

**NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**  
**AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

**Friday 21 November 2014**

**Present:** Members:  
J Nutley (Chairman), P Harper, D Lloyd (Deputy Chairman), P Sanders,  
D Webber

Officers:  
Kevin Bishop (Chief Executive)  
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)  
Neil White (Head of Human Resources)  
Sam Hill (Interim Manager, Communications & Visitor Services)  
Andrew Watson (Head of Recreation, Access & Estates)

R Woodall - observing

**Apologies:** J McInnes, M Retallick, P Vogel

The Chairman announced that the Authority's Visitor Centres had picked up the Gold award in the Devon Tourism Awards, held on Wednesday 19 November 2014. They were up against some very stiff competition in their category 'Tourist Information Service of the Year'. He congratulated all staff involved in the provision of an excellent visitor experience and customer service. The Visitor Centres are now automatically entered in the South West Regional Tourism Awards.

Rangers had recently undergone training with Devon and Cornwall Constabulary and had achieved accreditation to the Community Safety Accreditation Scheme.

**365 Minutes of the meeting held on 15 August 2014**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 August 2014 were signed as a correct record.

**366 Declarations of Interest**

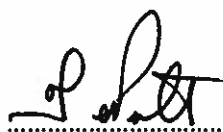
None

**367 Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

None

**368 Public Participation**

None

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Date 20-02-2015

**369 Audit Committee Member Training**

The Chairman reported that he, along with Mr Vogel and the Head of Resources, had attended an 'Audit Committee Member Training' day at Buckfast Abbey. The event was jointly hosted by South West Audit Partnership and Devon Audit Partnership. Some of the topics covered included:

- understanding the role and responsibilities of the Audit Committee;
- understanding the role of the Section 151 Officer;
- understanding and implementing 'best practice';
- understanding the role of internal and external audit;
- risk and risk management.

**370 Annual Audit Letter**

The Chairman welcomed John Goulding, a Partner at Grant Thornton who was attending the meeting to report on the Annual Audit Letter for the year ended 31 March 2014.

Mr Goulding advised that internal and external auditors have to work closely. Much of the focus of internal auditors is on risk. The role of the external auditors is somewhat narrower, focusing on two main areas: (i) to express an opinion on the Authority's accounts and (ii) to form a conclusion regarding 'value for money'. He offered to talk to Members regarding the role of the external auditors at a future event, should this be required.

With regard to the Annual Audit Letter, he advised that the letter was the last paper to be issued regarding the financial year 2013/14. Effectively, the letter was a summary of the work undertaken within the year and, essentially, recorded that in September 2014 an unqualified opinion on the Authority's Financial Statements and an unqualified Value for Money conclusion was given.

**371 Financial Management 1 April to 30 September 2014 and Forecast of Financial Outturn 2014/15**

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/052); the first financial management report of the financial year, reporting as at month six. The 2014/15 budget was set at £3,705,543, funded by National Park Grant (NPG), fees and charges and earmarked reserves. The net budget increased to £3,993,056 after various appropriations to reserves were made at the end of 2013/14. Current indications are that a surplus of £64,103 may arise at year-end.

An analysis of the main variations and movements in the management accounts as detailed in the report was presented and discussed.

Whilst it was acknowledged that the installation of the new door entry system appeared costly, the Chief Executive advised Members that it had been implemented on advice from the police, following threats to the security and well-being of staff and Members. The system also provided for an improved 'flexi-time' system.

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One Member welcomed the improving visitor centres sales income and the receipt of royalties from Airwick. He asked if the cost of fuel for the biomass boiler could be provided in future reports, so that the costs could be shown against the Renewable Heat incentive Income.

Members felt that Audit and Governance Committee should keep a close eye on costs and benefits of National Park Enterprises Company that is in the process of being set up by the UK National Park Authorities to ensure that 'value for money' is achieved.

The report also contained the mid-year review of the Authority's Treasury Management activity, including the 2013/14 outturn and forecast outturn for 2014/15.

The Capital Programme, consisting of the replacement of 3 vehicles was reported as being on target and within budget.

On 1 April 2014 the Authority brought forward Earmarked Reserves totalling £2,894 million. This figure included the General Reserve of £300,000. Members discussed the in-year allocation of earmarked reserves and requested clarification regarding the potentially significant increased cost for the new access ramp at the Princetown Visitor Centre.

Based on the Authority's current financial position, the earmarked reserves balance is anticipated to be approximately £1.567million.

In response to a Member query regarding amount set aside in the General Reserve balance, the Head of Resources advised that the level is determined by the Authority, after receiving advice from the S151 Officer, is kept under constant review and is deemed to be a reasonable and prudent minimum unallocated amount to maintain for emergencies and unforeseen circumstances.

**RESOLVED:**


Members noted the content of the report.

**372 Fees and Charges**

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/053).

Fees and Charges are reviewed and approved on an annual basis. Two new charges were introduced for 2014/15 : Public Path Orders, and a charge for supplying information under the Environmental Information Regulations.

With regard to 2015/16 it is proposed to make a small increase to the charges for photocopying - last changed in 2008, and hospitality – charges were set in 2011. In addition, small rises are proposed for the repair/replacement of gateways/posts, guided walks and Ranger Ralph Club membership. A pilot scheme for the introduction of a Junior Ranger Programme will take place in 2015.

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A review of car parking at Princetown is being undertaken; some data is still awaited from West Devon Borough Council. The Director of Conservation and Communities added that work was about to start to implement limited waiting outside of the shops. Any potential increase in the car parking fee at Princetown would be taken to Authority for decision following the review.

It was agreed that the Authority should not be shy in encouraging people to Princetown. The ticket machines in the car park are able to issue a double ticket – local businesses could be encouraged to advertise on the printed tickets and consideration could be given to the parking fee being refunded against purchases, as an incentive for staying longer and spending money in local businesses.

**RESOLVED:** Members recommended the proposed Fees and Charges for 2015/16, as currently set out, be presented to the Authority for approval.

### 373 **Risk Management and Strategic Risk Register**

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/14/054).

The current Risk Management Policy was approved by the Authority in May 2014. In an era of rapid change and evolution within the public sector it is important for the Authority to understand the risks it faces, how to identify those risks and how to manage them. To a large extent risk assessment is embedded into day-to-day practices.

One Member felt that there was a need for a tiered approach to monitoring the Authority's identified risks, for example:

Risk score of 0-9 (green)	review annually
Risk score of 10-19 (yellow)	review every six months
Risk score of 20-25 (Red)	review at each Audit and Governance meeting

With regard to the UK National Parks Conference that the Authority has agreed to host in October 2015, Members agreed that there should be a specific entry on the risk register for the overall event. Some Members also observed that Risk Ref. S3 relating to staff workload and potential stress arising out of the reduction in Government grant was particularly important. They also asked that staff sickness and absence data be reported. Another project the Members asked to monitor regularly was the *Moor than meets the eye* scheme.

One Member suggested that the review of the risk register could be tied in with the internal audit plan. Officers felt that this was a good idea. The Head of Resources agreed to look at the programme.

Mr Sanders proposed the recommendations, subject to the agreed amendments.

**RESOLVED:** Members:

- (i) noted the content of the report;
- (ii) reviewed and approved the Strategic Risk Register, subject to the addition of the UK National Parks Conference to the Register;

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- (iii) agreed that the Strategic Risk Register be co-ordinated with the internal audit plan.

**374 Draft Communications strategy and Visitor Centre Update**

Members received the report of the Interim Manager Communications and Visitor Centres (NPA/AG/14/055).

The draft Strategy has been launched to staff and Members; the consultation period ends on 24 December 2014. The Strategy sets the proposed direction of travel for the Authority for the next two years.

Historically, the Authority has been good at telling people what we do, but not so good at explaining why. The Strategy will be supported by a new website and social media, using a more conversational and engaging approach to our audience. The Authority's brand is very strong and is internationally renowned.

With regard to evaluation of success, new performance indicators will be introduced, as well as 'soft' measures to ensure better communications amongst staff and a better reputation for the whole Authority as a 'listening' organisation.

Visitor figures have risen by around 10%; spend per visitor has risen by nearly 30%. Recent improvements to the Centres, together with the level of service offered have been recognised by the Visit Devon Awards. The National Park Visitor Centres have taken the Gold award for best Information Services in Devon.

In response to queries, Members were advised that the proposed distribution of the strategy was internal only. It has been designed as a framework for staff to work to. Members were keen to ensure that measures are put in place to gather data to measure performance.

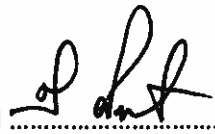
**RESOLVED: Members:**

- (i) reviewed and approved the draft Communication Strategy and outline plan; and
- (ii) noted the update on the visitor Centres and direction of travel for the retail strategy.

**375 Review of function and delivery of Public Rights of Way work**

Members received the report of the Head of Recreation, Access and Estates (NPA/AG/14/056).

The public rights of way network within the National Park is managed by the Authority on behalf of Devon County Council (DCC), through a Service Level Agreement (SLA). Funding for this work has reduced over recent years. The purpose of the review was to consider and determine the resources allocated to the work, the benefits to the Authority of continuing to have an SLA and the implications if not, and to consider alternatives.

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Several ways have been identified to provide opportunities for local communities to become more involved in looking after local path networks. The Authority could benefit in a reduction in ranger time spent directly on path surveys and maintenance work.

Devon County Council (DCC) runs a Parish Paths Partnership (P3) scheme, outside of the National Park, whereby parishes agree to undertake annual path condition surveys, vegetation clearance and small scale works. Discussions with DCC are currently taking place to explore the possibility of parishes within the National Park joining a version of P3. A brush cutter loan scheme is proposed to be piloted to enable parish councils to undertake clearance of surface vegetation from public rights of way. The number of path surveys, undertaken by voluntary wardens is to be increased from 50% to 75% by 2016. It is hoped that all surveys will eventually be undertaken by volunteers. Every path is inspected within a two year cycle. Minor maintenance works/clearance, it is hoped, may appeal to a wider public who want to help look after local paths but not necessarily become voluntary wardens.

DCC expects the Authority to deliver only statutory functions in relation to public rights of way. The Authority has, over the years, provided a full service to landowners – cutting back hedges, and overhanging tree limbs, dealing with fallen trees, providing dog accessible stiles etc. This has been in addition to the statutory work expected by DCC. Officers recognise that costs must reduce; however, maintenance of the ranger/landowner relationship is imperative. A Member commented that rangers have good relationships with Parish Councils too and are confident enough to ask for help when they need it.

All of the proposals may not, necessarily release cash savings but should release ranger time in order for them to undertake interpretation work etc.

The Director of Conservation and Communities confirmed that rangers are aware that changes need to be made; understandably they have concerns regarding their jobs. A way forward needs to be found to ensure that the proposals are seen as positive.

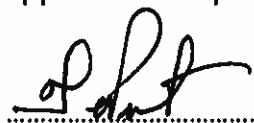
**RESOLVED:** Members:

- (i) approved the actions detailed within the report and the action plan;
- (ii) agreed that progress should be reported to Audit and Governance Committee on an annual basis and that a formal review be undertaken by 2018.

**376 Planning Directorate Performance Report – Quarter 2 (July – September 2014)**

Members received the report of the Director of Planning (NPA/AG/14/057).

The number of planning application received during Quarter two was 194, compared to 154 in Quarter 1 – a positive sign if improvements within the local economy. The secondment of the Planning Technician to deal with small household application has worked well; the target for the determination of major applications has been achieved. The overall number of pre-application enquiries is

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rising, 311 in Quarter 2, compared to 297 in Quarter 1. Pre-applications reduce the potential for unacceptable applications; officers now indicate if pre-application advice has been given, and followed, by the applicant. With regard to Enforcement, the number of new cases fell and 89% were resolved without the need to resort to legal action.

Affordable housing – figures have been disappointing for Quarter 2 with only three units approved. There are currently two applications before the Authority which, if approved, could provide a further 14 units.

Mobile Infrastructure Project – One Member suggested that Arqiva, the government appointed organisation charged with resolving poor mobile coverage, be asked to make better use of existing infrastructure, and be invited to the December Planning and Sustainable Development Working Panel to make a presentation. The Director of Planning agreed that he would raise this with Dr Mortimer, Chairman of the Working Panel.

**RESOLVED:** Members noted the content of the report.

**377 Conservation and Communities Directorate Performance Report – Quarter 2 (July – September 2014)**

Members received the report of the Director of Conservation and Communities (NPA/AG/14/058).

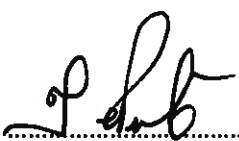
Three months of restoration work has been completed at Flat Tor Pan, as part of the Dartmoor Mires Project. In order to increase the hectares of hydrologically restored area a second machine was secured for August, thanks to the RSPB; volunteers have also helped with the restoration, building peat blocks by hand; help was also received from the Exmoor Mires Team.

Listed Building Consent (LBC) is being sought for the replacement of windows and other improvements to Higher Uppacott. Funding for the improvement of the fabric and representation of the building has been achieved through the Moor than meets the eye scheme. If the LBC is successful it is anticipated that works will commence on time and on budget.

Core funding for the continuation of the Hill Farm Project is unlikely to be forthcoming from Defra beyond the end of 2015. An application for funding has been submitted to the Duchy Countryside Fund and a response is awaited.

In response to a Member's question, the impact of the work undertaken by the Dartmoor Mires Project will be measured over the next 3-5 years. The evidence gathered will provide evidence which, it is hoped, will provide backup for further work and spend. South West Water has confirmed that it will support the hydrological monitoring for the next 3-5 years.

**RESOLVED:** Members noted the content of the report.

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