

NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Friday 16 May 2014

Present: Members:
P Harper (Chairman), B Hitchins, J Nutley, P Sanders, P Vogel

Officers:
Kevin Bishop (Chief Executive (National Park Officer))
Stephen Belli (Director of Planning)
Alison Kohler (Director of Conservation and Communities)
Christopher Walledge (Head of Legal and Democratic Services)
Donna Healy (Head of Resources)
Chris Hart (Planning Team Manager)

R Woodall, and R Blackshaw - observing

Apologies: D Lloyd, J McInnes, M Retallick, J Shears

340 Minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2014

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2014 were signed as a correct record.

341 Declarations of Interest

None.

342 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

343 Public Participation

None.

344 The Audit Plan for Dartmoor National Park Authority 2013/14

The Chairman welcomed Mark Bartlett, Engagement Manager, Grant Thornton.

Mr Bartlett reported on the audit plan for 2013/14. He explained the developments relevant to the Authority – financial reporting, corporate governance, pensions and financial pressures. The plan also set out the further work to be undertaken – with regard to areas of risk, he advised that Grant Thornton would undertake a review of systems documentation and ensure that all required controls are in place. An interim audit had concluded that internal control was effective; a review of property,

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Date 16-5-2014

plant and equipment activity will be carried out at the year end audit. With regard to Value for Money, a light touch approach would continue and would mainly be based on a review of the Annual Governance Statement. The final audit report would be presented to Authority in September 2014.

The Chairman thanked Mr Bartlett for his presentation.

345 Planned Audit Fee for 2014/15

Mr Bartlett reported to Members that the Audit Commission had set its fee scales for 2014/15. Therefore, the fee set for the Authority for 2014/15 would be a total of £11,807, which was the same as the audit fee for 2013/14.

The Chairman thanked Mr Bartlett once again. In addition, Members recorded their thanks to the Head of Resources and her team for their hard work.

346 Financial Outturn 2013/14 (provisional)

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/037). At the end of Quarter One of 2013/14 the forecast outturn had been £90k; this has reduced over the year to £48k. The Authority received an additional £150k from Defra in March 2014 for flood and storm damage incurred over the winter. In addition, £6k was awarded to the Authority for work undertaken under the INSPIRE directive.

The Authority brought forward total reserves of £2.42m on 1 April 2013. £375,263 was transferred into the Revenue budget this year for specific projects and £287,313 will be carried forward into 2014/15. The additional Defra funding will also be carried forward. It should be noted that this includes the Dartmoor Sustainable Development Fund (DSDF) fund balance which is fully committed.

The planned ramp to provide easier access to the National Park Visitor Centre, Princetown, has now been approved; therefore, the funds carried forward from 2013/14 will be utilised during the current financial year. An additional £20k from English Heritage for the ongoing work on the White Horse Hill project was received at the end of 2013/14 which will also be carried forward.

With regard to the Project Fund Balance, not all of the funds have been spent, this was mainly due to some Public Rights of Way work not taking place in year and Members deferring a decision to give a contribution to the Woodland Trust for the acquisition of Fingle Woods. In addition, considerable savings have been made in salaries and there has been underspend in supplies and services.

At the time the budget was set it was felt that the Authority would need to draw on some £138k of reserves. However, due to increased income and efficiency savings this has not been required.

The surplus of £47,974 represents a -1.07% variance against budget.

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Date 16.8.2014

A Member requested that a breakdown of spend be provided in respect of the Ashburton Masterplanning exercise.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) Noted the content of the report;
- (ii) Recommended to the Authority that the 2013/14 revenue surplus of £47,833 (provisional) is transferred to Reserves, and
- (iii) Recommended to the Authority that the transfers into earmarked reserves, for specific grant income, are approved as set out in sections 2 and 4 of the report

347 Performance Monitoring Report for 2013/14

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/038).

The Monitoring Framework for 2013/14 contained a great many green shaded boxes meaning that the NPA had met or exceeded national or local performance indicator targets. Members were reminded that for the year 2014/15 reporting would be by exception only.

CO2 emissions have reduced by an overall figure of 6.97% for the year. There has been a significant reduction in premises related emissions. Travel has shown an increase (due to a more accurate format for collecting and reporting data); mileage has increased, which is mainly down to rangers having to cover larger areas.

Visitor Centre numbers are down, however, finances are stable and satisfaction levels are high. The overall trend relating to sickness absence is a positive one, even though the number of days lost has increased, with managers remaining active in supporting their staff. Short term sickness is very stable; return to work meetings have addressed any issues since 2011. It is unfortunate that there were five cases of long term absence in year.

Member attendance at meetings has dropped slightly, as has Ranger/Officer attendance at Parish Council meetings. It was agreed that this issue would be raised at the National Park Forum on 21 May 2014 when it would be useful to understand what Parish Councils expect from Members and Officers. A Member suggested that it would be useful if Rangers, when emailing staff to canvass for issues/items to be raised at a Parish Council meeting, were to include Members in the email. With regard to Member attendance at meetings, it was agreed that this should be closely monitored and would be addressed in the Member appraisal process.

The number of news releases issued by the Authority has fallen but this is not a reflection of the amount of media coverage the Authority received in 2013/14. In response to a Member query regarding the possible reporting on the use of social media in addition to the printed word, Officers advised that Communications was on the agenda to be discussed at the Member Workshop in July.

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Date 16 - 8 - 2014

The overall message is that the Authority has maintained an excellent level of service in the priority areas as outlined in the Business Plan.

The increase in income through the introduction of parking meters at Princetown caused some debate. One Member commented that it was proving unpopular with the businesses and Parish Council of Princetown. Another commented that those using the car park did not appear to have any issues regarding the cost of parking. The Director of Conservation and Communities reported that a consultation had taken place and a flat rate fee was proposed by the community which has subsequently been implemented. There had always been concerns regarding the possible displacement of traffic onto the roadside. It was acknowledged that signage could be improved to encourage people to park in the car park.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report

348 Conservation and Communities Performance Report (April 2013 – March 2014)

Members received the report of the Director of Conservation and Communities (NPA/AG/14/039). There were many positive outcomes during 2013/14, including outreach work, volunteers, Landscape Partnership bid, transition funding for the Hill Farm Project.

It was noted that the percentage of Country Wildlife Sites in good condition is not quite reaching the target of 90%. Officers reported that this was not unexpected due to the methodology used. With regard to woodlands and their future management, this has not been pursued due to lack of resources. 82% of public rights of way are considered easy to use which is below the 90% target. Feedback received from Rangers is that there has been further deterioration over the winter. The funds received from Defra will go some way to resolving this issue.

An erosion survey carried out in 2011/12 showed that 84% of erosion sites were either stable or improving. In the 2013/14 survey, this figure has reduced to 61%. Analysis of this information will take place to determine any necessary action.

Implementation of the Recreation Strategy – The Chief Executive reported that he had tasked the Head Ranger to consider the possibility of organising targeted patrols at honey pot and other popular areas in an effort to combat issues such as overnight parking, especially camper vans, mountain bikers, dogs etc.

With regard to walks and events, there is an average of 16 people per event. It is planned to review the value for money of these activities over the next 12 months.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report

349 Planning Directorate Performance Report (April 2013 – March 2014)

Members received the report of the Director of Planning (NPA/AG/14/040).

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Date ...16...8...2014

The Planning Team Manager reported that figures for the last quarter of 2013/14 were very encouraging – all quarterly targets had been met. The Planning team had met its targets for Minor Applications in the last three quarters of the year; there had been success in all four quarters regarding Other Applications.

Planning application numbers have risen from 629 (2012/13) to 702 in the last year, with Quarter 4 seeing an upturn which is likely to be due to the ongoing recovery in the economy. There has been a fall in the number of days it takes to determine applications; the Planning Assistant secondment role has had a part to play in this.

86% of applications were approved; 87% of which were determined under delegated powers. 939 pre-application enquiries were received in 2013/14; responses were made in an average of 21 days compared to the target set of 28 days. As a result of pre-application enquiries, officers have found that the quality of full applications has improved. With the larger applications, time is well spent liaising with developers and through public consultations; officers can have significant input regarding any issues eg, affordable housing – a good application should follow.

An Enforcement review has been undertaken; a new enforcement policy had been adopted. Officers have started to monitor occupancy rate conditions. Few issues have arisen so far. The Planning Team Manager thanked colleagues in the Legal Department for their assistance. There are currently around 160 live enforcement cases. 90% of cases are resolved without the need to resort to formal action.

A Member enquired whether there would be any merit in using the option of pre-application open forums as many district authorities do, to enable Members to give a steer before an application went before full committee. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that there would need to be a clear mechanism in place as well as clear Member/officer roles. Planning Performance Agreements are proving to be a good solution but there will always be some applications where it will not be possible to complete one. Mr Vogel proposed that a paper be prepared for further discussion on this, which was fully supported and seconded by Mr Sanders.

The Director of Planning suggested that a paper be taken to the Planning and Sustainable Development Working Panel on 22 August 2014, a full report to go to Audit and Governance Committee in November 2014.

The Development Management and Delivery Plan Document (DMD) was formally adopted by the Authority in July 2013. DNPA was the first National Park to adopt a new development plan following the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework. The masterplanning at Chagford and progressed well. Ashburton has been more complex and the revised timetable for adoption has been set for December 2014. With regard to affordable housing 25 units were approved during the year.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report.

350 Review of Public Rights of Way (PRoW)

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Date 16 - 8 - 2014

Members received the report of the Director of Conservation and Communities (NPA/AG/14/041).

The Director of Conservation and Communities reported that, at a meeting held on Monday 12 May 2014, Mr Sanders was appointed as Chairman of the Working Group. The Terms of Reference for the Group as set out below were agreed. The following key lines of enquiry were agreed:

- The resources the Authority allocates to PRoW and how this compares with the funding we receive from Devon County Council;
- The benefits to the Authority for continuing to have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Devon County Council to deliver this work;
- The likely implications for the Authority if we do not continue with an SLA;
- Explore alternative models for delivering this work and consider the cost/benefits of such approaches for the Authority, the National Park, local communities and users.

An interim report will be presented to Audit and Governance Committee in August, with the final report to be presented in November.

Devon County Council (DCC) has already reviewed its PROW work. DCC is happy to discuss the Service Level Agreement (SLA) and officers have agreed to attend one of the Working Group meetings.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services commented that legal advice would be required in order to ensure that the SLA worked properly. Members with DCC PRoW responsibilities should be careful to maintain transparency and separation of interests.

A Member felt that a criteria/guidelines for sponsorship for Ranger work would be useful. The Chief Executive advised that the Promotion and Development Officer's workplan includes the drawing up of a Sponsorship Strategy.

Signage issues were raised; it was noted that some of the boundary signs were worn and faded. It was agreed that voluntary wardens could be involved in this work.

A Member suggested that with regard to sponsorship, rather than relatives paying for memorial benches to be placed on the moor, an idea to consider could be the engraving of stiles and gates - this could prove just as popular.

RESOLVED: Members agreed the Terms of Reference for the PRoW Review.

351 Planning User Satisfaction Survey Results 2013/14

Members received the report of the Director of Planning (NPA/AG/14/042).

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Date 16 - 8 - 2014

The Satisfaction Survey is carried out every two years. 300 questionnaires were sent out with decision notices; 61 responses were received.

The Director of Planning highlighted a few of the results from the survey:

- A high percentage would ask for pre-application advice;
- 59% stated that they would not be prepared to pay for pre-application advice;
- There is good use of the on-line facility to submit applications;
- It was noted that some respondents identified the website as difficult to use – this is being reviewed.

The key message is that the service is improving but there is still work to be done. Applicants appreciate communication from officers – even if sometimes this means a simple courtesy call to keep them 'in the loop'. A Member agreed with this, stating that things had greatly improved over the last three years.

A Member suggested that consideration be given to a link being placed on the website to Building Control.

The Chief Executive commented that this was, essentially, a good news story – the direction of travel is right and the challenge is to ensure that this continues. Communication is key.

Members advised that this needs to be publicised as soon as possible.

RESOLVED: Members notes the contents of the report and the findings of the latest user satisfaction survey

352 2013/14 Annual Governance Statement

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NAP/AG/14/043).

The Head of Resources advised Members that the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is prepared each year and must accompany the annual Statement of Accounts. It is the culmination of a year long review process of systems and internal controls.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) recommended the 2013/14 Annual Governance Statement to Authority for approval

353 Local Code of Corporate Governance

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/044).

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The Head of Resources advised Members that the Authority adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance in December 2009. Significant changes have taken place over recent years. Financial Regulations, the Scheme of Delegation of Delegation and Standing Orders have been amended to reflect those changes; it was felt that a formal review of the Local Code should also take place.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report; and
- (ii) recommended the revised Local Code of Corporate Governance to the Authority for approval.

354 Risk Management and the 2014/15 Strategic Risk Register

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/045).

In 2013/14 a thorough review of risk management across the Authority was undertaken by Devon Audit Partnership. From now on the register will be presented to Audit and Governance Committee (A&G) on an annual basis; it will be monitored quarterly by Leadership Team and A&G will only receive reports by exception.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) approved the Strategic Risk Register for 2014/15 attached at Appendix 1.

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Date 16-8-2014