

# HEART Community Engagement Jan – Mar 2026 Summary Report



## Executive Summary

This report summarises community engagement undertaken through the HEART (Heritage, Environment and Resilience Together) project between January and March 2026. It combines evidence from surveys, face-to-face engagement, oral histories, filmed interviews and targeted consultation commissioned through trusted community organisations working with underrepresented communities.

The engagement demonstrates strong support for the Lake District to lead climate adaptation while ensuring local people shape decisions affecting their communities. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of balancing nature recovery with cultural heritage, improving access and belonging, strengthening community resilience and creating more opportunities for young people and communities currently underrepresented in environmental decision-making.

These findings provide a robust evidence base for the HEART Climate and Heritage Action Plan and future community-led investment programmes.

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## 1. Introduction and Methodology

Community engagement is central to the HEART project (Heritage, Environment and Resilience Together). It will ensure that the Climate and Heritage Action Plan is grounded in lived experience, local knowledge and diverse perspectives from across the Lake District World Heritage Site. The aim of the engagement is to:

- Increase understanding of how climate change is affecting heritage, landscapes and communities
- Identify priorities, challenges and opportunities for action
- Inform the development of the Climate and Heritage Action Plan
- Shape the focus of community-led pilot projects and micro-grants

A mixed-method approach was used to ensure both breadth and depth of engagement. This included:

1. An online community survey to gather wide-ranging quantitative and qualitative insight. Invitations to complete the survey were targeted to different audiences and the survey was adapted to suit a range of needs, interest levels and prior knowledge of the subject.
2. Face-to-face engagement events to explore emerging themes in more depth
3. Creative and narrative-based engagement through film and oral histories

## 2. Survey Results

A short online survey was created and circulated through the Lake District Foundation contacts including community groups, parish councils, local organisations, and was also shared on social media and members of staff stood in two large supermarkets encouraging survey responses.

In total we received 61 responses to the survey and 357 pieces of information to analyse. All of the respondents either currently or recently lived, worked or visited the English Lake District World Heritage Site. 5 of the respondents told us that they had a disability. 1 told us that their ethnicity is Asian or Asian British, and 2 told us they are of Mixed multiple ethnicity. We received responses from people aged 16 – 65+ but the lowest number of responses was in the 16- 24 age group. Of respondents who told us their gender, there was an approximately equal split between male and female.

### 2.1. Outstanding Universal Values: What is Special?

We received 74 responses to the question “What feels irreplaceable, unique or special about the Lake District?”

Overall, responses highlight that the Lake District is valued not only for its natural beauty, but also for its living cultural landscape, where nature, farming, heritage, and community life are closely intertwined. Many people describe it as a place that offers both dramatic scenery and deep personal connection, combining opportunities for adventure with a sense of peace and wellbeing. The following themes emerged:

### **Exceptional Landscape and Scenic Beauty**

The most frequently mentioned aspect was the distinctive and beautiful landscape.

Respondents emphasised the combination of mountains, lakes, tarns, valleys, woodland and open moorland, often noting that the concentration of these features in such a small area makes the Lake District feel unique.

People also highlighted the geology and glaciated topography, which create the dramatic fells, steep valleys and lakes that define the area's character. Many described the scenery as breathtaking, world-class, and instantly recognisable.

*"The landscape takes your breath away but still feels friendly and inviting."*

*"There is so much beauty in such a small area. The lakes, fells, fields and woods work so well together visually."*

*"You can always tell when you see the Lake District on TV or in films that it is the Lake District, and not anywhere else."*

### **A Living Cultural Landscape**

Many respondents stressed that the Lake District is a working landscape shaped by centuries of human activity. Farming traditions—particularly hill farming, Herdwick sheep, dry stone walls, barns and vernacular buildings—were widely seen as essential parts of its identity.

Respondents valued the sense that people and landscape have evolved together, creating a distinctive cultural heritage that includes villages, paths, historic buildings and long-standing land management practices.

### **Opportunities for Nature, Adventure and Access**

The Lake District was frequently described as a place where people can experience nature directly and actively. Activities such as walking, climbing, wild swimming, kayaking, and camping were mentioned as key parts of its appeal.

Accessibility was also important: many respondents highlighted that fells, lakes and countryside can often be reached easily from towns and villages, allowing people to connect with nature in everyday life.

### **Peace, Wellbeing and Personal Connection**

Many responses focused on the emotional and restorative qualities of the landscape. People described feelings of peace, calm, inspiration and escape, and noted how time spent in the landscape can improve wellbeing.

For some, the Lake District holds deep personal and family memories, with traditions of visiting or exploring the area across generations.

### **Wildlife, Habitats and Environmental Value**

Respondents recognised the Lake District as an important place for flora, fauna and habitats, with opportunities to experience wildlife closely. However, some also expressed concern about declining biodiversity, suggesting that more wildlife-friendly land management could enhance the landscape further.

### **Communities, Livelihoods and Local Identity**

Several responses emphasised the importance of local communities and livelihoods, particularly farming, tourism and hospitality. The landscape was seen as supporting employment, local pride, and a strong sense of place.

Some respondents also raised concerns about pressures on communities, including second homes, housing affordability and tourism pressures, which they felt could affect the character and sustainability of local villages.

### **Heritage, Culture and Inspiration**

The Lake District's cultural significance was also highlighted, including its literary heritage, historical influences, and long tradition of inspiring artists, writers and visitors. Respondents noted that it continues to be a place that inspires creativity, exploration and reflection.

### **Overall conclusion**

Respondents consistently describe the Lake District as unique because it combines dramatic natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, active farming traditions, accessible outdoor experiences, and strong community connections within a relatively small landscape. Its value lies not only in the scenery but in the long-standing relationship between people and nature, which many feel should be carefully protected for future generations.

## **2.2. Climate Change Experiences**

We then asked what changes to the Lake District people had seen in their lifetime:

Most respondents believe climate change is already affecting the area, particularly through changes in weather patterns and increased extreme events. Flooding and wetter conditions were the most frequently mentioned impacts.

### **Increased Flooding and Heavy Rainfall**

Flooding emerged as the most frequently reported impact. Respondents described “more frequent and more intensive flooding events,” noting that “Keswick has had 3 major flood events in recent years,” which have caused extensive damage to homes, infrastructure, and farmland. Floodwaters and heavy rainfall were seen as overwhelming natural drainage, with one respondent observing “heavier density of rain leading to more flooding and landslips.” The lasting community impacts of such events remain profound.

### **More Extreme and Unpredictable Weather**

There was broad recognition of increasingly volatile weather patterns. Many described “more extremes of weather – flood, drought,” and noted that “the weather is more unpredictable than it used to be.” Intense storms and high winds were frequently mentioned as causing damage to infrastructure and natural features, highlighting a growing challenge in managing the region’s resilience.

### **Warmer, Wetter Winters and Reduced Snowfall**

Respondents consistently observed milder winters with significantly reduced and shorter-lasting snow cover. As one commented, “Warm winters – very little snowfall and short lived when it does fall.” Another noted “generally less snow falls, generally warmer winters,” with implications for local ecosystems and winter recreation.

### **Disrupted Seasonal Patterns**

A common theme was the shifting of traditional seasonal cycles. Participants remarked that “our seasons are mixed up,” with “trees and flowers noticeably coming out much earlier.” This shift was further illustrated by observations such as “frogspawn is coming out earlier and the daffodils and the grass is earlier every season,” indicating cascading effects on wildlife and farming cycles.

### **Landscape Erosion and Physical Damage**

Increasingly intense weather has led to notable landscape damage. Reports included “heavy rain washing out paths,” “flooding, erosion of paths and soil degradation,” and damage to hillsides and historic features. These impacts pose ongoing challenges to conservation and land management efforts.

### **Changes in Wildlife and Ecosystems**

There were widespread reports of ecological shifts linked to climate change. Respondents highlighted “wildlife numbers have declined” and species “becoming red listed.” Changing

flora and fauna patterns were noted alongside concerns about “higher water temperatures in lakes leading to algal blooms,” demonstrating ecosystem vulnerability.

### **Farming and Land Management Challenges**

Farmers and land managers described tangible operational impacts, including “noticeable seasonal shifts,” and that “warmer and wetter conditions may be altering parasite life cycles.” Shifts in grazing and vegetation growth patterns were reported, alongside adaptive changes in traditional land management practices.

### **Community, Tourism, and Economic Effects**

Climate-related events are affecting local economies and communities. Flooding directly impacts tourism, with one business reporting that “guests cancel bookings” due to disrupted transport and weather uncertainty. Respondents expressed concern over “the ongoing impact on people,” including mental health and insurance challenges after flooding.

### **Drought and Wildfire Risks**

Though less frequently mentioned, several respondents noted emerging risks from dry periods, including “dry periods with fire risk” and “warmer, drier periods have led to an increase in wildfires on the fells.” Water supply pressures during droughts were also a concern.

### **Infrastructure and Access Pressures**

Weather extremes are increasing strain on infrastructure and access. Participants reported “flooding, difficulty getting around due to extreme weather,” with “roads and footpaths regularly waterlogged or eroded.” Storms causing damage to utilities and power supplies were noted as ongoing issues.

### **Uncertainty**

Some respondents questioned the extent of change and/or causes of observed changes. Comments included “not sure” or “flooding occurs more frequently but can’t say if this is due to climate change.” This highlights the need for effective communication.

### **Overall Conclusion**

The responses reflect a clear perception that climate change is already affecting the region through increased flooding, more extreme and unpredictable weather, and shifting seasonal patterns. These changes are causing tangible impacts on landscapes, ecosystems, farming, and local communities, particularly through infrastructure challenges. While some uncertainty remains, there is broad consensus on the urgent need to plan for and adapt to ongoing climate impacts.



## 2.3. Ownership and Responsibilities

We sought to understand current beliefs and understanding about who the Lake District is for, and who has responsibility for it.

### Local communities as long-term custodians

The consultation responses indicate a clear consensus that the Lake District should primarily belong to and be guided by the people who live and work there. Local communities—including farmers, land managers, small business owners—are viewed as the long-term custodians of the landscape. Their everyday experience, knowledge of the land, and connection to the area were repeatedly highlighted as reasons they should have the greatest say in decisions affecting the Lake District's future. Concerns such as housing affordability, traffic congestion, and environmental pressures were often linked to the local perspective, emphasizing the need for their voices to be prioritized.

### Wider public input

At the same time, respondents recognized that visitors, tourists, and the wider public also have a role to play. Those who engage regularly and respectfully with the Lake District should be included in decision-making, though their influence should be secondary to that of local residents. Many respondents extended this idea to a global perspective, suggesting that everyone who cares for the Lake District, including future generations, should have a voice, reflecting the area's status as a national treasure and World Heritage Site.

### Organisational responsibilities

Legal and institutional stakeholders were also acknowledged. Landowners, including the National Trust, United Utilities, commoners, and private farmers, are key because of their property rights, while local authorities, parish councils, and planning and marketing boards play an essential role in balancing competing interests. Several respondents expressed concern that large businesses and tourism-focused organizations sometimes prioritize short-term profits over long-term sustainability, creating challenges for conservation and local wellbeing.

### Overarching principles

Sustainability and long-term stewardship emerged as major themes. Respondents emphasized the need for decisions to be guided by science, conservation principles, and sustainable land management, rather than purely economic or tourist-driven considerations.

### Tensions

Overall, the responses reflect a tension between local priorities and wider public interests, between ownership and stewardship, and between economic and environmental concerns. While legal ownership is recognized, many respondents framed the Lake District as a shared

responsibility, highlighting the importance of transparent, accountable governance. Children and future generations were repeatedly mentioned as important stakeholders whose interests must be considered.

## **Overall Conclusion**

In conclusion, while the Lake District is a national and global asset, the consultation overwhelmingly indicates that local communities should have the most influence in shaping its future. Wider public, visitors, and organizations should have a voice, but decisions must prioritize long-term sustainability, conservation, and the well-being of both human and ecological communities.

## **2.4. Adaptation Action**

We then asked about Climate Change adaptation – specifically, can and should the Lake District lead the way?

Of 61 respondents, 55 (90%) told us that they agree or strongly agree that the Lake District should lead the way in climate change adaptation.

When asked to describe their opinions, they told us that being a World Heritage Site, a well-known landscape, and a high-visibility location makes the Lake District an ideal leader.

“We should show the art of the possible.”

Respondents believe the Lake District can act as a demonstrator site for projects that others can replicate nationally.

“It provides tangible, visual evidence of what can be done.”

Several respondents emphasise the moral duty to protect the Lake District because of its natural and cultural value.

“We need to do what we can to protect this special landscape.”

Respondents mention several adaptation areas where the Lake District could lead:

- Footpath adaptation
- Flood management
- Wildlife and habitat protection
- Sustainable tourism
- Tree planting and river restoration
- Soil management

Only two respondents disagreed that the Lake District should lead the way and one told us that they needed assurance that adaptation approaches were evidence-led and landscape appropriate.

We asked local communities about existing projects that they are aware of. The projects can be grouped into broad categories

### **Water & Flood Management**

Re-meandering / re-wiggling rivers

Returning rivers to natural courses

Digging ponds

Dredging rivers

Restoring wetlands and floodplains

“Slow the Flow” initiatives

Natural flood management

Riparian (riverside) tree planting

Kendal–Keswick flood mitigation projects

Community flood-proofing infrastructure

Designing or rebuilding bridges as single-span for resilience (e.g., Pooley Bridge)

Maintaining reservoirs / holding storm space

Installing rock cascades to replace failing weirs

Monitoring water quality (e.g., blue-green algae)

Water testing initiatives

Rainwater harvesting

Reed bed expansion

Returning fields to floodplains

### **Habitat, Land, & Ecosystem Restoration**

Peatland / blanket bog restoration

Planting native trees

Hedgerow creation and restoration

Meadow plugging / grassland restoration

Woodland expansion

Improved grassland management (species-rich meadows)

Controlling invasive species (e.g., Himalayan balsam)

Deer management to help woodland recovery

Soil restoration through better grazing management

Restoring erosion damage on paths and landscapes

Wetland creation and enhancement

Rewilding projects (general)

### **Farming**

Changing farming practices to be more sustainable

Low-carbon farming initiatives

Farming in Protected Landscapes schemes

Supporting local food production

Helping farmers plant trees and hedges

### **Transport & Mobility**

Footpath repair (e.g., Fix the Fells)

More cycle paths and safer cycling infrastructure

Shuttle bus systems (e.g., Buttermere, Wasdale)

Car-free initiatives

Improving public transport to reduce congestion

### **Energy, Buildings & Community Resilience**

Burying electricity supply cables to reduce storm vulnerability

Building / retrofitting properties to withstand extreme rainfall

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Community climate action projects (“Climate Champions”)

### **Visitor & Tourism Adaptation**

Visitor management strategies (reducing peak congestion)

Promoting low-impact tourism

Encouraging “leave no trace” behaviour

### **Advocacy, Education & Awareness**

Raising awareness through art and science

Save Windermere activism

Community training and networking

### **Specific Landscape-wide Adaptation Projects Mentioned**

Cumbria Connect

Wild Haweswater

Ullswater Catchment Management

Upper Duddon Recovery Project

Nature Rich Miterdale

Resilient Glenderamackin

## **3. Summary of Face to face events**

An engagement event on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2026 held at the Mardale Inn in Bampton; a community with strong links to cultural and farming heritage but also experiencing increasing tourism pressures and on the doorstep of a large scale rewilding project, was well attended by members of the local community who talked to us about their lived experience and their hopes for the future. 17 members of the public spent 4 hours with us on a rainy day in the pub that has long been at the heart of the community and is now run by the community. The majority of attendees were local residents, alongside representatives from Cumbria Connect, Wild Haweswater and The Fell Pony Heritage Trust. Nestled between a large landowner (Lowther Estate) with ambitious plans for landscape and nature recovery,

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and the Wild Haweswater project led by the RSPB, the community were well-versed in the tensions between climate change adaptation and cultural heritage protection. When discussing what changes they experienced and their hopes for the future, they told us about:

- **More extreme weather patterns**, particularly increased frequency and intensity of floods and droughts. But interestingly they appreciated that this had raised awareness of whole catchment approaches; “Water is now seen as an asset to be cared for”.
- They noted that more species are becoming red listed, “within a lifetime” commented one resident and participants talked about the role of biodiversity in ecosystem function; “A loss of predators has led to a deer problem.”
- A large portion of the time was spent discussing the details of nature recovery. Many residents were knowledgeable about the human history of the area and many questioned “**what is meant by recovery**; recovery to which point in time?”. Some attendees felt that the World Heritage Site had been inscribed at a time when the quality of the landscape was low and therefore attempts to maintain the inscription were **setting the bar too low**.
- Most of the conversations around climate change adaptation referred to large scale approaches and interestingly attendees told us that they are seeing a loss of tenant farmers alongside land being sold for other purposes. The implication is that new landowners and land repurposed for other uses has weakened connections to cultural heritage and diminished the potential for **landscape scale action**.
- There was a sense that historically, the community knew about land ownership and what was happening on the land, but that this was being weakened; “**We need better transparency** about land ownership and what is being done.”
- Attendees told us that as well as the accelerating biodiversity and climate crisis, visitor patterns and visitor behaviours have changed a lot since world heritage site inscription, and a visitor levy was discussed. Many attendees thought that some sort of **levy used to offset impacts of tourism** would be welcome.
- When talking about existing landscape management it was clear that the local residents felt that communication was an issue and there was some scepticism about programs already in delivery; “We want to understand if landscape recovery could make flooding worse”. “Tree planting becomes a business and we need to know that it has been considered where they are placed in the landscape”. They told us that they **did not feel informed** about environmental initiatives especially when they relate to flooding and cultural heritage.
- Finally, attendees largely agreed that the Lake District should lead the way in climate change adaptation and that we should demonstrate “**the art of the possible**”.











On the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2026 we hosted an event aimed at the farming community at the Lakeland Farm Visitor Centre in Ings, located on a working farm with strong connections to the landscape and local community. We provided a meal made with local ingredients and we worked with a local farmer to encourage participation and despite being close to the lambing season, the event was attended by 19 farmers, mostly based in the Windermere catchment area. Many attendees told us that they appreciated the opportunity to meet face to face in a social setting, as they would soon be very busy on the farm. We used a range of activities to give participants the opportunity to tell us about their experiences of both climate change and cultural heritage.

- When asked about changes they had experienced in their lifetime, while not using the terminology of “climate change” many told us that they experienced **noticeable changes to weather and seasonality**: “Weather has changed, weather events are more dramatic, there are no seasons”.
- Farmers often described changes in weather in terms of implications for how they use the land; “The climate is wetter which means more erosion and less sunshine.” Several farmers referred to changes in the timing of spring and autumn conditions

and the knock-on **effects on grazing patterns, vegetation growth, and animal health**.

- Concerns were raised about the changing behaviour of **parasites** affecting livestock. Farmers suggested that warmer and wetter conditions may be altering parasite life cycles, making them harder to predict or manage. They also told us about concerns that **contamination** in soils may persist longer than previously expected, and that changes in **watercourses** may be affecting ecological balance.
- Participants noted that land management and farming **practices are already changing** in response to environmental (and economic) pressures including adapting traditional burning practices.
- We asked how the World Heritage Site status of the Lake District affected them and the majority of responses were concerned with tourism. Many felt that the inscription had led to **higher visitor numbers** with an associated increase in problems: litter, parking, traffic and congestion on narrow rural roads, and pressure on fragile upland landscapes. “World heritage site status has attracted more visitors and a different type of visitor **which makes living and working in the area harder.**”
- As well as increased visitor numbers there was a consistent attitude that behaviours of some visitors was problematic. When deliberated further, farmers felt that visitors did not understand (and therefore did not respect) local pressures and ways of life. “Visitor attitudes, behaviours and expectations are changing and there is **less respect for locals.**” Farmers perceived a direct correlation between the increase in visitor numbers and WHS status: “The area does not need promotion, we already have enough visitors”. Perhaps more could be done to **engage with locals about WHS** status and how it can also bring benefits to local communities.
- Participants perceived an increase in bureaucratic processes following WHS status: “World Heritage Site status is a hinderance and means that it is harder to get planning permission and there are more hoops to jump through”.
- There was some discussion of potential approaches to climate change adaptation that compliment cultural heritage. For example, there may be more **demand for traditional farming skills**, and the in-depth **knowledge held by farmers should be heard** and incorporated into future plans.
- We asked participants to tell us: “Who does this place belong to and who gets to shape its future”. We heard a broad range of answers from “legal landowners” to “future generations” to “governments and organisations”; this confirms the theory that this project is taking place in a much contested landscape. Farmers also told us that they feel that they are **expected to deliver a lot** (landscape recovery, visitor management, food security, animal welfare) but without commensurate support.

- **Priorities for farmers shift** often depending on government policy and while most farmers need to adapt to meet these expectations (and qualify for support) many felt that this approach this can erode the ability to farm the land.

We organised our discussions around the interactions between world heritage site status and climate change, but on the night, we heard about lots of additional, but related, issues namely:

- Lack of young people in the industry
- Lack of suitable and affordable housing affecting the communities who want to live and work here
- Farming is getting harder for lots of reasons and it means that there are smaller financial returns and it is difficult to invest in the farm









#### **4. Additional Community Engagement with Underrepresented Communities**

Recognising that traditional consultation approaches do not always reach those least likely to engage with environmental decision-making, the HEART project commissioned a number of trusted community organisations already working with underrepresented groups to undertake targeted engagement on our behalf. This approach enabled conversations to take place within familiar settings and through existing trusted relationships, ensuring that participants who may not normally contribute to discussions about the Lake District, climate change or heritage were able to share their experiences and aspirations.

Collectively these conversations reinforced many of the themes emerging elsewhere in the consultation while introducing important additional perspectives around belonging, access, affordability and opportunity.

## **4.1. Young People**

Young people consistently expressed a strong desire to contribute positively to nature recovery and climate action but often felt constrained by systems beyond their control. Rather than expressing apathy about environmental issues, many described frustration with bureaucracy, financial insecurity and uncertainty about their future.

One volunteer who had recently participated in a tree planting event commented that they had always wanted to become involved but questioned whether they would "bring enough value". This reflected a wider feeling that many young people do not always feel entitled to participate or believe their contribution matters. Discussions suggested that volunteering and practical conservation activities can build confidence, belonging and a sense of agency.

Young adults working within the conservation sector also described tensions between wanting to deliver meaningful environmental change while feeling constrained by organisational processes and competing priorities. Many nevertheless remained optimistic that local action could still make a difference.

Cost of living pressures featured strongly. Young people described actively reducing consumption by purchasing second-hand outdoor equipment, buying locally where possible and reconnecting with traditional skills such as foraging. Many also highlighted the growing difficulty of living and working within the Lake District due to rising housing costs, creating a sense that they were helping sustain a landscape they could no longer realistically afford to call home.

Climate change was viewed as an everyday reality rather than a distant concern. Participants described noticeable shifts in the seasons, earlier flowering, changing wildlife patterns and increasingly unpredictable weather. Those living and working within the National Park often expressed concern about these changes, whereas young people living in urban areas were generally less aware of their implications. Overall there was broad acceptance that climate change is already affecting the landscape and that communities will need to adapt alongside it.

## **4.2. Communities Experiencing Barriers to Access**

Working with Stanleys Community Centre, the project supported an intergenerational visit to the Lake District involving residents from an urban community, many of whom had never previously visited despite living less than an hour away.

The experience demonstrated that physical proximity alone does not equate to access. Financial constraints, lack of confidence, transport barriers and limited previous experience all contributed to people feeling disconnected from the National Park.

Participants described feelings of surprise, pride and belonging during the visit and many reported increased confidence to return independently in the future using the discounted travel opportunities introduced through the project.

The trip also highlighted wider social benefits beyond environmental engagement. Participants reported reduced isolation, improved wellbeing, stronger intergenerational relationships and increased confidence to explore unfamiliar places. For many, this was the first opportunity to experience the Lake District as somewhere that genuinely belonged to them rather than somewhere perceived to be "for other people."

### **4.3. Refugee and Diverse Communities**

Additional engagement was undertaken through organisations supporting refugee, asylum-seeking and ethnically diverse communities.

Conversations revealed that many participants already had direct experience of climate change, including drought, changing rainfall patterns and environmental degradation in their countries of origin. These experiences created strong empathy with discussions about flooding, biodiversity loss and environmental change within Cumbria.

Participants expressed considerable interest in becoming involved in practical environmental projects including tree planting, litter picking and community volunteering. Many also wished to spend more time within the Lake District but identified transport, language and the uncertainty associated with asylum processes as significant barriers to participation.

Engagement with another community group visiting from Burnley explored attitudes towards water quality, pollution and climate change. Using images of algal blooms as a starting point, participants demonstrated strong awareness of environmental issues and discussed practical actions that individuals and communities could take to reduce carbon emissions and protect rivers and lakes.

Across both groups there was clear enthusiasm for future involvement in community-led environmental action, provided opportunities were accessible and delivered through trusted local organisations.



## 5. Emerging themes from oral histories and filmed interviews

**“When people experience this landscape and fall in love with it, they stop seeing it as something to use and start seeing it as something to care for.” – Tom Smith**

This section of the report draws together insights from a series of filmed interviews conducted across the Lake District as part of the HEART project. Contributors include farmers, land managers, outdoor leaders, writers, activists and young people building livelihoods in the landscape. Their voices provide a grounded, lived perspective that complements and deepens the findings of the HEART community survey.

Across all interviews there is a profound attachment to place. The Lake District is described as formative, healing and identity shaping. It is valued not only for its scenery but as a living working landscape shaped by generations of farming, cultural heritage and community life. There is pride in Cumbria and a strong desire for the landscape to thrive ecologically and socially.

At the same time contributors are clear that access to the Lake District is not equal. Confidence, transport, equipment and cost are identified as practical barriers. Wealth disparity and housing affordability further shape who feels welcome and who can build a long-term life here. Many emphasise that inclusion is relational as well as structural, highlighting the importance of mentoring, community support and skills building to help people feel the landscape is “for them.”

Climate change is consistently described as visible and immediate. Interviewees point to increased flooding, drought, landslides, unpredictable seasons, erosion, tree disease and biodiversity decline. These changes affect daily decision making for farmers, outdoor leaders and local businesses. There is recognition that climate change can feel overwhelming or remote, yet contributors stress the importance of local action and community led responses as sources of agency and hope.

Responsibility for the Lake District is framed as shared. While landowners, authorities and organisations have defined roles, contributors repeatedly state that residents and visitors alike have a duty of care. Education, preparation and respect are seen as more effective than exclusion. Responsible enjoyment is described as being informed, equipped and willing to adapt plans in response to conditions.

Tensions between conservation, tourism and community life are acknowledged but not presented as irreconcilable. Several contributors challenge narratives of polarisation, noting that on the ground collaboration between farming and nature recovery is possible and increasingly common when trust and long term relationships are prioritised.

Housing affordability and the viability of local communities emerge as significant concerns. Rising costs and second home ownership create pressure for young people and workers. At the same time there is strong evidence of community resilience, volunteerism and intergenerational solidarity.

Overall the interviews reinforce the core themes of the HEART programme: resilience, inclusion, stewardship and community led action. They highlight both the urgency of environmental and social challenges and the depth of commitment among those who live and work in the Lake District. These insights provide a qualitative foundation that strengthens the findings of the community survey and will inform future engagement, partnership and investment decisions.

## **5.1. Belonging and access**

A recurring theme is that the Lake District is not experienced equally. Many describe it as open and life changing. Others point to very real barriers.

Confidence is central. Outdoor leaders describe how fear drops away once people learn basic skills such as map reading and understanding forecasts. Once confidence grows people feel able to return independently. Several interviewees describe that without a mentor or someone to “show you the way in” the outdoors can feel intimidating.

Transport and equipment are also identified as structural barriers. Interviewees challenge the narrative that “you only need a pair of trainers.” For many people transport, kit and even having a spare pair of dry shoes are real obstacles. For those living in towns on the edge of the National Park, a bus journey can be the biggest hurdle.

Wealth disparity is another strong theme. Some communities live within commuting distance of world class landscapes yet feel they do not have the same right to access them. Class, race and gender are all named as shaping how welcome people feel.

At the same time there is a powerful counter narrative. People who work in inclusion speak about the relief that comes when someone steps off a bus into nature for the first time. “This is their place too” is a strong refrain. The sense that the Lake District must be for everyone is widely shared.

## **5.2. Responsibility and care**

There is broad agreement that responsibility for the Lake District is shared. Interviewees consistently say “we all hold responsibility” whether as residents, visitors, landowners or leaders.

Outdoor leaders see themselves as setting the tone. Responsible enjoyment is described as being prepared, making sensible decisions and being willing to turn back. Education is repeatedly highlighted as more effective than exclusion. Keeping people out is not seen as the answer. Helping people understand impact is.

Land managers and farmers emphasise collaboration rather than conflict. Projects that include farmers in decision making are described as more trusted and more effective. There is recognition that previous schemes felt top down and fragmented. In contrast long term landscape recovery work that builds trust over time is seen as positive.

Storytelling is also framed as a form of responsibility. Writers and booksellers speak about shaping how people think and feel about place. Stories influence care.

### **5.3. Climate change and environmental instability**

All interviewees describe climate change as present and visible.

Extreme weather is a dominant theme. More floods. More droughts. Shorter cycles between them. Landslides blocking roads. Roads and valleys cut off. Ground conditions becoming unpredictable.

Farmers describe guaranteed drought windows in late spring. Relentless wet winters rather than crisp cold seasons. Snow lying for days rather than months. Disease in trees. Reduced butterflies and knock on impacts through the food chain.

Outdoor leaders speak about having to cancel guiding days due to heat or severe rain. Tree planters describe shifts in planting seasons over just three years. Writers describe warmer winters punctuated by extreme swings.

Climate change is also seen as reshaping access. Road closures. Landslips. Transport disruption. Increased erosion from heavy footfall on saturated ground.

There is awareness that climate change is both global and local. Several interviewees speak about the danger of feeling powerless. Others highlight the importance of local action and community led sustainability as a counter to that powerlessness.

### **5.4. Nature and heritage**

Many contributors describe the Lake District as a balance between human heritage and nature.

There is respect for the work that has shaped the landscape. Dry stone walls. Herdwick sheep. Historic mines. Generations of farming. The Lake District is repeatedly described as a living working landscape rather than wilderness.

At the same time there is concern about ecological decline. Species loss. Erosion. Habitat fragmentation. Tree disease. Pollinator decline. Several contributors speak about the need to connect habitats and create more robust landscapes.

Tension between heritage and rewilding is acknowledged but not framed as irreconcilable. Instead the emphasis is on integration. Farming and nature recovery working together rather than in opposition.

## **5.5. Housing and the viability of community**

Housing affordability is a consistent concern. Young people describe the cost of living as a barrier to building a future here. Renting insecurity and the prevalence of second homes are named as destabilising factors.

Business owners speak about staffing challenges where workers cannot afford to live in the villages they serve. Flooding that cuts off a valley compounds these issues by disrupting already fragile local economies.

Despite this there is a strong sense of pride in community. Mixed communities of landowners, workers, farmers and volunteers are described as resilient and generous. Older residents are seen as having time and commitment to volunteer. Younger residents speak about feeling inspired by that example.

## **5.6. Mental health and wellbeing**

The Lake District is repeatedly described as therapeutic.

Outdoor practitioners describe nature as a “healing tool.” Walking in the fells creates space for deeper conversations. Being in motion is linked to clarity and presence.

There is also honesty about identity pressure. For some, sport in the fells shifted from performance to connection. Unpacking competitive identity and returning to simple connection with landscape is described as transformative.

## **5.7. Hope and agency**

There is a clear desire not to frame the Lake District as doomed. Even those who speak most urgently about climate crisis emphasise empowerment.

Adventure is framed as a metaphor for change. If the journey from where we are to where we need to be is large, it can still be navigated. People speak about wanting others to feel “there’s loads I can do.”

Community projects such as invasive species removal, landscape recovery partnerships and sustainability groups are described as energising. Action brings people together and reduces overwhelm.

## **5.8. Themes beyond the survey framework**

Several themes emerged strongly that may not sit explicitly within the survey questions.

### **Identity and pride**

Many contributors express deep pride in being from Cumbria or living here. This identity is formative and powerful.

### **Fear of polarisation**

There is concern about narratives that frame farmers and conservationists as enemies. Interviewees describe that on the ground relationships are often more nuanced and collaborative than portrayed in media.

### **Movement and mentoring**

The importance of having a guide, mentor or intergenerational link is repeatedly highlighted. Access is often relational rather than purely infrastructural.

### **Economic contradiction**

Tourism sustains the economy yet inflates prices. The same landscape that draws visitors can price out workers. This tension is described with both frustration and acceptance.

## **5.9. Overlap and areas of tension**

There is strong alignment across interviews on shared responsibility, visible climate change and the need for inclusive access.

There is also subtle tension in emphasis.

Some focus on individual behaviour change and education as the main solution. Others highlight structural inequalities and wealth disparities that shape access.

Some frame heritage and farming as central to identity. Others arrived with a desire for more nature led restoration and have evolved towards a more integrated view.

Some feel global recognition such as World Heritage status is distant from daily life. Others emphasise its significance in governance and funding.

These differences are not polarised disagreements but reflect different vantage points shaped by role, age and lived experience.

## 5.10. Interview Summary

The interviews reinforce the core HEART themes of resilience, inclusion and shared responsibility. They also highlight that community engagement must recognise inequality, housing stress and lived climate disruption as central to how people experience the Lake District today.

There is deep care. There is concern. There is pride. There is a desire for the Lake District to remain a place that belongs to everyone while thriving ecologically and socially.

## 5.11. Quotes from the oral histories

“Some of the barriers are simple. Transport. Confidence. Even a pair of boots.”

“Most of the people I work with only have one pair of shoes. If they get them wet they’re wet all week. Without transport and basic kit there’s no access.”

“When people say you only need a pair of trainers to go out for a run... that whole concept is quite problematic.”

“When people don’t have the confidence, they often panic or switch off when they’re outside. When people learn basic skills... the fear drops away and suddenly it becomes possible.”

“I believe that some people still don’t feel like they can experience the outdoors because they didn’t have someone like my Nana.”

“There is massive wealth disparity within it and that completely limits the way people feel like they can access the space.”

“I keep encouraging people to go because this is their place too.”

“If you’ve never felt like the Lake District is for you I’d say please go and have a look. It’s there for all of us.”

### **Responsibility and care**

(Who is responsible for looking after this place? What does responsible enjoyment look like?)

“We all hold responsibility to take care of our landscapes.”

“We all have a huge responsibility to protect the landscape here in the Lakes.”

“It is everyone’s responsibility to look after the Lake District.”

“I don’t think keeping people out of these places is the right answer. Education... is the best way.”



"It's about being prepared. It's about making sensible choices. And it's being OK with the fact that you can turn back."

"These places are for us to protect. We are the guests and respect has to be part of the experience."

"If you don't feel like you can be in the Lakes or feel like you can be outside in nature then you're probably less likely to actually look after it."

### **Climate change and environmental change**

(Where do you see change happening? What concerns you?)

"We've had quite a few floods... you pretty much get cut off from the main town."

"There are definitely more extreme flood events than there were when I first moved here."

"The cycle between flood and drought is getting shorter and shorter."

"We pretty much guarantee a drought through middle of May to the middle of June the last few years."

"Winter time is not cold crisp long periods of dry. It's relentless wet."

"The unpredictability of weather and the fact that weather systems are visibly clearly changing is something I have witnessed in a very short space of time."

"If we don't do conservation work now then in a couple of generations' time we may lose what we have."

"The erosion of the hills is probably going to increase."

"Blue green algae in the lakes... that does feel like it's affecting my business."

### **Nature, heritage and identity**

(What makes this place special? What sits behind the scenery?)

"It is a living working landscape. Our communities are what make this place."

"When I stand on a fell and think about how hard of a day I might be having... I think about the people who built the dry stone walls and spent weeks out in the weather."

"The balance between nature and human heritage."

"Fell running has been going for hundreds of years... I can't imagine not identifying myself with it."

"That relationship between farming and fell running is really entwined."

"The Lake District landscape just runs beneath everything that I do."

### **Housing and the future of community**

(What challenges does the Lake District face socially?)

“It’s ridiculously expensive to live here... never mind living in a place where people own second, third, fourth homes.”

“The lack of local housing means that most businesses are staffed by people who don’t live in the village.”

“It’s quite unsettling to know that the housing situation is pretty bleak unless you have the luxury of lots of money.”

### **Hope and agency**

(What gives you hope? What can people do?)

“When people experience a landscape and fall in love with it they stop seeing it as something to use and start seeing it as something to care for.”

“If I can just change one person’s mind about how to care and protect the outdoors then that helps me sleep at night.”

“We can all do more than we think.”

“When we get back into nature we feel better.”

## **6. How the Findings Have Been Used and Will Continue to Inform Climate Resilience**

Community engagement has been central to the development of the HEART project. The findings presented in this report have been considered alongside the *Climate Change Risk Assessment and Adaptation Actions* produced by JBA Consulting to ensure that both technical evidence and community perspectives have informed project development. Together, these two pieces of work have created a robust evidence base for understanding climate risks, identifying opportunities for adaptation and ensuring that future action reflects both scientific evidence and community priorities.

Importantly, the consultation has demonstrated that communities want to help shape the priorities, design and delivery of future environmental programmes affecting the places where they live, work and spend time. This reinforces the importance of continued co-production as the HEART programme and future climate actions programmes develop.

The evidence gathered through this engagement has already informed several key areas of the project and will continue to shape future activity.

### **6.1 Community Investment Programme**

HEART Community Engagement Jan – Mar 2026 Summary Report

Community priorities identified through the consultation directly informed the design of the HEART Community Microgrant Programme. The programme has been developed to support projects that respond to locally identified priorities, enabling communities to lead practical action that reflects the needs, aspirations and strengths of their own communities.

## **6.2 Climate and Heritage Action Planning**

The consultation findings have been used alongside the Climate Change Risk Assessment to inform the development of the HEART Climate and Heritage Action Plan. Combining technical assessment with community insight has ensured that the proposed actions respond not only to environmental risks but also to the lived experiences, values and priorities of the people who know the Lake District best.

## **6.3 Investment and Fundraising**

The engagement has strengthened the evidence base used to develop investment opportunities and future funding proposals. By demonstrating clear community priorities alongside technical evidence, the project is better placed to secure investment that supports climate adaptation, heritage conservation and community resilience across the Lake District World Heritage Site.

## **6.4 Interpretation, Communications and Storytelling**

The oral histories, filmed interviews and wider community engagement have generated a rich collection of stories, experiences and local knowledge. These insights will inform future interpretation, communications and public engagement, helping to emotionally connect climate adaptation with the heritage, identity and lived experience of Lake District communities.

## **6.5 Future Strategy and Partnership Working**

The consultation has reinforced the value of bringing together communities, land managers, businesses, local authorities and conservation organisations to shape future priorities collaboratively. The findings will continue to inform strategic planning across both the HEART programme, Climate Action and Landscape Recovery programmes and strengthen partnership working as new opportunities emerge.

The additional engagement undertaken with young people, refugee and asylum-seeking communities, and communities experiencing barriers to accessing the Lake District has also demonstrated the importance of working through trusted local organisations to ensure that those whose voices are often underrepresented are able to influence future decision-making. This approach will continue to underpin future engagement and project development.

## **6.6 Continuing Community Co-production**

Community engagement will not end with this report. The relationships established through HEART provide the foundation for ongoing dialogue with communities as projects are developed and delivered. Future engagement will continue to gather feedback, test ideas and refine priorities, ensuring that HEART remains responsive to local needs while supporting long-term climate resilience and the protection of the Lake District's Outstanding Universal Value.

The HEART community engagement has demonstrated the value of combining technical evidence with the knowledge, experience and aspirations of the people who live, work in and care for the Lake District. By bringing these perspectives together, the project has established a strong foundation for climate adaptation that is both evidence-led and community-informed. This integrated approach will continue to guide investment, partnership working, interpretation, fundraising and practical action across the Lake District World Heritage Site.