

Dartmoor National Park Authority

Public Minutes of Meeting held on 21 March 2025

Present:

Peter Harper, Gay Hill, James McInnes, Sally Morgan, Caroline Mott, Mark Owen, Guy Pannell, Mark Renders, Philip Sanders, Peter Smerdon, Mark Williams, Pamela Woods

Apologies:

Will Dracup, Mike Jeffery, John Nutley, Lois Samuel and Mary Seddon

Non-Attendance:

Jerry Brook, Dan Thomas

Officers in attendance:

Kevin Bishop (Chief Executive), Richard Drysdale (Director of Conservation and Communities), Angela Stirland (Head of Business Support), Neil White (Head of Organisational Development), Andrew Watson (Head of Recreation, Access and Estates), Penny Bailey (Business Support – Minutes)

3650 Declarations of Interest

None.

3651 Minutes

The public minutes of the meetings held on 7 February 2025, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read, confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

The minutes of the Part II confidential Authority meeting, having been printed and circulated to Members, were taken as read, confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

3652 Chair's Report

The Chair reported having attended the following meetings:

- Together with Mr Dracup and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer), she had met with Mary Creagh, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Nature) responsible for National Parks, via Teams, in which the importance of sufficient funding for National Parks to carry out their statutory duties was emphasised. It is understood that the Minister is planning to visit Exmoor and Dartmoor on 8/9 April 2025.
- Together with other Members, she had attended a Youth Rangers celebration held on Saturday 8 March 2025. The event was extremely inspirational, and it was great to see first-hand the enthusiasm and energy in the room. Thanks were recorded to the staff who organised celebration and to the Members who attended.
- Attended two National Parks England teams meetings; discussions included the proposed funding for the next financial year and the forthcoming spending review.

3653 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

3654 Public Participation

None.

3655 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28

Considered: Report of the Head of Business Support and Chief Executive (National Park Officer (NPA/25/011)).

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised Members that the Authority had not yet received confirmation of National Park Grant (NPG) for 2025/26.

Two scenarios were provided in the report. Scenario one assumes flat cash for 2025/26 this was the working assumption up until late February. Defra officials had a meeting with chief executives from all of the English National Parks when they indicated that we might be facing a real terms cut to NPG in 2025/26. This statement prompted officers to start work on a second scenario which assumes a 9% cut to NPG in 2025/26. The report provides the implications in headline terms of a 9% cut not just for one year but also whether that would be mirrored in other years of the spending review that is forthcoming. Additionally, Defra indicated a potential switch from revenue funding to capital funding. Defra has confirmed that the National Park Authorities will not receive any support in regard to the increase in national insurance contributions that employers must pay.

The Head of Business Support presented the Medium-Term Financial Plan which is based on the assumption that core funding will remain static.

In response to Member questions, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) and the Head of Business Support responded as follows:

- For clarity, it was confirmed that £615,000 may be needed from Reserves in order to balance the revenue budget for 2025/26. Should a significant business review be required there would obviously be a cost in undertaking this, including redundancy costs and pension strain.
- Capital expenditure – Defra has issued some draft guidance on a potential capital fund and has asked the Authority to submit our capital plans. These include some staff costs that we think we could capitalise and that we are proposing that the National Park Management Plan is defined as an intangible capital asset. Some ranger time could, potentially, be capitalised as public rights of way and access land is a capital asset - the amount of staff time that the rangers put in to maintaining, enhancing and improving the public rights away network is in excess of the service level agreement value that we get from the county council. We are also looking to see if we can get Defra's agreement that the Local Plan is also an intangible capital asset;
- If the Authority was to receive a capital element within the NPG it would have to be spent within the financial year. The transfer of funds into Reserves would not be counted as spent or commitment;
- There is no guarantee that any capital element for 2025/26 would be repeated in future years;
- Officer opinion was that the Authority would remain a going concern even with a 9% cut. We are doing some work with two other National Parks on a minimum level of NPG i.e., a floor below which NPG should not drop. This work is ongoing and is being led by Northumberland NPA;
- If the Authority does have a 9% cut in revenue and Defra does not support the proposals to capitalise some staff costs then we will be forced to conduct a business review, the purpose of which would be to reduce staff costs which would ultimately result in an inability to deliver some services;

- The potential capital fund could not be used on feasibility or research studies and, therefore, the climate change work could not be allocated to be capital funded. We are also signed up for Net Zero – work with the Land Use Management Group would provide the opportunity for them to help fund the work that we need to do.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) asked that a further recommendation be added as follows:

‘that Members note that the Authority may award a consultancy contract for a climate risk assessment up to the value of £40,000’

Members agreed that a business review should not be undertaken until NPG has been confirmed, together with the results of the Spending Review, to be announced by the Chancellor on Wednesday 26 March 2025.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised that, how we influence this government is by building a relationship. We have so far had one Teams meeting with Mary Creagh and she is due to visit 8/9 April 2025. She has also invited Chief Executives to a round table meeting on Monday 31 March; we are hoping that this starts to build the relationship and that she and the Secretary of State will see the benefit of the work we do. Daniel Zeitner, Farming Minister is to attend a Forum meeting on 3 April; this presents more opportunities.

- Resolved:** Members:
- (i) Approved the 2025/26 budget and noted the indicative budgets for 2026/27 and 2027/28 as shown in Appendices 1-3;
 - (ii) Approved the use of Earmarked Reserve balances as set out in Appendix 5, noting the need to take up to £615,000 from reserves to balance the revenue budget in 2025/26;
 - (iii) Approve the Capital Investment Strategy as set out in section 4 of the report;
 - (iv) Note that the Authority faces an uncertain financial future and will, in all likelihood, have to undertake a major business review to reduce costs in order to set a balanced budget in the medium term; and
 - (v) Agreed that any such business review should be commenced when we know the outcomes of the current Spending Review so we can plan ahead with some certainty.
 - (vi) noted that the Authority may need to award a consultancy contract for a climate risk assessment up to the value of £40,000.

3656 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2025/26

Considered: Report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/25/012).

Every year, in accordance with the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management, the Authority must set out and adopt a treasury management and investment strategy. This is a straightforward document as the Authority is debt free and has no plans to borrow. The Authority also has modest working capital balances that are invested in bank treasury deposits and rarely has capital programmes of any substance.

In response to Member questions, the Head of Business Support replied as follows:

- The Authority has limited cash; investments to make more money usually mean tying up funds over the longer term for the Authority; the Authority must always consider its cashflow which means that it is unable to invest over the longer term;
- The Authority is able to borrow from the Public Works Loan Board; however, repayments would be from Revenue.

Resolved: Members approved and adopted the 2025/26 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy.

3657 Draft Business Plan 2025-26

Considered: Report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/25/013).

The draft Business Plan is a strategic document. It does not describe everything that the Authority does; it focuses on 2025/26 but many of the actions are multi-year. There is a strong link between the Authority's Business Plan and the Partnership Plan for the National Park.

There is a range of performance indicators set through the Business Plan process; some of those are national and others are set locally. They are reported to Leadership Team on a quarterly basis and then to Audit and Governance Committee which meets three times a year.

In response to Member questions, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised as follows:

- 30 x 30 - the government has published draft criteria - there are three criteria:
 - the purpose is nature conservation;
 - Protection - you cannot destroy it or damage it;
 - active management

A report will be brought to the next meeting of the Authority that will pick up our work in response to declaring a nature crisis. The report should provide more detail on the 30 x 30 criteria and what we think is covered by that on Dartmoor.

- Target of 2,000 hectares of broadleaf woodland – The Director of Conservation and Communities explained that the Authority is working with the Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest which covers all of Dartmoor through Dartmoor's Dynamic Landscapes with the Woodland Trust. We have just recruited an officer, a joint post with Devon County Council, using woodland creator accelerator fund monies, to look to map all the data and ensure that we can reach that target. There is an increased spotlight on trees and woodland following announcements of a new national forest by the government on Friday 21 March 2025;
- Parish Council attendance by Members –the target set within the Performance Indicators would be reviewed

Members commented that the Business Plan encapsulates the ambitions of the Authority and expressed the hope that, whatever financial position the Authority finds itself in, it is able to drive this forward.

With regard to the 30 x 30 a Member felt that we are capable of delivering a lot more than 30% of our land to nature conservation.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) confirmed that, should the Authority be given a National Park Grant with a significant cut, the Business Review would need to be included within the Business Plan.

- Resolved:** Members:
- (i) Reviewed the draft Business Plan for 2025/26 and performance indicators; and
 - (ii) Delegated authority to the Chief Executive (National Park Officer), in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Authority, to agree the final version of the Business Plan and set of performance indicators and targets for 2025/26

3658 Update of the Financial Regulations

Considered: Report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/25/014).

With regard to Section A8 of the Financial Regulations – Use of Consultants – there was discussion regarding the agreed allowance of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to spend up to £30,000 on things in general, but at the same time, a constraint of £10,000 on consultants, and also a requirement of Member approval. It was agreed that consideration would be given to the Section A8 financial limit and Officers would bring a report to a future Authority.

- Resolved:** Members:
- (i) Approved the proposed changes to the Financial Regulations which update the regulations to reflect current legislation, best practice guidance and current practice as set out in Appendix 1, to take effect from the conclusion of the meeting; and
 - (ii) Agreed to the removal of the Systems and Procedures from the Financial Regulations for these detailed standards to become internal documents which govern the actions of officers of the Authority and for these standards to be directly under the jurisdiction of the Head of Business Support.

3659 Review of Public Toilets on Dartmoor owned or leased by Dartmoor National Park Authority

Considered: Report of the Head of Recreation, Access and Estates

In response to Member questions, the Head of Recreation, Access and Estates advised as follows:

- Alternative uses for the toilet block at Dartmeet – advice had been given that any new proposals would need to be for a recreational use, e.g., bookable space for kayakers, maintaining some form of toilet provision. A conversation with a Planning Officer for advice has been offered.
- For clarification, the toilets at Dartmeet are currently open; the lease for the toilet block runs until August but the agreement for the use of the soakaway ends on the 30 March, therefore, from 1 April we would not have a right to make use of the soakaway.
- Contactless payment systems for paying to use the toilet would not work at Dartmeet due to very poor mobile signal; contactless relies on a good strong 4G signal.

Members commented that opportunities should be provided to Parish Councils that want to take more responsibility for what is within their parishes. From experience this can result in better management of facilities and dignity for all users.

Another advised that, having known the history of the Dartmeet site for many years, the Authority's recommendations could be an opportunity for the private landowners and businesses to step up to take on responsibility. The proposed re-opening of the facilities at Lydford was a positive step and would contribute towards the off setting of the introduction of car parking charges.

- Resolved:** Members:
- (i) Noted the content of the report;
 - (ii) Agreed to end the current lease and agreements for the public toilets at Dartmeet; and
 - (iii) Agreed to proceed with the reopening of the public toilets at Lydford.

3660 Amendments to Scheme of Delegation : Enforcement Warning Notice

Considered: Report of the Head of Organisational Development and Monitoring Officer.

Resolved: Members approved the proposed amendment to the Scheme of Delegation as set out At Appendix 1, to take effect from the conclusion of this meeting.

There being no other business, the meeting ended.