

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Friday 12 June 2020

Present: K Ball, S Barker, A Cooper, P Harper, G Hill, S Morgan, D Moyse, J McInnes, J Nutley, C Pannell, M Renders, P Sanders, P Smerdon, P Vogel, P Woods

Apologies: G Gribble, N Oakley, D Webber

The Chair proposed a formal motion as follows:

To resolve that all motions before this Authority meeting and all future remote Authority meetings and remote committee meetings shall be determined by a verbal vote not a show of hands in accordance with Standing Order 14.1 until otherwise resolved by the Authority.

The proposed resolution was seconded by Mr Harper and carried unanimously by Members.

3515 Minutes of the Authority Meetings held on 6 March 2020

Save for the amendments as detailed below, the minutes of the meeting held on 6 March 2020 were agreed and signed as a correct record:

Minute 3505 – Bullet point 1 - removal of the words “including costs”; and Bullet point 2 to read as follows: “Defra has been notified of concerns regarding possible late decisions on National Park Grant ...”

3516 Declarations of Interest

None.

3517 Chair’s Report

The Chair reported that since the Authority meeting on 6 March 2020, there had been no opportunities to carry out any of the Chair’s usual activities in person. However, through various virtual media applications she had carried out the following:

- The shortlisting and interviews to fill the vacancy for a Secretary of State appointee created by Dr Parkinson’s resignation and move from the area.
- Attended the National Parks England EGM and Board Meeting at which a new Chair and Deputy Chair were elected (Mike McKinley – Lake District National Park Authority and Andrew McCloy – Peak District National Park Authority respectively). There was also consideration of four issues: Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic; The Glover Review; Health & Well-Being and Climate Change.

- With regard to the National Parks' response to Covid-19 our representatives have been undertaking intense discussions with Government during the Covid-19 lockdown and we are carrying out various actions to ensure National Parks have a key role in recovery planning and are supported by Government in doing so.
- Taking part in discussions with representatives of small businesses, farmers and individuals about the impact of lockdown and the implications for the raising of lockdown on people who live and work on the Moor.
- Following that up next day with a discussion with the Leader and the Chief Officer of West Devon and sharing some issues in common.

3518 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

3519 Public Participation

None.

3520 Remote Meetings of the Authority and Annual Meeting

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/20/012).

He advised that the report related to the recent introduction of regulations to enable local authorities to conduct their formal meetings in an alternative way rather than face to face.

Officers have developed a Formal Meetings Protocol to support the running of remote meetings. It is likely that the Protocol will evolve over the next 12 months. With regard to the Annual Meeting of the Authority which, Standing Orders state should be the first meeting held after 31 May each year, the 2020 Regulations dis-apply this requirement; rather, appointments normally made at the annual meeting will now continue until the next annual meeting is held. Therefore, it is proposed that the Authority postpones its Annual Meeting until such time that the Authority is able to conduct a face to face meeting safely, or upon the expiration of the regulations.

The draft calendar of meetings for 2020/21 was attached, at Appendix 1, for Member approval.

Mr Sanders proposed the recommendations en bloc, which was seconded by Mr Ball.

RESOLVED: Members:
 (i) noted the introduction of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 that permit remote formal meetings of the Authority;

- (ii) noted the Formal Meetings Protocol and confirm that the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair of the Authority (or in their absence the Deputy Chair of the Authority) has authority to revise the Protocol as deemed necessary;
- (iii) agreed that the Authority does not hold an Annual Meeting until such time that it is possible to conduct a face to face meeting in a safe manner or expiry of the Regulations on 7 May 2021 (or such extended date), whichever is sooner; and
- (iv) confirmed the calendar of meetings for 2020/2021 as set out at Appendix 1.

3521 External Audit Plan (Year Ending 31 March 2020)

Mr Mills, Engagement Lead, Grant Thornton presented the External Audit Plan for the year ending 31 March 2020. He advised Members that Grant Thornton now audit five of the 10 English National Parks. Page 26 details the key messages and any significant risks which they are likely to focus on in the next 12 months. With regard to the impact of Covid-19, he advised that Grant Thornton was currently three quarters of the way through its audit of the NHS; he felt that this put the company in a good position to be able to undertake the National Park's audit. Discussions have commenced with the Head of Business Support in relation to Value for Money and the impact of Covid-19, the flat National Park Grant etc.

A Member raised the issue of the increase in fees for the forthcoming year and the 33%+ increase. Mr Mills advised that the PSAA sets the scale fee; the additional costs have arisen due to changes in audit requirements and the introduction of new accounting standards. The Head of Business Support has indicated that the Authority wishes to challenge the additional costs and this matter will be examined by PSAA who will act as arbiter. He added that the fee for delivering the audit is still less than the actual cost. The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised that the proposed increase in fees has been highlighted to Defra.

Ms Woods proposed that the report be NOTED, which was seconded by Mr Harper.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the content of the External Audit Plan for the year ending 31 March 2020.

3522 Annual Internal Audit Report 2019/20 and Proposed Internal Audit Plan 2020/21

Mr Barker declared a personal interest, due to his inclusion in the introduction of the iTrent payroll system and his responsibility for resources at Devon County Council. He advised that he would not vote on this item.

Mr Measures presented the Annual Internal Audit Report for 2019/20 and the proposed Internal Audit Plan for 2020/21.

Issues raised during their work include:

- Staff absence forms – there are three systems in operation which needs to be rationalised;
- Payroll – Devon County Council's new iTrent system has been introduced. Devon Audit Partnership played a part in the implementation of the system and are aware that there are a few teething problems;
- Central inventory database – an extra member of staff trained to enable records to be maintained in a timely way

An overall opinion of full assurance has been given and is due to the quality of controls in place within the Authority and the experience and professionalism of the staff.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on everyone the plan for 2020/21 is the same as in previous years – 20 days audit. There is an increase in fees of 2%, equating to £5 per day.

The Head of Business Support stated that officers understood that Members have struggled with iTrent and that further training would be provided. Members recorded their appreciation of the Head of Business Support and her team and for the hard work undertaken each year. They were pleased to be able to have confidence in the Authority's processes and systems.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the Annual Internal Audit Report 2019/20 and the proposed Internal Audit Plan for 2020/21.

3523 2019/20 Financial Outturn

Members received the report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/20/013).

The report details the outturn position for the last financial year and seeks approval to carry forward the outturn surplus, monies for contractual commitments, various grants and contributions received in-year and capital receipts. The revenue outturn for 2019/20 is a surplus of £179,957 which has mainly arisen as a result of increased income generation. The Authority received increased external grants and contributions against budget of just under £102k and increased fees and charges against budget of just under £185k. The most significant expenditure variations have been communicated to the Authority's Audit & Governance Committee during the year. Some work programmes have slipped, mainly due to reasons not of our own making; it is requested that some budgets are carried forward into 2020/21 to enable work programmes to be completed. Provision for a Project Fund was made and set at £115,445. There was a surplus of £24,363 at the end of the year and this will be used to fund the Coronavirus Community Support Grant that the Authority launched on 30 March 2020.

Donate for Dartmoor started in 2016 and since its inception, a total of £87,107 in donations has been received. Table 5 of the report shows how those donations have been used

Members will recall that car park repair and maintenance budgets totalling £227,000 (for the next 3 years) was approved in March 2020 as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan, which will be funded from parking charges or National Park Grant if there is a shortfall. Parking charges were suspended in March due to the Coronavirus lockdown; no parking income has been received in this new financial year as at end of May; however charging has now recommenced.

With regard to capital expenditure, it is pleasing to note that the redevelopment of Postbridge Visitor Centre is well underway and completion of the extension is anticipated for July 2020. The total cost of the project is £479,947 which is 100% funded via the Rural development Programme for England. The Authority also disposed of various items of obsolete plant and equipment from the Station Yard Depot; this has generated capital receipts of £20,769 and will be used to purchase a replacement vehicle for the Conservation Works Service.

The reserve balances used in 2019/20, totalling £327,738 are summarised in Table 8 of the report. Table 10 details requests for carry forward into 2020/21; this stands at £571,744 and a significant proportion of this relates to externally generated income that is ring fenced for specific projects, with the remainder being related to contractual commitments. Reserve balances are determined in part by the Authority's on-going work programmes and projects and by a risk based analysis and methodology previously approved. A detailed analysis of the movement in reserves for the 2019/20 financial year is provided in Appendix 3 together with the estimated movement right through until 31 March 2023. The level of reserves and balances held is regarded as sufficient to meet current needs and to provide some assurance that unforeseen risks and emergencies can be managed.

With regard to the Statement of Accounts, an issue relating to historical management agreement payments of £1.2million, made by the Authority, between the 1980s and 2007 was brought to Members' attention. These were subsequently identified as falling within the EU definition of state aid. In accounting terms this could be deemed a contingent liability that should be disclosed in the accounts; and in the past it was declared as such with the External Auditor reporting an Emphasis of Matter. Since 2013 when Grant Thornton took on the External Audit role the technical accounting treatment of the issue was re-visited and re-examined; and the Authority has continued to do this each year to consider whether there is a need to include either a contingent liability, emphasis of matter or any other note in the accounts. Recent advice from Defra is that the Authority will not have a clear indication of what the position will be until the terms of the BREXIT exit negotiations are finalised. It has therefore been concluded that the position has not changed and that a contingent liability note is not needed to be made in the 2019/20 accounts.

In conclusion, the outturn surplus of £179,957 equates to a minus 4.43% variance against the original budget. The revenue surplus can be set aside to

help fund the Medium Term Financial Plan budget gap that has arisen due a real terms cut in National park Grant for 2020/21 and any potential financial impacts arising from the current coronavirus emergency. The Authority is able to maintain the match funding and invest to save Reserves to take advantage of future opportunities and new projects. Partnership working continues to flourish, also leveraging in external income.

The Authority continues to maintain a robust financial position and demonstrates a proactive approach to building stronger partnerships, generation of increased income streams, financial resilience and agility.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic will be felt in the current financial year and beyond. This will be reported on through the budget, the business plan and financial monitoring processes.

Mr Barker proposed the recommendations, commenting that it was unbelievable that the Authority can be in this positive position when taking into account the current situation we find ourselves in. He identified a typing error/mismatch of £1 in the outturn figures within the report and asked for the correct figure to be clarified. The Head of Business Support confirmed that the correct figure was contained within recommendation (ii) - '... revenue surplus of £179,957 ...'.

In response to a Member query, the Head of Business Support advised that the underspend was not due to the Coronavirus Lockdown; rather, this was down to a significant planning fee income received, together with other grant income that officers have been able to secure. A Member expressed his thanks on behalf of local communities for the Covid-19 community grant scheme and the speed in which finances were made available.

Mr Cooper seconded Mr Barker's proposal.

RESOLVED Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) approved the transfer of the 2019/20 revenue surplus of £179,957 and a Capital Receipt of £20,769 into Reserves;
- (iii) approved the transfer of grants and contributions received with specific conditions or restrictions and monies set aside for contractual commitments into earmarked reserves, as set out in section 4.4 (table 10) of the report; and
- (iv) agreed that it is unnecessary to include a note in the Statement of Accounts relating to the remote possibility of a contingent liability, as set out in section 5 of the report.

3524 The Local Code of Corporate Governance and 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement

Members received the report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/12/014)

The Authority adopted the CIPFA framework “Delivering good governance in local government” in 2008 using it as the basis for setting out its own corporate governance framework and arrangements. The Authority is required to set out its governance arrangements in the ‘Local Code of Corporate Governance’ and the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) which must accompany the Statement of Accounts.

No changes are required to the format of the Local Code this year, but it is reviewed and updated to reflect the way the Authority operates. The production of the AGS is the culmination of the Authority’s on-going work to improve the effectiveness of its systems of internal control and governance arrangements.

Sections 2.5 and 2.6 set out the most significant work and improvements undertaken in the last 12 months. The proposed work programme for the 2020/21 financial year is set out in section 2.7 of the report.

The Authority has carried out a robust review of its Governance arrangements and is satisfied that:

- the system of internal control is sound;
- there are proper and sound arrangements in place to detect and deter fraud and corruption;
- arrangements to ensure the legality of the Authority’s business transactions are adequate and effective;
- the Authority’s governance arrangements and Local Code are compliant with the CIPFA framework “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government”.

Mr Ball proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Mr McInnes.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) approved the assessment of the Authority’s governance arrangements as set out in the Local Code of Corporate Governance at Appendix 1; and
- (ii) approved the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement at Appendix 2

3525 Consideration of the Landscape Review

Members received the report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/20/015).

The Chief Executive advised Members that the Landscapes Review was published in September 2019. Defra has advised that, in spite of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Government’s response to this independent review remains a priority and is to be published by the end of 2020.

The Landscape Review contains 27 key recommendations and proposals. Appendix 1 to the report list these, together with details of the Authority’s

position and comments. The Glover Review calls for national landscapes to be happier, healthier, greener, more beautiful and open to everyone. The term 'national landscapes' refers to the 10 National Parks, 34 AONBs and some non-designated landscapes. The main concern is that the ambition expressed within the Glover Review is not supported by any detail of how this could be resourced.

In the Member discussions that followed, a number of comments/queries were raised:

- There is a consistent approach across all 10 National Parks on some issues;
- Concerns regarding the possible push for more visitors to the National Park; some sites are already overloaded, plus there is no comment within the Review as to how increased numbers would be managed with regard to funding. A proportion of visitors do not recognise how they should behave in the countryside; the National Park Authority and residents are left to pick up the pieces;
- A Mosaic style project should be placed at the forefront of future plans;
- There is much variety in the 10 National Parks; it would be difficult for some schemes to be put in place across all Parks.
- National Parks England is undertaking some work on a 'common position'. Some of this work relates to legislation and the strengthening of National Park Management Plans;
- Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) – to replace the current payment system – Members would be keen to see how this would work for the farming community. It was understood that Defra would be publishing a consultation paper regarding this in the near future. Dartmoor is one of the 'test and trial' areas; a group of farmers has been setup to consult and feed into ELMS regarding scheme design; waiting to hear whether the National Park will be included as a deliverer of ELMS;
- The central criticism in the Glover Review is that we all do not collaborate enough but the Review Panel appear unsighted on the work of the professional officer groups which operate across all English National Parks and, in some cases, include colleagues from Welsh and Scottish National Parks.

A Member commented that the report highlighted some significant risks and felt that a watching brief was required. The Chair stated that, having the Authority's Chief Executive (National Park Officer) also taking the role as Lead National Park Officer for England this year would provide greater insight going forward.

A Member expressed concern that the creation of a National Ranger Service would be unmanageable. They added that the Review was missing important details; there was no recognition of the financial implications of its proposals. Another Member added that the Authority should be on the 'front foot' and

should let Government know what DNPA would like to do rather than wait for instructions. Members thanked the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) for his balanced report and proposed the recommendation 'en bloc'; Mr Cooper seconded the proposals.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) agreed the Authority's position with respect to the key proposals contained in the Landscapes Review (see appendix 1); and
- (iii) agreed to establish a Member and Officer working group to consider the proposed changes to the Authority and make recommendations on these to the Authority for potential submission to Defra. Members to email the Chair of the Authority to express their interest in joining the working group

3526 Final Report on Completion of the Moor Than Meets The Eye Landscape Partnership

Members received the report of the Strategic Planning and Projects Officer (NPA/20/016).

The Moor Than Meets the Eye Landscape Partnership Scheme comprised of a range of small community and special interest groups, non-government organisations and government agencies, the lead partner being Dartmoor National Park Authority. Partners worked to conserve and enhance Dartmoor's heritage, help people better access, understand and engage in order to support the development of heritage skills and volunteering.

There were 28 projects delivered by the Partnership, with each Project being led by one of the 15 Partners. As Lead Partner, Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA/the Authority) is responsible for the general administrative, financial and project management functions of the programme.

The Scheme's success has strengthened the Authority's relationship and reputation with the National Lottery Heritage Fund which granted £1.9million towards the total budget of £3,843,183.

Delivery of the Scheme commenced in July 2014 and closed at the end of March 2020.

A Member commented that the Scheme has been immensely successful and impressive with regard to public engagement. There will be a huge legacy following this work which will be to everyone's benefit as well as Dartmoor as a whole. This view was echoed by other Members of the Authority.

With regard to legacy, The Strategic Planning and Projects Officer advised that an expression of interest with regard to 'Moorscapes', a proposed descendant of Parishscapes, has been put together.

Mr Harper proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Cooper.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) noted the successful delivery and closure of this programme; and
- (ii) formally thanked partners, communities, volunteers and the National Lottery Heritage Fund which helped to ensure that this scheme was a success

3527 Dartmoor National Park Authority's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Mr Ball declared a personal interest in this item due to his involvement in the Okehampton Covid-19 Support Group.

Mr Vogel declared a personal interest due to his involvement in the Covid-19 executive for Ashburton. He commended the resilience of local traders, together with the consistent help provided by the Sector Ranger. He advised that he had been able to communicate with officers as and when required and thanked them for their consistency over the lockdown period.

Members received the report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/20/017).

On 23 March 2020 the Prime Minister advised a national emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak, to which the Authority responded accordingly.

Various initiatives have been taken to support local communities and businesses and manage visitors. In addition, the Authority has adapted as an organisation in order to maintain service provision and discharge its statutory purposes and duty.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) commended the staff of the Authority for their overall team efforts and rapid adaptation to working from home. He also expressed his thanks to Devon and Cornwall Police who had worked closely with Rangers and without whom the Authority would have struggled to get the message across to the public.

Regular updates have been provided for staff, Members and partners such as Parish Councils and Commoners etc.

Members thanked the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) for his strong leadership and staff for adjusting so well and so quickly. They commented that, as the Lead National Park Officer for England, the Chief Executive was at the forefront of negotiations with Defra and Ministers.

Mr Smerdon proposed a change to the recommendations (i), as follows:

*'(i) that Members note and **endorse** the content of the report'*

and proposed an additional recommendation as follows:

(iv) that Members wish to thank all towns, parishes and local groups across the Moor for their outstanding care and commitment to their communities over the course of the pandemic.'

Mr Sanders proposed the recommendations, subject to the amendments detailed above, as well as the additional recommendation proposed by Mr Smerdon. This was seconded by Mr Harper.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) Noted and endorsed the content of the report;
- (ii) Agreed the Authority's position with respect to the key proposals contained in the Landscapes Review (Appendix 1);
- (iii) Agreed to establish a Member and Officer working group to consider the proposed changes to the Authority and make recommendations on such to the Authority for potential submission to Defra; and
- (iv) Thanked all towns, parishes and local groups across the Moor for their outstanding care and commitment to their communities over the course of the pandemic.

3528 Tree Preservation Orders and Section 211 Notifications (Works to Trees in Conservation Areas) Determined Under Delegated Powers

Members received the report of the Trees & Landscape Officer (NPA/20/018).

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the content of the report.