

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Friday 3 November 2023

Present: Members

Mr A Cooper, Mr W Dracup, Mr P Harper, Mrs G Hill, Mr J McInnes, Mrs S Morgan (Chair), Mr J Nutley, Mr M Renders, Mr P Sanders; Ms P Woods

Officers

Dr K Bishop, Mr R Drysdale, Mrs A Stirland, Mr N White

609 Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 26 May 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2023 were AGREED and signed as a correct record.

610 Declarations of Interest

Mr Dracup and Mr Harper declared a personal interest in Farming in Protected Landscapes.

611 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

612 Public Participation

None.

613 Financial Management 1 April – 30 September 2023 and Forecast of Financial Outturn 2023/24

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

She reminded Members that the 2023/24 net budget was approved by the Authority in March 2023 and is funded from:

- National Park Grant (NPG)
- Fees and Charges
- External grants and partnership income
- The Authority's own reserve balances

Various work programs and associated income streams from 2022/23 were also brought forward, which means that the net budget has increased by just over £66,600.

Based on the current status of work programmes, the Authority is currently forecasting, as at month six, a potential deficit of £67,661 at year end,

The forecast deficit is largely related to

- The pay award Local Government Employers have offered £1,925 lump sum and 3.88% for all nationally agreed allowances, which at the time of writing the report, had yet to be agreed by the Unions. This has, however, been included in the forecast outturn position. Also included were additional staffing requirements for Biodiversity, Land management and funding to keep Princetown open, which was not included in the budget;
- Repair costs at Princetown Visitor Centre continue to rise, as more unexpected issues have been discovered.
- Development Management planning income has so far achieved less than budgeted. As a demand led service this is difficult to forecast, so could change before year end.

Section 2.5 of the report sets out the bids that have been funded from the Project Fund (PF) to date. The PF is an unallocated post of money that allows officers to bid for the money in-year, to enable new unplanned projects to start, to add capacity to teams if required and meet unforeseen expenditure and pressures.

Section 3 of the report formally set out details of the capital programme to meet the requirements of the Prudential Code. At the start of the year, it was anticipated that three vehicles would be purchased by the Authority; this has reduced to two.

With regard to the forecast of interest expected to be generated from treasury deposits at close of the financial year, due to the increases in interest rates this has resulted in a higher return than budgeted. On 2 November 2023 the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee continued to keep base rates at 5.25%. The markets appear to indicate that interest rates have peaked; however, there is no certainty, the forecast could change by year end.

Forecast movement in reserves for the year have been summarised in Section 5 of the report. Appendix 3 shows a detailed breakdown of individual reserve balances and associated movements; Appendix 4 details the risk-based analysis.

The Head of Business Support advised that the 2024/25 budget and new Medium Term Financial Plan process was underway, working on an assumption that the National Park Grant for 2024/25 would be a flat cash settlement. In real terms, with consideration for inflation and pay award increases, this would be a significant reduction in cash terms since the start of austerity in 2010.

The forecast outturn deficit of £67,661 represents a 1.69% variance against the (revised) budget. This could change before the end of the year due to factors outside of the Authority's control. The additional one-off grant received

from DEFRA at the end of 2022/23 created a surplus; this will be used to balance this and the following years' budget. Although reserves are healthy, utilisation of such reserves is not sustainable.

Budget management is being closely monitored and challenged. Members will be kept informed if new pressures arise that give rise to concern.

In response to Member comments and queries, Officers responded as follows:

- 'Trees' budget overspend – the Authority was currently employing a consultant to undertake works. The consultation period had been extended. A conscious decision had been taken, in agreement with Members, that a full time Trees and Landscape Officer was not required and the post had been made redundant. Officers were now considering the possibility of a part time Trees Officer. With regard to landscape issues, discussions were taking place with other Local Authorities.
- Car Parking income was higher than originally projected which was pleasing to see. New fees which had been introduced have been accepted by the general public. Car parking machines currently accept card payments and use of the App. The only car park which does not have a machine is the middle car park at Haytor. 50% of users now use the App. The Authority is in the process of updating all of the machines to cancel out the need for cash completely.
- With regard to the £102k spend regarding legal charges, the Authority currently has a Service Level Agreement with Devon County Council but, on occasion, officers need to look elsewhere for more specialised advice.
- Clarification of projects:
 - Arcspeed App – an app used by the Ranger and Access teams – finger post ordering;
 - Smallworld Consulting – all National Park Authorities have undertaken carbon footprinting; data to be used to look at our Net Zero.
- Progress re Princetown Visitor Centre – YHA partnership will not be going ahead. Another charity has considered that it would not be appropriate to relocate. With regard to local businesses, this has not been pursued as the Authority is restricted as to what can be sold through the Visitor Centre by the lease with the Duchy of Cornwall. No indication has been forthcoming from the Duchy that it would consider making changes to the Lease. Without this the Authority will be looking at the future of Princetown in March 2025 or sooner. The Authority currently has a full repairing lease on Princetown.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report;

614 Business Plan Monitoring 2022/23

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/23/011).

He advised Members that the report informs them of the Authority's performance to the end of Quarter 2 (end of September) against the key

actions identified in the current Business Plan. The Business Plan Monitor identifies 23 key actions and progress over the first six months of the business year is provided in the table at section 2.3 of the report. Three key actions have been identified as unlikely to be completed as planned; one key action – the development of a Green Transport Strategy will not be completed in this business year.

Leadership Team closely monitors workloads across the Authority; some actions have had to be re-prioritised due to a number of factors such as staff turnover and new priority areas.

While there are challenges and pressures across the organisation, staff continue to deliver and a snapshot of some key achievements and is set out in paragraph 2.6 of the report.

With regard to Member queries, Officers advised that outstanding actions from the 2023/24 Business Plan Monitoring were likely to be reflected in the Draft Business Plan for next year.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report and commented on performance against the key actions identified in the 2022/23 Business Plan

615 Performance Indicators 2023/24 & Annual Ombudsman Letter

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/23/012).

The Performance Indicators detail how the Authority has performed against the targets agreed for 2023/24 at the half-way point of this business year. The focus of the Audit and Governance Committee is on those performance indicators that relate to how our services of performing.

Performance for the year to date under Quarter 2 is shown in Appendix 1, as well as the outturn for the previous two years for comparison.

Section 4 of the report provides further commentary to highlight some specific areas including our Development Management service.

A Member commented that visitor numbers appear to have reduced. The Head of Organisational Development explained that we are still in recovery mode post-pandemic. Numbers are recovering; targets were set at an ambitious level for this year. Each Visitor Centre has a counter which measures footfall into the Centres. It has been noted at Postbridge, for example, that the coach traffic has been slower to return. Princetown visitor numbers have reduced significantly due to lack of exhibition space in the Ian Mercer Room.

A Member commented on the record of Member attendance which was highlighted in red. The Head of Organisational Development noted the comment, advising that this could be raised at the Standards Sub-Committee for discussion. The Chair of the Authority questioned whether the attendance

record also related to working panels, workshops and other meetings of the Authority. The Head of Organisational Development confirmed that this performance indicator only captured formal meetings of the Authority, including Development Management Committee and Audit & Governance Committee. The Chair added that although the percentage point that Member attendance is falling below is not by a significant amount, it does suggest that appointments may clash with other work meetings. This is a complex issue which will take a while to solve but needs to be seriously considered.

A Member complimented the Authority for its sickness absence (excluding long-term) record which he felt was remarkably good. He felt that the staff should be congratulated on this; it is quite an achievement in the current climate. In addition, he congratulated those officers who deal with enforcement cases, adding that to have an achievement figure of 94% of cases resolved without formal action deserved credit.

A Member commented that the number of volunteer days has halved. The Head of Organisational Development explained that the main reason for this figure was that the vast majority of the data is gathered at the end of the year (Quarter 4) when the Authority received figures from those groups that it supports. A review of volunteering work is due to take place in the coming months with regard to the way forward.

With regard to Parish meetings, a Member proposed that consideration be given to streamline the process for required attendance so that the strain on staff is reduced and there is less overlap with Member attendance.

With regard to the EV rollout, supported by BMW Podpoint – there are now points at Haytor and Postbridge. Works have been undertaken in Princetown and Meldon – installation of the Podpoints will take place in November. The Authority is part of the overall Devon Climate Emergency team and is working with them with regard to their wider rollout. With regard to the location for the Podpoint in Princetown, reparations are planned for its relocation.

616 Annual Complaints Letter 2022/23

In July 2023, the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman published the annual review letter containing details of the number of complaints and enquiries received and decisions made by the Ombudsman regarding the Authority for the period until 31 March 2023.

The Ombudsman investigated two complaints during 2022/23, neither were upheld.

RESOLVED: Members

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) analysed the performance for 2023/24 to-date and considered any action which may be taken to maintain and/or improve performance or to address under performance; and

- (iii) noted the Annual Review Letter for 2022/23 received from the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

616 Strategic Risk Register 2023/24

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/23/013).

The Strategic Risk Register forms an important part of the Authority's overall risk management strategy. It is important that Members regularly review the strategic risks for the Authority to raise issues for consideration and highlight areas of risk to be added or removed. Leadership Team monitor and review the Strategic Risk Register on a quarterly basis and the updated Register is provided at Appendix 1 and summarised in the table at 3.6.

There have been no changes to the residual risk ratings since the Register was approved in May 2023 and Members are invited to discuss and approve the register, subject to any amendments Members may wish to make.

A Member stated that, in his opinion, the risk to the finances of the Authority (F1) and the possibility of further reductions in National Park Grant, should be amended to 'Very Severe Risk' and shaded Red.

Another commented that the biggest knock-on effect to the reduction in finances is to the staff of the Authority – pressure of workloads, turnover, burnout etc.

Members requested that their interpretation of the risks for the Authority as detailed within the Strategic Risk Register, and their real concerns regarding reductions in funding and consequential effects be NOTED.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report and approved the updated Strategic Risk Register.

There being no other business the meeting closed.