

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Friday 5 November 2021

Present: Members
A Cooper, W Dracup, P Harper, J McInnes, S Morgan (Chair),
J Nutley, C Pannell, P Sanders, P Vogel, P Woods

Officers
O Rutter, A Stirland, K Bishop

In attendance: N Tigwell, C Shewan (Independent Persons)

Apologies: M Renders, P Smerdon

The Chair welcomed Angela Stirland, new Head of Business Support.

557 Minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2021 were proposed by Mr Sanders, seconded by Mr Cooper and AGREED as a correct record.

558 Declarations of Interest

None.

559 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

560 Public Participation

None.

561 Dartmoor National Park – Outreach and Engagement Strategy 2020 : annual update

Members received the report of the Head of Outreach and Understanding (NPA/AG/21/010). The Outreach and Understanding Strategy was formally adopted by the Authority on 6 November 2020. It has provided focus to the work involved and resulted in significant funding and growth opportunities. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in an increased usage of social media, including You Tube, virtual walks, events and festivals. In July 2021, following a lifting of some of the lockdown rules, an open day was held at Postbridge Visitor Centre. Staff and public alike enjoyed the relief of being able to enjoy an outdoor event again.

The partnership with 'Generation Green' gave the team additional capacity which allowed the growth of the Junior and Youth Ranger offers, both in volume and reach. This has assisted with the team's ambition to reach those who are not currently engaged with Dartmoor.

2021 saw a more proactive approach to managing relationships with visitors, compared to 2020. Engagement Volunteers and Marshalls worked well with Authority staff, with positive feedback received from partners and landowners.

It is hoped that the long-term success of the Strategy will be measured by a greater diversity of people engaging with Dartmoor, the physical, socio-economic or cultural barrier having been removed.

A Member stated that, having taken on the role of an Engagement Volunteer, she had enjoyed the experience and aimed to continue to build on this in 2022. Another, who had also undertaken the role, thanked the whole team, reporting that the Ranger Ralph 21st anniversary event had been enjoyed by young people and parents alike. The hard work undertaken over the year had proved very successful.

In response to Member queries the Head of Outreach and Understanding advised that with regard to the Clarion Housing partnership – the work with Yorkshire Dales, Broads Authority and Dartmoor was a pilot scheme. A meeting will be held on 8 November 2021 between Clarion and National Parks to seek a way forward. The project has helped us to reach out to some communities and people who would otherwise not be able to become engaged.

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised Members that this was the Head of Outreach and Understanding's last formal meeting and recorded his thanks for his hard work and enthusiasm over the years. This was echoed by Members.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the content of the report and the impact of the Outreach and Engagement Strategy during the first year of its adoption.

562 Financial Management 1 April to 31 August 2021 and Forecast of Financial Outturn 2021/22

Members received the report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) and the Head of Business Support (NPA/AG/21/011).

The 2021/22 net budget was approved by the Authority in March 2021 and is funded from:

- National Park Grant (NPG) (as with the previous year the Authority was given a single year settlement only)
- Fees and Charges
- External grants and partnership income
- The Authority's own reserve balances

Various work programs and associated income streams from 2020/21 were brought forward, meaning that the net budget has increased by just over £57,000.

Based on the current status of work programs; the current forecast as at month 5, is for a potential deficit of £2,138 at year end. A full variance analysis can be found at appendix 2 and details of the most significant variations are set out in section 2.4 of the report.

The forecast deficit is however largely related to

- The potential pay award Local Government Employers offered of 1.75%, which at the time of writing the report, had been rejected by the Unions; negotiations were ongoing. However, the proposed pay award has been included in the forecast outturn position.
- The Authority has also incurred premises related cost at Higher Uppacott Cottage and in the ballroom at Princetown Visitor Centre, which have also been included in the current forecast outturn position. These costs could be met from the 'Property Repair Reserve' at year end if they cannot be absorbed into any in-year savings, but it was too early yet to be making that sort of allocation.

Other variances to note were:

- Travel, transport & subsistence savings due to reduced staff need to attend meetings, conferences, and training in person.
- Supplies and services underspend in respect of the cleaning contract being less than budgeted and visitor management budget not yet fully utilised; however, this has been offset by the increased maintenance fee and upgrade for iDOX.
- Grants income for the Dartmoor Marshals and a contribution from defence infrastructure for new visitor management signage.
- Planning fees exceeding budget, but this has been counterbalanced by car parking income not meeting projected target.

Moor Otters II project was delayed this year due to Covid 19 and was now well underway with the recent auction of the otters having taken place.

Section 2.6 of the report sets out the bids that have been funded from the Project Fund to date. The Fund is an unallocated pot of money that allows officers to bid for the money in year, to enable new unplanned projects to start, to add capacity to teams if required and meet unforeseen expenditure and pressures.

Section 3 of the report formally set out details of the capital program to meet the requirements of the Prudential Code: the table at 3.1 shows the total anticipated spend per project, how the projects are funded and timing of any income streams.

Section 4 summarises the forecast movement in reserves for the year, with the prior year comparator. Appendix 3 shows a detailed breakdown of individual reserve balances and associated movements. Appendix 4 is the risk-based analysis.

The 2022/23 budget and new Medium Term Financial Plan process is underway, and the balances are likely to change. Officers are unsure of the NPG for 2022/23 but is likely to be a one-year flat cash settlement. In real terms, with consideration for inflation, pay award and the National Insurance increase, this will be a reduction in cash terms.

The forecast outturn deficit of £2,138 represents a 0.05% variance against the (revised) budget. Fluctuations are likely, especially if projects are delayed (e.g., due to further COVID 19 implications, poor weather conditions or to partnership funding variations) or if other income is received or generated over the remainder of the financial year.

Budget management is being closely monitored and challenged; Members would be kept informed if new pressures arise that give reason for concern.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the contents of the report.

563 Business Plan Monitoring 2021/22

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/21/012).

The report informs Members of the Authority's performance against the key actions identified in the Business Plan for 2021/22. The Head of Organisational Development advised Members that 12 key actions are currently on target, 13 are delayed or behind schedule. Two key actions will not be completed in 2021/22 – Action 4 due to officer capacity and revised priorities and Action 22 which has been incorporated into key action 26.

Between July and the end of the calendar year the Authority will have lost 16 employees. However, around 20 new posts, including new roles, will have been filled.

In response to Member queries, the Chief Executive advised that the public consultation on the Byelaws Review had just completed; over 3500 responses have been received via the on-line survey. Due to this, work on the Green Transport Strategy may have to be paused, with no indication as to when work may restart. Analysis of the Byelaw consultation will take place in the new year. He added that the views expressed via the on-line survey are closer that perceived and reported on social media.

Members urged the Chief Executive to advise Members of any projects that needed to be put on hold.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the content of the report.

564 Performance Indicators 2021/22 and Annual Ombudsman Letter

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/21/013).

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised Members that there are 37 by which to measure the performance of the Authority. Some of the indicators are national; data is therefore compared annually with other National Parks. Particularly of note for Members – staff sickness absence has increased slightly; there will be no Residents' Satisfaction Survey undertaken this year due to staff shortages and budget and, Member attendance was lower in Quarter Two but only slightly below target.

RESOLVED: Members NOTED the content of the report, together with the Annual Review Letter for 2020/21 from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

565 Strategic Risk Register 2021/22

Members received the report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/AG/21/014).

The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised Members that the Strategic Risk Register forms part of the Authority's overall risk management strategy. Following the most recent review, the following changes have been made:

- Moor Otters – removed (F4)
- Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) – added (S5)
- Review of Byelaws – added (S6)

With regard to risk reference P3, the Planning data system (PACS) is no longer supported. The replacement system has been delayed and it is expected to be in place by mid-2022. The Head of ICT and Premises is the only member of staff who has knowledge of how to maintain the PACS system. The document management system migration to the Cloud is expected to be completed by the summer of 2022.

In response to Member queries, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised that replacement staff within ICT is expected soon; there is support from iDOX and there is a backup system for the Cloud. With regard to the replacement of PACS, there is no common system; each Local Planning Authority chooses its own. DNPA selected the most robust system which also happens to cost the least.

Following a Member comment, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) accepted that the Planned Residual Risk Rating for Risk Ref F1 should be red rather than amber.

Under the Risk Category of Strategy, Risk Refs S3 – Managing Officer workload and S4 – Workforce planning/resilience – these risks are subject to the turnover of staff and the recruitment of new staff.

A full report on respect of Farming in Protected Landscapes would be taken to the next Audit and Governance Committee meeting in February 2022. Two selection panels have met so far; a good number of projects have been submitted and discussed.

Mrs Morgan proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Mr Harper.

RESOLVED: Members APPROVED the Strategic Risk Register for 2021/22.

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