Backcountry Trust and DOC Partnership

Frequently Asked Questions

Funding and purpose

Where does the rest of the International Visitor Levy go? If funding is available to BCT, isn't that money that could go to DOC?

Decisions about how the International Visitor Levy is allocated are made by Government and Ministers. Neither DOC nor the Backcountry Trust controls the overall allocation of the levy.

The levy is subject to competing demands from conservation and tourism initiatives. Any funding for the Backcountry Trust would need to be supported through a case put forward by DOC and approved through the relevant government process.

The purpose of the proposed agreement is not to determine how the levy should be divided. It is to establish whether BCT can provide a sustainable way to help maintain parts of the existing public hut network where community involvement is appropriate and can help sustain assets that may otherwise be difficult to support within existing resources.

Why isn't DOC simply funded to continue managing all of these huts itself?

Decisions about DOC's overall funding are matters for the Government.

BCT does not view community involvement as merely a substitute for government funding. Even with a well-funded DOC, volunteer programmes such as those enabled through BCT can strengthen local stewardship, connect people with conservation and enable communities to contribute practical skills and care to places that matter to them.

The proposed agreement is therefore about a partnership model: DOC retains an essential role, while BCT and volunteers add capability, local engagement and resilience to the existing network.

Is the purpose of this agreement to build more huts?

No. The immediate focus of the proposed agreement is strengthening the resilience of New Zealand's existing public backcountry hut network by retaining and maintaining as much of it as is practical and sustainable.

While the Backcountry Trust has supported new and replacement huts in specific circumstances, expanding the hut network is not the central purpose of this agreement.

BCT will continue its current strategic direction alongside the agreement with DOC. There may be opportunities to develop new huts separate to the agreement where they deliver clear conservation, recreation and financial benefits. Any such proposal would be considered on its own merits and would require a robust business case, appropriate consultation and Board approval before proceeding.

Why BCT and how decisions will be made

Why has DOC chosen to work with BCT instead of organisations such as FMC, Permolat or other groups that manage huts? Was there, or will there be, a tender process?

DOC selected the Backcountry Trust because of its experience managing the Community Hut Programme and its proven ability to coordinate volunteers, funding and project delivery at a national level.

The proposed agreement does not prevent other organisations from continuing their work. Existing agreements between DOC and clubs, trusts and community groups are expected to remain in place, with any future changes considered in consultation with those involved.

The proposed agreement is intended to complement the work already being undertaken across the sector, not replace it.

What happens to existing arrangements with organisations such as FMC, NZDA, NZAC, Permolat and Adopt-a-Hut groups?

Existing successful arrangements are expected to continue.

Groups will continue to have the option of managing huts or other backcountry assets through their existing agreements with DOC where those arrangements continue to work well. The proposed agreement does not require existing groups to move to a different model.

The proposed agreement is intended to support and strengthen the wider network of volunteers and organisations already contributing to New Zealand's backcountry, rather than replace their role.

How will local communities and the wider outdoor sector be involved?

Community involvement is a fundamental part of the proposed partnership and has been throughout its development.

The Backcountry Trust itself reflects that collaborative approach. Its Board includes representatives nominated by the Federated Mountain Clubs (FMC), the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association (NZDA) and Trail Fund New Zealand, ensuring these organisations have a direct role in the Trust's governance.

In addition, an External Reference Group comprising organisations including FMC, NZDA, the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC), Te Araroa Trust and the Backcountry Trust has been meeting throughout the development of the proposed agreement. The group will continue to provide a forum for regular communication, information sharing and discussion as the partnership progresses.

DOC has also indicated there will be opportunities for engagement with regional staff, Treaty partners and local communities as the proposed arrangements are developed.

What happens to the huts

If BCT did not agree to look after these huts, what would happen to them?

There is no single answer for every hut. Some may continue to be managed directly by DOC, and some may be adopted or maintained through local arrangements.

However, DOC has indicated that without sustainable management solutions, some lower-use huts could be closed or decommissioned over time. The proposed partnership is intended to provide another practical pathway for retaining as much of the existing public network as possible.

This should not be presented as a guarantee that every hut will be retained. Decisions will still need to reflect condition, safety, cost, public value and the availability of a sustainable management solution.

Will the huts remain publicly owned and accessible?

The proposed agreement does not change ownership of huts or other backcountry assets. They would remain publicly owned and part of New Zealand's open public backcountry network.

The Backcountry Trust's role would generally be the management and maintenance of assets in partnership with DOC, rather than ownership. The limited number of huts built and owned directly by the Trust are a separate category.

What happens if BCT runs out of money or is no longer able to manage a hut?

If BCT were no longer able to meet its obligations, DOC would need to resume responsibility or establish another suitable arrangement. In this scenario DOC may have to consider a gradual retreat from lower-use facilities.

The final operational agreement should clearly set out continuity, hand-back and exit provisions so that responsibilities are understood in advance.

BCT would not support taking on a significantly expanded role without the funding and systems required to deliver it responsibly.

What if BCT decides a hut is not worth saving?

BCT would not have unilateral authority to remove a publicly owned hut from the network. Decisions about the future of public assets would remain subject to the agreed process with DOC.

Individual huts may still face difficult decisions because of safety, condition, cost, location or long-term use. Those decisions should be evidence-based, transparent and informed by regional and community knowledge.

Existing DOC staff and volunteers

The proposed national agreement is intended to support and connect community effort, not displace it.

Will volunteers replace DOC staff or contractors?

That is not the intended purpose of the agreement.

Volunteers already make a substantial contribution to New Zealand's backcountry alongside DOC staff and professional contractors and the proposed agreement is intended to build on – not replace – that existing model. Many projects require a combination of professional assessment, technical work, contractor delivery and volunteer support.

BCT's preferred model retains, and where possible strengthens, DOC capability and engagement while creating structured opportunities for communities to contribute. The detailed division of responsibilities will need to be made clear in the operational agreement.

Why involve volunteers at all?

Community involvement is about more than reducing cost. It creates local care, builds practical conservation skills and gives people a meaningful way to contribute to places they value.

Many people who become involved in hut and track work also contribute to wider biodiversity and conservation projects. A well-run volunteer programme can strengthen the long-term social support needed to sustain the backcountry network.

Capability, safety and accountability

Is BCT equipped to take on a larger role?

Over the past decade, BCT has supported work on more than 300 huts through the Community Hut Programme and related projects. It has established national project-management processes, experienced contractors, volunteer systems, governance, financial reporting and audited health and safety arrangements.

That track record provides a strong foundation. However, any expanded role would need to be matched by a careful look at BCT's governance arrangements, appropriate funding, capability and a staged implementation approach.

BCT has consistently said it would not support taking on additional responsibilities without the resources needed to deliver them safely and effectively.

Who will be legally responsible if something goes wrong?

The detailed allocation of legal responsibilities and liabilities is still being worked through and would need to be resolved in the final operational agreement.

BCT, its principal contractors and subcontractors already carry public liability insurance and operate under established health and safety systems. Those arrangements support the work being undertaken, but they do not remove responsibility where negligence occurs.

An outstanding issue is responsibility for major accidental damage to publicly owned huts, such as a hut being destroyed by fire, and for end-of-life removal costs. BCT's position is that responsibility for these types of asset-level risks should generally remain with the Crown.

How will the public know where the money is spent?

BCT publishes an annual Performance Report and publicly available financial information. It is also required to account for and report on public funding received through DOC.

Under any expanded agreement, reporting should clearly show what funding was received, which projects were delivered, where work occurred and what outcomes were achieved. BCT supports transparent reporting that allows the public, donors and DOC to see how funds and volunteer effort are being used.

How will performance be measured?

The final agreement should include clear measures covering delivery, asset condition, safety, financial management, volunteer participation and reporting.

Measures should focus not only on the number of projects completed, but also on whether the arrangement improves the resilience of the existing network and provides a sustainable basis for future maintenance.

Iwi, hapū and future scope

How will iwi and hapu be involved?

DOC has responsibilities to engage with the Crown's Treaty partners and has indicated that these conversations will be part of the process where significant changes to hut and track management are being considered.

BCT is not party to all of DOC's existing relationships or discussions. It supports meaningful engagement and recognises that iwi and hapū may have important interests, knowledge and aspirations relating to particular places and assets.

The exact process and BCT's role within it will need to be confirmed with DOC.

Is this the first step towards BCT managing all DOC huts?

No. DOC will continue to manage the majority of huts going forward.

The discussion is about evolving an existing partnership to help retain as much of the current network as possible.

The preferred approach is a mixture of regional solutions, community partnerships and national guidance, with DOC remaining an essential part of the system.

Could the agreement expand further in the future?

Any future expansion would need to be considered on its merits and agreed by the relevant parties. It should not be assumed as an automatic outcome of the current discussions.

The immediate priority is to establish a practical, adequately funded and accountable model that improves the resilience of the existing hut network.

Summary

The proposed agreement is best understood as an evolution of a long-standing DOC-BCT partnership. Its purpose is to help retain a resilient, publicly accessible backcountry hut network by combining DOC's role and expertise with BCT's delivery systems, community relationships, contractors and volunteers. Important details - including selection, funding, liability, engagement and performance measures - remain to be agreed and should be communicated transparently as the process develops.