

NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Friday 20 February 2015

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

Officers:
Stephen Belli (Director of Planning)
Alison Kohler (Director of Conservation and Communities)
Donna Healy (Head of Resources)
Orlando Rutter (Senior Learning and Outreach Officer)
Andrew West (Enforcement Officer)

Apologies: J McInnes, P Vogel

The Chairman welcomed Ann Parsons of the Devon Audit Partnership, and Geri Daly of Grant Thornton.

378 Minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2014

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

379 Declarations of Interest

None

380 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None

381 Public Participation

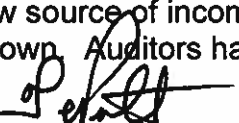
None

382 DNPA Internal Audit Report – Key Financial Systems 2014-2015

Ann Parsons, Devon Audit Partnership, presented the Internal Audit Report – Key Financial Systems 2014-2015 to Members. She reported that the Authority had had another good year with high standards again being recorded.

Small issues requiring attention were reported as follows:

- (i) Income and Cash Collection – With regard to the new source of income to the Authority from the car parking charges at Princetown. Auditors had noted

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that the Authority had paid the quarterly management fees on time to West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) but that no suitable supporting data had been provided in return so that the Authority could monitor and project income.

One Member advised that this issue had been raised with WDBC and he had been advised that this had now been resolved. The Head of Resources confirmed that a meeting had been held with colleagues from WDBC and that reports had now been received. If any issues arose in the future Members would be advised.

- (ii) Ordering and Payments – Auditors had noted that where quotations for services had been sought, there was not always the evidence recorded to confirm these quotes. The Head of Resources confirmed that refresher training to address this issue had been undertaken by all budget holders.
- (iii) Payroll – A small number of errors within the monthly payroll had been identified. These were mainly due to incorrect data input by the Payroll provider HR One. Auditors had recommended that a record of errors was kept in order that they could be dealt with promptly. The Head of Resources confirmed that a contract management meeting had been held and that HR One was now performing adequately.

383 DNPA Internal Audit Plan 2015-2016

Ann Parsons reported to Members that the Internal Audit Plan is reviewed and agreed on an annual basis. She advised that for 2015-2016 the audit plan would allow for up to 20 days of internal audit support. This has increased from 19 days in 2014-2015 following a request from the Senior Finance Officer for a review of inventories and disposals to identify any improvements or streamlining that could be made. Charges have had to increase slightly and the daily rate will now be £255 (was £250).

384 Financial Management 1 April to 31 December 2014 and Forecast of Financial Outturn 2014/15

Members received the report of the Head of Resources (NPA/AG/15/001).

There is a current projection of a £57k surplus at the end of the financial year. This figure will, and indeed has, fluctuated since this report was written. The main variations and movements in the management accounts include:

- Salaries – the pay award to staff, as at 1 January 2015, has been incorporated, as well as the non-consolidated payments made on 31 December 2014.
- Travel and transport – four vehicle leases had to be extended slightly due to delays in the supply chain for new vehicles for Conservation Works Team and Rangers.
- Premises – Some of the planned works at Parke, for example the replacement of the gabions, has come in under budget and can therefore be paid for without the use of Reserves.

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- Supplies and Services – various amounts of grant funding have not been spent and permission has been sought to carry these amounts forward into 2015-2016.

With regard to grant income, there is the possibility of further funding for the Whitehorse Hill Project from English Heritage. Devon County Council has paid the full first year's allocation of £20k in respect of the Naturally Healthy Dartmoor Project. £25k has been received from Teignbridge District Council's Communities Grant Fund. The New Homes Bonus funds from West Devon Borough Council and South Hams District Council have been committed and payments to successful applicants are starting to be made. Grant fund payments that have not been paid over by the end of the financial year will be carried forward.

With regard to the Project Fund Budget, the outreach vehicle and trailer have been re-wrapped. Staff have welcomed the improvements that have been made to the kitchen facilities at Parke. Architects have been brought on board to undertake Phase One of the Moor than Meets the Eye (MTMTE) project to upgrade the Postbridge Visitor Centre; this is likely to cost in the region of £10k.

Mark Allot, MTMTE Project Manager will, in future, bring a report to Audit and Governance Committee to ensure that Members are kept abreast of risk and progress.

In conclusion, there will be some small changes within the next few months, but it is likely that there will be an outturn surplus at the end of the financial year, rather than a deficit.

In response to Member queries, the Head of Resources advised:

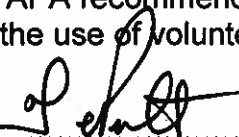
- The extension of the vehicle leases were required due to a delay in the supply chain, not procurement delays.
- The Princetown disabled ramp project has been placed on hold due to the likelihood of costs exceeding the initial quote – this was due to the intervention of HRH The Prince of Wales and revisions required. DNPA is in the process of applying for additional funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- The New Homes Bonus contribution from Teignbridge District Council was confirmed as £25k per annum for 2014/15; 2015/16 and 2016/17.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report.

385 'Mini Review' of Volunteer Strategy

Members received the report of the Senior Learning and Outreach Officer (NPA/AG/15/002).

The Authority adopted a formal Volunteer Strategy in 2011. In 2011 the National Park Authorities Performance Assessment (NPAPA) performance report advised that the Strategy did not convince assessors that the Authority would be able to deliver its aspirations for greater volunteer involvement. NPAPA recommended that the Authority should consider how to improve and increase the use of volunteers through better planning and co-ordination.

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Clear processes for recruitment, induction and the retention of volunteers have been introduced. The range of volunteer opportunities has increased; the use of 'task templates' the calendar function on the website has contributed towards this. Volunteers have been recruited to undertake outreach work, specialist surveys, data logging and a range of other things across the Moor etc.

With regard to volunteering budgets, these vary significantly across the National Park Authorities. The Lake District's budget of £50,000 supports 5,200 volunteer days; The Broads sets aside £20,000 to support 2,000 days. Dartmoor's budget is £11,000 which supports 3,820 days. Therefore, for an investment of £2.90 per volunteer day, Dartmoor gets a good return compared to some, eg., £10 per day in the Lake District and the Broads.

Consideration needs to be given regarding the future of volunteering. This will be taken to a future meeting of the Park Management Working Panel for discussion.

Members commented and made suggestions as follows:

- Volunteers are very valuable to the Authority; a lot of practical work would not be completed without them;
- Specific training could be offered to volunteers who expressed a specific preferred area of work. This could save on 'Ranger Days' but Rangers to remain the point of contact as strong relationships have been built;
- Rangers could provide training; Hill Farm Project also has a wide range of Countryside Skills courses available that volunteers could attend;
- Attention needs to be given to creating a much more co-ordinated approach in order to identify what the Authority needs volunteers to do;
- The Authority needs to be careful not to raise volunteers' expectations too high. If training is provided, Officers need to ensure that the new found skills are utilised soon after, and as often as possible to retain momentum and enthusiasm;
- Volunteers could be placed into groups and given an area to look after. This could give them a sense of belonging and responsibility.

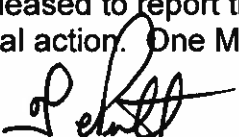
RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report.

386 Planning Directorate Performance Report – Quarter 3 (October – December 2014)

Members received the report of the Director of Planning (NPA/AG/15/003).

Performance targets have again been met this quarter regarding minor and other applications. Applications approved have risen to 88% - this has been brought about by officers negotiating with applicants. Government targets continue to be met on minor and householder applications. Less than 10% of applications are taken to Committee for determination.

With regard to Enforcement, the Director of Planning was pleased to report that 100% of cases had been dealt with without the need for legal action. One Member

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suggested that a good news press release could be drawn up to publicise these figures. The Enforcement Officer provided Members with an update on outstanding cases.

The timetable for the Ashburton Masterplan had slipped due to the ongoing issues surrounding the future of the railway station. A presentation by the Friends of Ashburton Station is to be made to Members at the Planning and Sustainable Development Working Panel in April.

The number of affordable housing units has increased in the last quarter. An application, due to be determined in the last quarter for 2014/15 should be the Authority close to its annual target. With regard to the Vanguard Self Build project, the Authority has, along with Exmoor, successfully achieved pilot status. Expressions of interest have been collated; further meetings are planned with Devon Communities Together to determine the work that needs to be done. £10,000 in the form of a government grant will support this work. Receipt of this money is awaited. The reasons for the delay in funding were set out by the Head of Resources.

With regard to the recent Ministerial Statement regarding S106 changes relating to affordable housing, the Forward Planning Team is considering an addendum to the Affordable Housing SPD and will be writing to agents to advise that the Ministerial Statement does not override the Local Plan. The Authority intends to take a robust approach to agents who do not propose affordable housing within their clients' applications.

It was noted that West Berkshire and Reading Councils have instigated a judicial review of the process regarding the Ministerial Statement on the use of Section 106 agreements for affordable housing. Some Members suggested that the Authority should support this action.

RESOLVED: Members:


- (i) Noted the content of the report; and
- (ii) Recommended that the Authority should consider how it might support the action being taken by West Berkshire and Reading Councils.

387 Update on the introduction of charges for pre-application planning advice and training for Members

The Director of Planning reported that the Authority will apply pre-application charges from 1 April 2015 for certain types of development. A review of the pre-application advice process has been commenced, with the assistance of the Head of Resources. New notes and forms for customers are being worked up.

A recent business survey showed a need for Officers to undertake some refresher training. Members will be invited to attend this event.

One Member commented that the system introduced by South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils was working very well, bringing funds into the Local

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Authorities. They added that Officers would need to ensure that there was adequate cover when colleagues were on leave/sick. The Director of Planning advised that this would be dealt with – no Officer would be allocated a large number of cases just prior to a holiday, for example.

Another Member stressed the need for Officers to communicate with customers; eg., keep a customer up to date if a response from a Parish Council, Highways etc was holding up their response. Back office staff could assist offices with this type of communication. He commended the use of an activity log at the front of each pre-application advice folder.

Members suggested that a role play session could prove beneficial, with everyone learning from each other. Customer Service training will be arranged. The Director of Planning agreed that this could take place once the mechanics of the scheme had been concluded – by 1 April 2015.

388 Conservation and Communities Directorate performance report – Quarter 3 (October – December 2014)

Members received the report of the Director of Conservation and Communities (NPA/AG/15/004). Key projects were highlighted as follows:

Mires Project – Officers started a new period of restoration to complete the restoration required for the hydro monitoring. Challenging weather has delayed work for two weeks. The project ends at the end of March this year but further funding from South West Water is available to continue monitoring for five years.

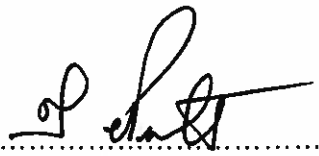
Moor than meets the eye – The first claim has been submitted. Full reports will be brought to Audit and Governance Committee in future.

Car Parking – double yellow lines are currently being placed at Newbridge and Deeper Marsh. DCC has advised that it will enforce this. With regard to the parking charges at Princetown, a full year of data is now available to officers and evaluation had commenced.

Volunteers – the number of volunteer days is down by 37% on last year – related to staff capacity and the need to identify practical jobs well in advance. A full evaluation and analysis will be undertaken at year end and will compare 2014/15 with 2013/14. A Member suggested that volunteers could become more 'specialised' in their favoured areas of work.

Core Work – has increased throughout the year, eg., the increase in number of education walks due to the changes in the National Curriculum., Development Management consultations to the Ecology team have totalled 250 compared to 146 for the same period in 2013.

RESOLVED: Members noted the content of the report.

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