

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Friday 3 March 2023

Present: W Dracup, G Gribble, P Harper, G Hill, J McInnes, S Morgan, N Oakley, C Pannell, M Renders, L Samuel, P Sanders, P Smerdon, D Thomas, P Woods (Chair), A Cooper, R Glanville, D Moyse, P Vogel

Officers: K Bishop, Chief Executive (National Park Officer), R Drysdale (Director of Conservation and Communities), A Stirland (Head of Business Support), A Watson (Head of Recreation, Access & Estates)

Apologies: J Nutley

3480 Declarations of Interest

Mr Dracup, Mrs Oakley, Mr Glanville and Mr Harper declared a personal interest with regard to Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) as they had all personally benefitted from a FiPL grant.

3481 Minutes of the Authority meetings held on Friday 6 January 2023 and Friday 27 January 2023

The Minutes of the Authority meetings held on Friday 6 January 2023 and Friday 27 January 2023 were agreed as correct records.

3482 Chair's Report

The Chair reported that she had attended various meetings on behalf of the Dartmoor National Park Authority Members:

The Team Devon meeting focused on the Housing Strategy which is now going forward and should be of a wide benefit. Although it does not affect the Authority directly, it is in support of Devon as a whole moving forward with its housing provision.

The National Park Partnerships meeting discussed the bid to Defra for funding to develop commercial income/sponsorship. The Chair advised that she had felt unable to vote either for or against the motion to approve the bid conditions and had, therefore, abstained on behalf of the Authority.

The Chair had attended the National Parks England meeting where a review of National Parks England's purpose and structure was undertaken.

A meeting had been held with the Chair of Dartmoor Commons Owners' Association (DCOA) – Mr Howell - to establish what common ground there was and how the Authority could develop a better understanding of the owners' responsibilities for the land and issues faced by them. Possible opportunities for officers and the DCOA to work together.

Working Group for the Dartmoor Foundation – the Chair advised that this was the charity that the Authority was hoping to set up. A separate charitable body was needed in order for this to be set up; work was in progress.

The Chair thanked Mr Nutley who had been successful in putting forward a motion to Teignbridge District Council to support DNPA to seek leave to appeal against the backpack camping judgement. This was passed unanimously by Teignbridge District Council.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reported that Defra had confirmed an additional £440K to be paid to the Authority by the end of March 2023. This was good news; however, it was a “sticking plaster” and not a long-term solution and, in real terms, the National Park Authority had still suffered a 50% reduction in core grant. It was also forecast that the National Park Grant for 2023-24 would be flat cash. This additional money would have implications on the Authority’s revenue budget and the Business Plan.

The money would be used to keep the Princetown Visitor Centre open beyond the next six months.

Thanks to the four constituency MPs who lobbied the Secretary of State and Minister for the additional money were recorded.

The Director of Conservation and Communities advised that there was a planned mass camping event, organised via Facebook, for the forthcoming weekend, on Dartmoor, to protest and carry out direct action against the Backpack camping decision. Officers had been seeking to contact the Facebook group and liaising with local landowners and the Police.

The Deputy Chair, reported that formal approval from the US State had been received to enter into a sister park arrangement with Cuyahoga Park. This was a great opportunity for the National Park Authority which would provide access to US experience and expertise. It was hoped that the sister park status would lead to future study visits. He added that there were only seven instances of this type of sister park arrangement previously so it was a significant achievement.

The Chair thanked both the Deputy Chair and officers who had supported the initiative.

3483 Public Participation

The Chair advised that there was one speaker who had registered to speak – Mrs Hill, Church Warden of Brentor Church. She clarified that Members would be able to ask questions of Mrs Hill but that there would be no debate at this stage.

The speaker, Mrs Hill, Church Warden at Brentor Church, advised that she was supported by the Vicar and the Chair of the Parish Council, adding that St

Michael's Church was a vibrant hub for the community with weekly services and events.

The Car Park served the church visitors, as well as visitors to the Tor, both of whom may well need to use the facilities which were located in the car park. The maintenance of the car park and toilets was essential for health and safety. At present, the facilities were closed for half of the year which has caused issues. Parish Council, Brentor Church, West Devon Council and the Authority have previously shared the task. However, the Council was unable to afford to run the toilets and, in addition, Dartmoor National Park Authority had other demands on its dwindling budget. Mrs Hill advised that Brentor Church was willing to take on the burden, with the aim that the car park and toilets remained open year-round.

Following questions from Members, it was confirmed that Brentor Church was prepared to take on the maintenance and ownership of the car park, as well as the toilets and that it was their intention to keep them open all year round. In order to cover the funding for this, Mrs Hill stated that the car park could be half-tarmacked or gravelled which would ease the level of maintenance required. Maintenance of both the car park and toilets would be funded from various revenue streams including a donations point (by card transfer) and the installation of card payment for car parking. Consideration was also being given to the possibility of setting up a food van in the car park; this could also have a double benefit to help to deter thieves who target cars parked in the car park.

3484 Brentor Car Park and Toilets

Members received the report of the Head of Access, Recreation and Estates (NPA/23/008).

The Head of Access, Recreation and Estates advised Members that the toilets and car park were not actually located on Dartmoor, but were situated just outside the boundary of the National Park. The Authority held the freehold title to Brentor Church Car park and toilets. The car park was currently managed by the Authority, whilst the toilets were managed and operated by West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) under an agreement.

The toilets were at risk of closure due to financial challenges being experienced by WDBC. The car park was well used and was in need of resurfacing. The Authority also incurred regular charges to maintain hedges and verges.

WDBC had been in discussion with the Authority and the Parish Council regarding the continued availability of the toilets to the public but no conclusion had been reached.

Members noted that during 2022, the Authority undertook a review of premises which included Brentor car park. The review proposed that options to introduce formal car park charges should be explored. This option alone

would not safeguard the longer-term future of maintaining the public toilet facilities at the site. A cost analysis suggested a small profit from the car parking charges; however, it would be a challenge for the Authority to manage and it was likely that WDBC would seek a financial contribution from the Authority towards the running costs of the toilet facilities from any income raised.

The investment required for ticket machine installation and retarmacking the car park was estimated at £35,000, with a projected income of £15K per annum and annual costs of £7K. The toilets currently cost approximately £6K per annum to run (open for half of the year) and so the clawback period whereby initial costs were recovered would take several years.

Following discussions with the Church, the Authority was in favour of transferring the ownership and maintenance of the site, both toilets and car park, through a Community Asset Transfer, to the Church. The site had limited (or no value) due to its size and location, with limited prospect for viable alternative uses and was outside the National Park boundary. In order to meet requirements of Section 123, an overage would be included to protect the DNPA, should the land be sold in the future where some of the sale amount would be passed to DNPA.

There would, therefore, be a loss of income; however, officers believed that the site would be best served by treating the land as a community asset, transferred to the Church, who would assume full responsibility for management of the site, including the toilets. West Devon Borough Council agreed with this proposal.

The costs of drafting heads of terms would be re-charged to the Church and the subsequent legal work necessary to conclude the asset transfer would be included within the existing Service Level Agreement with Devon County Council Legal services. Therefore, no additional financial resources would be required.

Officers believe that the best way forward would be to carry out an asset transfer to the Church, who would maintain the car park and keep the toilets open, at no further cost to the Authority.

In response to a Member's question, it was advised that there was some access to power (via the toilets and sub-meter) and also a mobile phone signal at the site. Therefore, a cashless system for parking charges, as well as donations, could be introduced.

A Member stated that it was likely that West Devon Borough Council would not continue to operate the toilets, regardless of who owned them. The Authority would therefore have to pay the full cost of the toilets from that point onwards. It was suggested that the £6K figure per annum cost of running the toilets was very low estimate. The Authority would find it difficult to staff these toilets. The Head of Recreation, Access and Estates added that should the

Authority make any profit from the car park, WDBC would likely request a proportion to be granted for the maintenance of the toilets.

A Member suggested that a lease and peppercorn rent could be a better idea than the suggested asset transfer. This had not been considered as an option as, should the Authority lease the area to the Church instead, there would always be the risk that those issues currently being faced could return at some point.

Mr McInnes proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mrs Pannell.

Discussion followed and included the following comments/queries:

- The transfer of assets rather than a lease would be a preferred option. The land, as part of an iconic site, could not be used for anything else e.g., housing, a transfer of ownership to the Church would show the Authority working with the communities on the moor;
- There was further support for the proposal as an excellent example of localism in action;
- A Member commented that although it went against instinct to give away an asset, this particular land was more of a liability. If the Authority was to retain the asset, it would have to pay the full cost of maintaining the toilets which would be more than £6K per annum.
- Several Members advised that they would abstain as they were unsure about giving land/assets away, particularly at the current time. They added that although the land had no obvious other use at the present time, this could change in 10-20 years time. A lease and a peppercorn rent would retain ownership and could be better for the future of the National Park. There was concern about what could happen to the asset in the future.
- It was noted that it would be necessary to re-write the recommendation should Members decide that they would prefer the land to be leased and was suggested that a study of the terms and conditions of a lease option could be undertaken with consideration for the future taken into account. A Member requested the financial implications for this. At least both options to be investigated. To this end it was suggested that it would be necessary to withdraw the recommendation.
- A Member cited previous examples of where the transfer of ownership to the local people had improved the offer for inhabitants.

Members were asked to follow the guidance of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer). Officer recommendation was for an asset transfer; a Member had suggested that the transfer could be facilitated through a lease, thus retaining ownership of the site. Dartmoor National Park Authority had not explored this option, nor had the Church's opinion on the suggestion been sought. The report and recommendation would therefore need to be withdrawn and brought back to a future Authority meeting once further information had been gathered.

Members were reminded that the recommendation had been proposed and seconded. Mrs Pannell proposed that the recommendation now be put.

RESOLVED: Members authorised officers, in conjunction with the Director of Conservation and Communities and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer), to conclude a community asset transfer of the land and public toilets at Brentor Church car park.

3485 Draft Business Plan 2023-24

Members received the report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/23/008).

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reported that the annual draft Business Plan 2023/2024 took its lead from the Dartmoor Partnership Plan which sets out the long-term vision for the National Park.

Local priorities had also been identified, such as being an excellent organisation e.g., carbon neutral by 2025. This would be reported back to Members in June 2023.

The Business Plan was monitored on a quarterly basis with a system of dashboards and performance indicators and the use of a traffic light system.

It had been confirmed that the Authority would receive a flat cash settlement in 2023-24. The most significant risks highlighted within the Plan were the lack of core grant and staff turnover.

It was hoped that partners of the Authority would continue to be able to engage fully, despite the current financial pressures; however, it was acknowledged that this could not be guaranteed.

Following a question from Members regarding the viability of the Business Plan, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) confirmed that officers were confident that they would be able to deliver the 23 key actions set out in the plan. Although ambitious, it was important that the Authority stretched itself. Whilst being confident of delivery.

With regard to the Authority's assets, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reported that the Authority had already completed a review of its premises. There were no plans to formally review the other land owned by the Authority in the next 12 months. The Authority was reviewing its assets as part of a joint project with other English National Parks, funded by Defra, which was focused on potential for income generation. A Member suggested that the Authority's assets should be working for it and that the Park Management Working Panel could help. This was welcomed by the Authority.

In response to a Member's question about how agile the Business Plan was should it need to respond to a potential new government with new policies, it was confirmed that the Plan is fully flexible, although the Authority does have some contractual obligations e.g., Peatland, Natural Flood Management,

FiPL, etc. However, other elements could be flexed, as had been proved recently by the time spent on backpack camping.

With regard to the Glover Review and the uncertainty surrounding it, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reported that the Government was due to publish its final response shortly.

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

RESOLVED: Members reviewed the draft Business Plan for 2023/24 and delegate authority to the Chief Executive (National Park Officer), in consultation with the Chair, to agree the final version.

3486 Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan 2023/24 to 2025/26

Members received the report of The Head of Business Support (NPA/23/010).

It was advised that since this report was written; the Authority had received confirmation of a flat cash settlement for the National Park Grant for 2023/24 for the fifth year running, a cut in real terms. The Authority had received additional £440k one-off funding in 2022/23; New Homes Bonus monies from two out of three district councils had also been confirmed. The budget would therefore be amended and re-presented to Members at a later date, however, the current budget remained valid until then.

The one-off funding would be used to keep Princetown Visitor Centre open until at least end of March 2024.

The sections of the report were summarised and certain points, as follows, were highlighted:

- Reserves of £200K would be used to establish the charitable Foundation;
- Reserves to be used to cover the shortfall between budget and the agreed pay award.
- Despite this usage of reserves, the Head of Business Support in her capacity as S151 Officer, confirmed that the Authority's reserve balances were adequate, spending plans affordable and the contingency reserve was adequately funded, as set out in the risk analysis matrix within the report.

Members thanked the Officer for her second year at DNPA as Section 151 Officer.

It was confirmed that funds would not now be taken out of reserves for Princetown, but rather from the additional grant received from Defra.

A Member questioned why the Visitor Centre and retail store sales income was on the decline and suggested that it should be on the increase. The Head of Business Support advised that situation would change once the

additional funding was added to the Budget; the Visitor Centre would stay open and, therefore, income should increase.

A Member requested clarification on the Flat Rate input for Donate for Dartmoor and was advised that the Authority was aiming for £30K; £14K has been received in the current year so far.

With regard to the future of the Princetown Visitor Centre, it was confirmed that the Authority is hopeful in keeping the Visitor Centre open beyond 31 March 2024 but will need to wait and see what grant / additional funds were given next year. The Authority was considering a different sort of visitor experience in Princetown and was currently reviewing the options.

With regard to the additional funding of £440K received, it was confirmed that each National Park received the same amount, regardless of size/requirement, etc.

With regard to Lease costs, it was confirmed that costs for Parke and the Meeting Room building have not increased as officers renegotiated the lease before the last break clause. This gave slightly better leverage and it was considered that the Authority now had a good value for money lease. As it was is a full maintenance lease officers would need to ensure that regular condition surveys were undertaken on the properties. A recent condition survey carried out at Princetown was fed into the premises survey. All properties were under constant review.

In response to a Member who suggested that in the risk analysis, Brexit should no longer be classified as a risk, it was agreed that it would not be a heading and should be referred to in the side column instead.

The properties which were leased by the Authority did form part of the study carried out last calendar year. Members were reminded that should a leased property be deemed surplus to requirements, officers would need to wait for a break clause within the lease before anything could be done.

Mrs Morgan proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Gribble.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) approved the 2023/24 budget and noted the indicative budgets for 2024/25 and 2025/26 as shown in Appendices 1 – 3;
- (ii) approved the use of Earmarked Reserves balances as set out in Appendix 5; and
- (iii) approved the Capital Investment Strategy as set out in section 4 of the report.

3487 Treasury Management & Investment Strategy 2023/24

Members received the report of The Head of Business Support (NPA/23/011).

There were no changes to the CIPFA code during the year so the policy, strategy and management practices remained unchanged.

A Member commented that the Barclays interest rate was unfavourable. The Head of Business Support advised that she had contacted to relevant officer regarding this.

Mrs Morgan proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Sanders.

RESOLVED: Members approved the 2023/24 Treasury Management & Investment Strategy (Appendix 1).

DRAFT