

# DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Friday 5 April 2024

Present: A Cooper, W Dracup, G Hill, M Jeffery, J McInnes, S Morgan, C Mott, J Nutley, M Owen, G Pannell, M Renders, P Sanders, P Smerdon, M Williams, P Woods

Apologies: P Harper, L Samuel, D Thomas

Formal leave of absence: G Gribble

Officers: K Bishop, Chief Executive (National Park Officer)  
R Drysdale, Director of Conservation and Communities  
C Giles, Head of Conservation and Land Management  
D Kinsella, Director of Spatial Planning  
A Stirland, Head of Business Support

The Chair welcomed Ms Farrell, the Authority's Independent Person and Mr Barber, Key Audit Partner for Grant Thornton UK LLP.

## **3562 Declarations of Interest**

Mr Pannell and Mr Smerdon declared an interest in Item 9 (land at South Brent), being involved with Sustainable South Brent and their composting scheme.

Mr Dracup and Mr Owen declared an interest in Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL), both having received FiPL grants.

Mr Dracup and Mr Owen declared an interest in Item 10 (Nature Enhancement on Dartmoor) as they are part of the Central Dartmoor Farm Cluster. Mr Dracup is also involved in the curlew project.

## **3563 Minutes of the previous meetings**

The amendments to the Minutes of the Authority meeting held on 2 February 2024 were agreed at the 1 March 2024, noted, and signed as a true record.

The Minutes of the Authority Meeting held on 1 March 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

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

## **3564 Chair's Report**

The Chair reported:

1. The sad news about our colleague Janet Coles, who passed away on 11 March 2024. Janet was an Information Officer and a Guided Walk Leader for DNPA. The Authority would like to formally record thanks to Janet for everything that she did for the National Park, and to send condolences to her

- family and friends. The funeral and wake will be held at St Lukes Church, Torquay on 8 April 2024 at 11am.
2. Attending Team Devon (TD) meeting on behalf of Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) on Wednesday 3 April 2024. The main item on the agenda being the devolution deal. TD meet monthly and it is expected that upcoming meetings will focus on procedures and input for the deal, which will then need to be reviewed by the Department for levelling-Up, Housing and Communities.
  3. Attended a steering group meeting to discuss the Dartmoor Foundation, where good progress was made with constitutional and other issues.
  4. Attending meetings to discuss National Park funding with Sir Gary Streeter MP, Sir Geoffrey Cox MP, and Mel Stride MP. Dartmoor National Park Authority are appreciative of their support in helping to secure additional revenue grant for the 2024/25 financial year. In particular, we are grateful to Mel Stride MP for organising a meeting with Steve Barclay (Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reminded Members that in November 2023, Steve Barclay, Secretary of State, announced an additional £10m capital grant for Protected Landscapes in England (NP's and AONB's). The Authority stressed the importance of this additional grant being revenue funding as capital cannot be spent on staffing costs (which is where there is most pressure). MP's Gary Streeter, Sir Geoffrey Cox and Mel Stride actively supported this. Mel Stride MP arranged a meeting with Steve Barclay, and also spoke to Treasury. On Thursday 28 March we received final confirmation of a £3.8m National Park Grant for 2024/25, together with a £500K additional grant (of which 50% can be used for revenue spending).. In addition, we have also received a one-off £75K Access for All revenue grant. This is all good news. The Chair and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) are grateful for Member support in pushing forward this agenda.

Members thanked the Chair and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) for their hard work and resilience in pursuing this matter for the benefit of DNPA and other Protected Landscapes. Members noted that all national Parks will receive £500,000 in additional grant for 2024/25 and all will benefit from the 50/50 revenue and capital split.

Members highlighted that the Authority are still dealing with real time financial cuts, as well as late notice of income streams (from DEFRA) which make financial planning very difficult, especially medium to long term planning.

The Chair invited other Members of the Authority to report any news.

None reported.

### **3565 Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

None

### **3566 Public Participation**

Mr Smerdon and Mr Pannell left the meeting room.

Mr Kennerley, Trustee of Sustainable South Brent (SSB), spoke in support of the report in Item 9 (land at South Brent) and to offer any clarifications or respond to any queries Members might have. He conveyed apologies from Andy Harker (Chair, SSB).

Mr Kennerley explained that SSB is a charity, it's aims and values focus on sustainability across environment, society, and economy to support a resilient South Brent. The charity currently has 300 members. The site has been used for 13 years and produces up to 30 tonnes of compost annually for use by local gardens and allotments.

SSB fully supports the proposed lease extension and the contents of the report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) and asks for DNPA members to approve the recommendation in the paper.

The activity of SSB includes making compost, intercepting green waste, and working with volunteers. Any profits are put back into the local community through charitable projects in South Brent, for example: funding solar panels at the local primary school.

SSB see this as a partnership rather than a landlord/tenant arrangement, it delivers on a range of the Dartmoor Partnership Plan outcomes around *Thriving Communities*. Any success is shared with DNPA.

No questions from Members.

### **3567 Land at South Brent**

To note, this item was brought forward on the agenda.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) reported that the Authority owns , approximately 0.1 hectares of land at Manor Mills, South Brent. In 2008, the Authority declared the land surplus to requirements and approved the disposal of the land by tender for sale or lease.

The land was put on the market for sale, but this sale fell through.

The current situation is that the Authority has leased the land to Sustainable South Brent (SSB), with the lease running out in March 2031.

SSB have asked the Authority to consider a significant extension to the lease (25 years), as security of tender is needed for a bank loan to facilitate investment in the site. Rent for the current lease is £1 per annum, reflecting the not-for-profit nature of SSB.

Members supported this impressive, well supported project and would be interested to hear more about how this links to the Partnership Plan.

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

**RESOLVED:** Members noted the content of the report, and it was agreed:

That Members authorise the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to negotiate a new/extended lease for land that the Authority owns at South Brent with Sustainable South Brent.

**3568 The Audit Findings Report (ISA260) for Dartmoor National Park Authority for the year ended 31 March 2023**

Mr Smerdon and Mr Pannell rejoined the meeting.

Mr Barber reported that the work was completed at the end of February, dated 26 February 2024, with no new issues arising since discussion at the 2 February Authority Meeting.

The Auditors main findings are set out on page 34, with one material error being identified in the draft financial statement. This referred to a fifth 'additional' Farming in Protected Landscapes grant payment from DEFRA, when payments are usually received quarterly. The Authority sought clarification from DEFRA for the additional payment, explanations weren't forthcoming, so the monies were held and not spent. The auditors also made numerous attempts to speak to DEFRA and finally, on 15 February 2024, DEFRA responded to the auditors, advising that the additional fifth payment was made in error. The accounts were re-stated and corrected to reflect this.

The report is positive, Officers have been prudent, and Members should feel assured that the Authority has procedures in place to create detailed and accurate accounts.

The Auditor's fee is just over £19k.

In response to Member questions, Mr Barber advised:

1. The wording on page 67 will remain as *Draft* until the accounts are adopted.
2. It's imperative that the audit is transparent on the nature of any error, making it very clear that the error was of no fault of the Authority.

Mr Barber passed his thanks to Mrs Stirland and the wider Finance Team and wished the Authority all the best for the future.

Members noted the audit findings and thanked the Head of Business Support and the Finance team for their meticulous work.

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

**3569 Statement of Accounts 2022/23**

The Head of Business Support presented the audited Statement of Accounts for the financial year 2022/23.

The Head of Business Support explained that the main aim of the document is to explain how we have used public money to deliver services, thereby achieving our

strategic objectives. It sets out the Authority's financial transactions, in line with the code of practice and accounting standards.

The unaudited accounts were released for public inspection on 10 June 2023, with no representations or questions being received from the public to date.

The report provides a reminder of the actual financial outturn position, which was reported to Audit & Governance committee on 26 of May 2023, the reported deficit of £4,281 being unchanged. The reserve balance has required an alteration, as highlighted in the Audit report (Item 7). This was in relation to additional funds received from DEFRA (in error) and how the Authority had initially treated this. Despite contacting DEFRA on 7 July 2022 onwards, seeking clarity on what these funds were for, none was forthcoming. Due to DEFRA's response to the Auditors, an adjustment was required to the Statement of Accounts and the reserves reported at outturn to A&G (see report, sections 2.4 and 2.5).

The Narrative Report summarises the financial and non-financial performance for the year, with a brief commentary about future strategy and plans.

The Head of Business Support provided assurance to Members, stating that considering the ambitious and often diverse work programmes, 2022/23 was a year of sound financial management, with the continued commitment of staff to deliver good outcomes for the National Park.

Members had no questions, other than whether it was an option to raise a formal complaint with DEFRA. The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised that DEFRA have admitted their error and he did not see any merit in pursuing this further.

Members again praised the wider Finance Team.

Mr Cooper proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Mrs Morgan.

**RESOLVED:** Members noted the content of the report, and it was agreed that:

- (i) Members approve the 2022/23 draft Statement of Accounts;
- (ii) The Chair be authorised to sign and date the Statement of Responsibilities on behalf of the Authority;
- (iii) The Chair and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) be authorised to sign the Letter of Representation on behalf of the Authority; and
- (iv) Members approve the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement

### **3570 Nature Enhancement on Dartmoor – Approach and Progress**

The Head of Conservation and Land Management presented his report.

He reported that Dartmoor is extremely rich in nature with complex habitats and rare species. However, Dartmoor hasn't escaped the biodiversity crisis causing loss of species. Many of the species' living on Dartmoor are living in sub optimal habitats, or where they wouldn't usually choose to be.

To tackle the issues around land management, biodiversity and climate issues, the National Park is focusing on 3 simple principles:

1. Restoring natural processes (for example restoring peat, cleaning rivers).
2. At scale – striving for more, bigger, better and joined, a coordinated landscape approach.
3. Through collaboration – with landowners and managers working together with a co-designed shared vision.

These principles are embedded in the Dartmoor Partnership Plan. Work is focused on seven river catchments, though not excluding other areas if opportunities arise.

With regards to progress made, highlights include:

1. The peatland restoration project which is in its 2<sup>nd</sup> year (of 3-year project) with Southwest Water. The intention is that this will continue for many years to come, with an estimated additional 50 years of peatland restoration work required to restore de-graded peatland. There is also a project focusing on natural flood management funded via the Environment Agency. This project is looking at how we can slow the flow and prevent downstream flooding whilst also delivering other public benefits (e.g. enhanced biodiversity).
2. Three Landscape Recovery (LR) schemes supported by DEFRA on Dartmoor with a focus on collaboration and long-term agreements: Central Dartmoor CIC (in partnership with the Duchy of Cornwall), East Dartmoor (led by the Devon Wildlife Trust) and Walkham Valley (led by DNPA). Together they cover 30% of the National Park.
3. Species programmes – examples included the reintroduction of pine martens to Exmoor and Dartmoor and the curlew headstarting programme, now in its fourth year.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) thanked the Head of Conservation and Land Management for his leadership on this agenda, and for securing a number of external grants. Direct officer time for 'nature', supported by our core National Park grant equates to approximately 2.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff. A deliberate strategy of targeting external funding for project delivery means that we have been able to expand the natural environment staff capacity to 13 FTE.

In response to Member questions, the Head of Conservation and Land Management reported:

1. Loss of habitat for curlews and lapwings is happening all over the country and not Dartmoor specific, there are many curlews on the coast, but the issue is with them returning to Dartmoor.
2. The Authority is confident we will exceed the Partnership Plan target to facilitate and fund the establishment of at least 500 hectares of woodland.
3. We have a new Officer starting at the end of April, Jen Manning, giving us the resource to bring the Partnership and Monitoring plans up to date.
4. It would be folly to recreate what came before, and better to look at what is needed for the future, balancing eco systems. There are too many predators on Dartmoor – crows, foxes, deer, grey squirrel. The reintroduction of pine martens will likely drive down grey squirrel numbers.

5. Intervention is needed, this does not mean that we harbour back to an 'idealistic past'.

Members thanked the Head of Conservation and Land Management, and his wider team, for work on these ambitious plans, and for the additional work on the Fursdon review.

Mr Cooper proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Nutley.

**RESOLVED:** Members noted and commented on the Authority's approach to, and progress towards, nature enhancement target on Dartmoor.

### **3571 2023 Visitor Survey**

The Director of Spatial Planning presented the Visitor Survey report.

The 2023 Visitor Survey was carried out by the Authority between July and October 2023, the aim of which was to gain an understanding of visitor profiles to the National Park and to develop a greater awareness of visitors' attitudes towards a range of issues facing Dartmoor. Results are compared to the previous survey (2017), where possible.

In total, 409 survey responses were received via face-to-face interviews at a variety of sites across the National Park, including key towns such as Ashburton and Chagford, as well as busier 'honeypot sites' and more remote locations. The plan is to repeat the survey every 2 to 3 years, providing a valuable insight into the profiles of people visiting the National Park.

Some findings were highlighted, including:

1. Only 4% of those overnight visitors were visiting Dartmoor for longer than a week which is fewer than in 2017, where 8% were staying for over a week.
2. Of those visitors who were staying overnight, 19% were staying with friends/family and 20% were staying in a self-catering rented house or cottage.
3. Active travel was much more common within the National Park whilst on activity, with 26.9% of respondents reporting that they travelled by walking.
4. When asked what activities they had partaken in or will partake in during their visit, the highest proportion (21%) gave the response of going for a walk which is similar to that in 2017, where 18% stated their main reason for visiting was going on a walk.
5. The most used information source prior to visit was previous knowledge of the site/area (26% of respondents).
6. 89% of respondents agree that Dartmoor is well conserved (51% strongly agree and 38% slightly agree).
7. Attitudes towards Dartmoor's features were largely positive. The features which visitors consider are deteriorating the most are public access to open space and traditional farming practices.
8. The 3 main issues negatively impacting the enjoyment of their visit to Dartmoor were litter, too many visitors and speeding vehicles. 67% of respondents think more should be done to manage these, and other, issues raised in the report.
9. The survey showed that the majority of visitors (94%) will visit again.

In response to Member questions, The Director of Conservation and Communities advised:

1. That annual day visitor numbers are between 6 to 7 million people
2. The survey gives the National Park a road map for potential funding opportunities.
3. The survey results will show different results during different times of the year, for example during canoeing season, many visitors travel from the Midlands and Wales. Data such as this will be considered when deciding to do the next survey, as well as location and vicinity to a train station.
4. Dartmoor National Park Authority's website is top of Google search and our relationship with Visit Dartmoor is crucial, working on initiatives together.
5. The Dartmoor App for walking routes is about to be launched, this was paid for by DEFRA Access for All monies.

Mr McInnes proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Renders.

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

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