scheduled an additional session (session 8) and followed up session 7 with a survey to collate insights and inform the final session.

8. Online



Session 8 – Focus on eligibility and applications – Wednesday 17 June, 6–8.30pm

Session 8 focused on the questions that most need the panel's input before the fund could be finalised. The Park Authority shared a draft blueprint of the fund in response to all of the work of the panel up to that point. The panel worked through final decisions about the different sizes of grants that people could apply for and how communities would be involved in decision making.

This session was an extra session where feedback across May showed that there were still some open questions about the fund. Session 8 was about finding a way through these final decisions together. By the end of the session, the panel clarified what the Park Authority needed to do to turn the blueprint into an operational plan. We used a short follow-up survey to capture anything that needed more time to reflect on.

9. Online



Session 9 – Focus on the decision process Wednesday 24 June, 6–8.30pm

Session 9 was the panel's final session. The Park Authority presented a plan for how they will put the Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund into action, based on all the decisions the panel had made over the previous eight sessions.

The panel reviewed this plan and gave feedback on it, and held an initial discussion on how to involve members of the wider public in decisions about large grants.

A follow-up survey then asked panel members for further views on involving the public in large grants and on how the fund should be communicated more widely.



Co-design techniques



Our approach to design and decision-making

We designed this process to hand decision-making power to the panel and treated it as an emergent process throughout, adapting as we went with flexible session plans.

We created a decision map to guide us through the decisions that had to be made across the process. Across nine sessions, the panel moved from understanding the fund's context and constraints, through shaping its principles and structure, to making binding decisions on how the money was allocated and distributed. Park Authority staff and outside contributors gave context, answered questions, and offered feasibility input throughout.



Making power visible: the decision map

This decision map set out, for every stage of the process, what kind of input the panel had and who held the final say. It was shared with the panel in Session 1, so everyone knew from the outset what to expect.

The overall pattern moved from receiving information and exploring ideas early on, through shaping proposals in the middle sessions, to making decisions by Session 7. The aim was to help the panel understand what kind of power they held at each point – and to give them a clear basis for holding others to account for the decisions that weren't theirs to make.

But this structure wasn't fixed. Within that overall shape, we adapted the process as we went – giving the panel as much room as possible to influence how things unfolded, while still making steady progress towards a decision. When the panel felt they needed more time to get something right, they chose to add an extra session rather than being rushed into one. Facilitators also adapted each session's design in response to how the panel was actually working, not just to the original plan. The decision map gave everyone shared, common ground to work from – it didn't lock the process into moving at a fixed pace.

RECEIVE	The panel is given information by speakers, the Park Authority or NLHF. They can ask questions but are not being asked to produce or decide anything.
EXPLORE	The panel discusses, questions, and makes sense of information. They are forming views and surfacing concerns, but not yet committing to positions.
SHAPE	The panel drafts, proposes or creates something – criteria, principles, processes. Working drafts subject to later confirmation.
DECIDE	The panel makes a binding decision that will be carried forward into the final fund design. This is where genuine decision-making power sits.
ADVISE	The panel provides input or recommendations, but the final decision rests with another body (Park Authority board or staff, NLHF).

Generating and testing options

Before any decision was made, the panel explored the range of options in front of them. In small groups, they worked through different options against a set of guiding questions - who benefits, who might be excluded, and what each option would make possible or harder.

One exercise, known as a **gallery walk**, set up examples of real-world case studies around the room like an exhibition. Small groups moved between them, adding notes directly onto each display to say what looked worth trying and what looked worth avoiding.

The panel also tested draft ideas against hypothetical **scenarios**, walking through invented but realistic examples to ask simply: where would this process break down?

Examples of techniques we used

Gallery walk	Small groups moved between real examples set out like an exhibition, noting what looked worth trying and what looked worth avoiding.
Small-group work	Groups discussed each option against the same questions: who benefits, who might be excluded, what it would make possible or harder.
Scenario testing	The Panel tested draft ideas against fictional but realistic grant cases, asking simply: where would this break down?

Real world examples

During the second in-person session, the panel heard directly from people in the National Park who had applied for funding themselves - some successfully, some not. Contributors came from farming, community development and local education projects, and spoke frankly about their own recent experience, followed by a question-and-answer session.

This gave the panel a grounded sense of the funding that's already available, and the real obstacles people can face trying to access it.

Reaching decisions

There wasn't one fixed method for reaching a decision. Different sessions called for different approaches, and we adapted as we went rather than following a single script throughout. Decisions were mostly reached through group discussion, with one facilitator leading and a second writing up the group's emerging view on a flipchart in real time, visible to everyone.

Interactive tools, such as giving each participant a set of sticky dots to place on the options they favoured, turned abstract trade-offs into something people could physically act on. Where the Panel couldn't reach full agreement, a fallback approach - such as a high majority threshold, agreed in advance - meant a decision could still move forward.

Between sessions, surveys let panel members vote on options, give input on specific questions, and raise anything else in an open text box. Both the raw results and a facilitator summary were shared with the panel before the next stage of work.

Examples of techniques we used

Whole-group deliberation with live capture	While the group talked, a facilitator wrote up what was emerging on a flipchart everyone could see - so people could check it reflected the discussion, or challenge it if not.
Interactive budget allocation	Each participant used sticky dots to mark visually how they'd split the funding across the options on offer.
Consensus-first, with agreed fallback	The panel aimed for full agreement first. Where that wasn't possible, a fallback (an agreed threshold of support) let the decision proceed rather than stall.



Deliberation and working through difference

Beyond individual techniques, a few structural choices ran throughout. The panel held real differences of view, so we built the process to surface that rather than smooth it over.

Examples of how we structured deliberation

Share back protocol

After any breakout, each group fed back one point or question sorted under fixed headings that flowed into the next exercise.

Naming the type of input up front

Every activity was explicitly framed so expectations were clear before discussion started.

Expertise on tap

Grant officers from the Park Authority sat alongside the panel to answer feasibility questions as they arose, being careful not to direct the outcome.

Examples of how we worked through difference

“I” not “we”

We created ground rules with the panel and this included an ask for people to speak for themselves, so a strong opinion wasn't mistaken for the group's consensus.

Small groups, specific questions

Breakout groups and direct prompts made space for quieter and less confident voices. This was combined with a range of full group facilitation activities.

Agreed fallback, dissent noted

Where full agreement wasn't possible, the pre-agreed fallback let a decision proceed without erasing dissent.



Building connections and bringing funding to life

Deliberation on its own can feel abstract, and long sessions risk losing people's energy and honesty before making decisions.

We used a range of different techniques to ground discussion in personal experience, making the diversity of experiences and views visible early and giving space for the panel to have moments of discovery, rather than a steady drip of information.

This helped participants arrive at the harder conversations already warmed up, more willing to speak honestly and more connected to each other – which in turn made the deliberation and decisions that followed focused and more trusted.

"What's your funding story?"

Before any formal definitions, the panel shared their own experience of funding. Most had little to none, which said something important about who the fund needed to reach.

Word-or-phrase share-back

Every so often, facilitators asked people to sum up how they were feeling in a word or phrase. This gave a quick, simple sense of the room's mood.

Transformational at different scales activity

In table groups, the panel imagined what real projects could look like at four different funding amounts – from small to large – before weighing those options against each other.

Survey share

Between-session survey results were presented live, creating a moment of collective discovery.

Cairngorms 2030 floor exercise

The panel moved around the room, grouping and adding to cards showing different words and ideas connected to the fund. They worked out together what mattered most, before hearing the Park Authority's own definitions.

Unhurried opening, informality and (re)connecting

A welcoming, informal space with refreshments and a (re)connecting activity before the work began.

The co-design panel outputs



By the end, the Communities Fund panel agreed:

1. Timelines for the fund
2. Split of the fund and priority areas
3. Who can apply and how
4. How decisions about funding would be made
5. What success looked like and how funded projects would share their impact

1. Timelines for the fund

- The fund was designed to be accessible to someone who had never applied before and to support the people we were most trying to reach.
- Applicants were to be given time (and support) to develop and work up ideas before applying.
- Feedback loops were to be included between funding rounds so potential applicants could see clearly that the fund was for people like them, allowing them to plan ahead.
- A two-year fund timetable was proposed, with three specific tiers of funding:
 - An 'always on' small grants fund.
 - Medium grants awarded three times per year.
 - Large grants awarded in two stages (in 2027).
- A programme of engagement and communications would be put in place to support the fund's delivery, outreach and with applications.

2. Split of the fund and priority areas

Four core themes would underpin the fund. These were the four priority areas for Cairngorms 2030:

- Transform the way land is managed and used to benefit nature.
- Empower communities to shape the future of their local area.
- Make getting around the Cairngorms easier, safer and greener.
- Foster healthier, happier communities with wellbeing at their heart.

Alongside the four themes, there was a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion as part of the fund:

- A minimum of 10% of the total fund value would be directed toward projects whose primary beneficiaries were people and communities least likely to benefit from standard funding processes – because of who they are, where they live or barriers they face.
- This was not about ticking boxes. It was about making sure the fund reached people it would otherwise miss.
- ‘Equity’ recognised that some people needed more targeted support to have a fair chance. Reaching those people would require active promotion and practical support to apply.
- In order to achieve this there would be:
 - **A key application question** – ‘Is this project primarily aimed at people who face barriers to participation, or who are under-represented in the Cairngorms?’ (yes / partly / no)
 - **Ongoing monitoring:** Establishing what actually happened vs what was intended to happen.

2. Split of the fund and priority areas

It was agreed that there would be three different funding sizes.

Each had a slightly different process for funding to be allocated.

Small grants would be awarded between £500 and £5,000

Medium grants would be awarded between £5,001 and £50,000

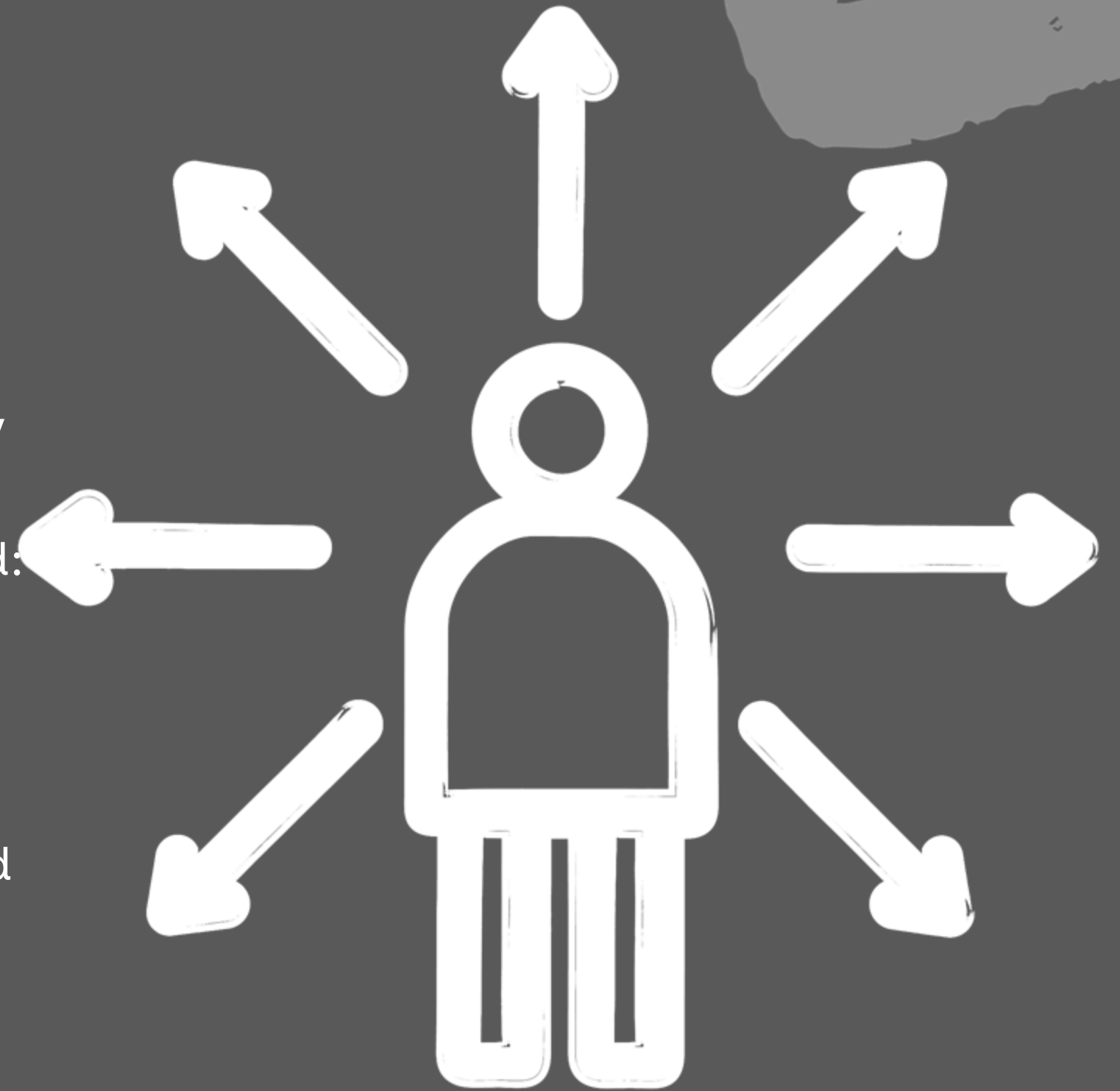
Large grants would be awarded between £50,001 and £100,000

2. Split of the fund and priority areas

Size	What was innovative or distinctive about this funding pot – ie different from a standard grant?	Features of the pot
Small £500 – £5,000	• Presumption to say ‘yes’ to applications • Priority given to first time applicants • Simple reporting process, eg three basic questions, with video and written formats welcome • Minimum 10% ringfenced for EDI projects, but question asked of all applicants to increase this	• Applicants could apply for up to £5,000 at any one time (across multiple bids) • Time allowed for applicants to develop and work up ideas before applying • Regular comms using case studies to highlight ‘this fund is for you’ • Interactive map showing successful projects across the National Park • Maximum 50 awards per year (150 total)
Medium £5,001 – £50,000	• Paid forum drawn from across the National Park and a range of backgrounds made decisions • Showcase for applicants develop ideas, form teams, gather materials etc. Linked to C2030 roadshow events • Minimum 10% ring fenced for EDI projects, but question asked of all applicants to increase this	• Applicants could apply for up to £50,000 at any one time (across multiple bids), priority given to first timers • More detailed application than small grants, but still straightforward to complete • Support available to help work up applications • Partnerships encouraged where duplication occurred • Grants paid in instalments (unless time was too tight) • Forum size 11, meeting three times per year. Same forum throughout process • Forum members to independently score applications, deliberate and, if consensus wasn’t reached, a 2/3rds majority vote
Large £50,001 – £100,000	• Showcase for applicants develop ideas, form teams, gather materials etc. Linked to C2030 roadshow events • Match funding welcomed but not required • Public invited to comment / help longlist applications ahead of panel decisions • Forum retained ability to interview applicants, with this being communicated clearly at the application stage • Element of general public feedback in final decision • Minimum 10% ring fenced for EDI projects, but question asked of all applicants to increase this	• Applicants could apply for up to £100,000 at any one time (across multiple bids) • Applicants made aware they could apply for small / medium grants first and progress to large later on • Public engagement (on and offline) highlighted work of successful projects

3. Who can apply and how

- Eligibility criteria to be in place for all applications, regardless of grant size.
- Eligibility criteria would be pass / fail rather than a scored process.
- Applications reviewed by the Park Authority's Grants team, with panel check-in at every meeting. This would include any applications that were pending.
- Applications had to meet all three of the following to proceed:
 - Fitted within a Cairngorms 2030 theme
 - Took place within the National Park
 - Delivered community benefit
- All else being equal, first-time applicants would be prioritised to deliver on the panel's ambitions around widening participation.
- If the Grants team believed a project to be undeliverable, it would be deferred to the next decision-making panel.



4. How decisions about funding are made: medium and large grants

1



Park Authority will recruit a single, diverse decision making panel with a balance of geographic, demographic and EDI representation.

2



This forum will make decisions on the medium and large grants and will be in place for the full fund term.

3



The forum made up of 11 individuals. Current panel members are welcome to apply.

4



Park Authority will use a similar approach to recruit the forum as was used for the co-design panel.

5



The following support will be provided for forum members:

- Training and capacity building built into timetable
- Grants team available as ongoing advisors
- Option for forum to request specific expertise (eg legal, financial) in an advisory capacity

6



Forum members will not be recruited based on their experience of similar funding processes.

What success looks like and how funded projects will share their impact

	Small	Medium	Large
Evidence of spend	Bank statement showing spend	Bank statement showing spend, and receipts	Evidence of spending; guidance template provided at award
Activity reporting	What you did	What you did + did you do what you planned - if not, why not?	Diary; progress reports at agreed intervals
Impact evidence	Simple, intuitive format	Quantitative data; evaluation against application measures	As medium, plus video update produced with the Park Authority
Updates during project	None	Diary updates via portal	Staged reports via portal
At end	Brief report via portal, various formats accepted	Report via portal; pictures; potential project learning visits	Public presentation delivered with help from the Park Authority; legacy report

Reflections and learning from the process



Reflections and learning from panel members and Park Authority colleagues

Throughout the co-design process, members were asked their views about this way of making decisions and doing grant funding.

Some final thoughts about the fund are on the following slide. However, a full evaluation of the process was also carried out.

[The evaluation will be published here in due course.](#)

Five key learnings from the Park Authority about future engagement and participation work

1. Payment for participation enables a far more diverse group of people to be involved.
2. It takes time to build trust in a new process from senior stakeholders, but the outcome is well worth the effort.
3. Recognising that, when you're in the room on behalf of an organisation, people will often look to you for answers. How and when you answer can inadvertently influence outcomes.
4. Handing over power in this way requires appropriate support. Having an independent facilitator allowed space for proper discussion and enabled us to really listen.
5. Don't be scared to try something different and to change your mind! By properly listening to one another, we came to a solution that none of us would have designed on our own.

**Things that stood out
to panel members at
the end of the process**

***Very interesting to see the process, and the
insight to what other people are thinking.***

***I was surprised that we managed to get to a
conclusion, at some points it felt a long way
away.***

***Will we, as a Group/Panel, come to
successful Outcomes that benefit all
Communities in the Cairngorms National
Park?***

***That I felt part of something
that will impact people in a
positive way and hopefully
attract new folks, hopefully
folks feel the process is
easier too.***

***A strong question as to if this
process has been worth the
money and time spent on it to
achieve a grant making
process with [in my view]
little marked differences to
existing systems within the
Park.***

“ ”

***I think the effort everyone
was willing to put in, and the
care that was taken.***

***Often in panels, once people
are on it, they can sit back on
their laurels, but that wasn't
the case here.***

Get in contact for a conversation, we would love to hear from you!

To find out more about how the fund is doing, visit:
cairngorms.co.uk/2030-fund

To talk about funding: communitygrants@cairngorms.co.uk

To talk about the codesign process - engagement@cairngorms.co.uk

To talk with Involve - hello@involve.org.uk



Cairngorms
National Park
Pàirc Nàiseanta a'
Mhonaidh Ruaidh



Cairngorms 2030 is a Cairngorms National Park Authority programme supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, with thanks to National Lottery players