

Dartmoor National Park Authority

Public Minutes of Meeting held on 1 November 2024

Present:

Jerry Brook, Will Dracup, Corinne Farrell (Independent Person), Peter Harper, Gay Hill, Mike Jeffery, James McInnes, Sally Morgan, Caroline Mott, John Nutley, Mark Owen, Guy Pannell, Mark Renders, Lois Samuel, Philip Sanders, Mary Seddon, Peter Smerdon, Dan Thomas, Mark Williams, Pamela Woods (Chair)

Apologies:

None

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), James Aven (Principal Planning Officer (Enforcement), Craig Sullivan (Audit Partner, Bishop Fleming), Alex Searle (Audit Manager, Bishop Fleming), Cath Burnett (Business Support – Minutes)

3607 Declarations of Interest

Dr Seddon declared an interest in Youth Hostel Association (YHA), working as part of the YHA in Okehampton.

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

Mr Dracup declared an interest in Defra Generation Green 2, delivery via Shallowford Farm.

Mr Owen declared an interest in Archaeological Heritage at Challacombe Farm.

Mr Renders declared an interest as Councillor for West Devon Borough Council and Postmaster at Princetown. He advised his position as predisposed but not predetermined and proposed that he stay for Part II and be fully involved in the discussion.

3608 Minutes

The public minutes of the meetings held on 26 July 2024, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read, confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

3609 Chair's Report

The Chair reported the following:

- Meeting with Team Devon, the main topics discussed were housing provision in the county and the construction of a new body which will have a new constitution.
- Attendance at Natural England reception at the House of Lords, with representatives from other National Parks and National Landscapes. The Rt Hon Steve Reed MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, gave an encouraging speech with a special mention to Dartmoor. This was a good opportunity to meet two new MPs, Caroline Voaden and Rebecca Smith.

- The Supreme Court hearing into the backpack camping case (Darwalls vs Dartmoor National Park Authority) was heard on 8 October 2024. We await the judgment, there is no timeline for this.
- The Chair, Deputy Chair, Chair of Park Management, Monitoring Officer and Chief Executive (National Park Officer) attended the UK National Parks conference. The topic was 'Landscapes for Everyone' and the presentations thought provoking. Members will be having an informal discussion about what more the Authority can do to promote equality, diversity and inclusivity across the organisation and the work it does.
- Mrs Mott reported attending the Campaign for National Parks event in September, held in Brighton. She will circulate a report to all Members.
- Mr Sanders asked a question about affordable housing. The Chief Executive (National Parks Officer) will take this question away; a response will be provided by the Director of Spatial Planning.

3610 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

3611 Public Participation

None.

3612 Statement of Accounts 2023/24

Considered:

The report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/24/034).

Bishop Flemming (Auditors) have been waiting for the Pensions Letter of Assurance which was due to be received in September but has only just been received this week on 30/10/24. This has highlighted that the Pensions Note is materially mis-stated on the liabilities and assets, due to a variance discovered in the Audit of the Pension Funds Accounts. This is not material to the Pension Fund Accounts and Larger Authorities, due to the size of their materiality levels. However, when filtered down to the smaller Authorities they can experience a material misstatement due to their lower levels of materiality thresholds. The Auditors explained that the Authority was not at fault.

There were no questions. Members thanked the Head of Business Support and her team.

Resolved:

Members recommended a reword to note the materiality issue (which was highlighted this morning) and approved the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts on that basis.

The Chair was authorised to sign and date the Statement of Responsibilities on behalf of the Authority.

The Chair and the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) were authorised to sign the Letter of Representation on behalf of the Authority.

Members approved the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement.

3613 DNPA Audit Completion Report for Year Ended 31 March 2024 and DNPA Auditor's Annual Report for Year Ended 31 March 2024

Report presented by Bishop Fleming (Auditors).

In response to Member comments/queries, Bishop Fleming responded as follows:

- That they should be in a position to sign the Audit Completion Report for year ended 31 March 2024 by 15 November 2024.
- The final fees for 2023/24 accounts have been agreed. The fees for 2024/25 will be discussed and agreed with the Head of Business Support.
- The pension issue is out of the control of DNPA, it's a presentational issue only and not for Members concern.
- With regards to the Auditor's Annual Report (page 12) referring to the number of times the Audit and Governance meetings are combined with the main Authority meeting, this will be changed to factual (3 times in 17 years) rather than 'often'.
- Thanks to the Head of Business Support and wider staff team for being so professional and making the audit process smooth.

Resolved:

Members noted the content of the report and thanked Bishop Fleming for making it so clear and easy to understand.

3614 Financial Management 1 April to 30 September 2024 and Forecast of Financial Outturn 2024/25

Considered:

The report of the Head of Business Support (NPA/24/035).

In response to Member comments/queries:

- The Director of Conservation and Communities advised that new pay and display machines are being installed in car parks operated by the Authority. To date they have proved more reliable than the old machines. Lydford is included in the installation programme. The car park at Lydford has been resurfaced and the future of the toilets is to be discussed. The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) confirmed that whilst we are expecting to exceed the target for income generated from car parking charges, this is a gross figure and does not take account of the costs of maintaining the car parks and associated facilities.
- With regards to the excavation at Cut Hill, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised that the money that Members approved be taken from reserves has been spent on the site extraction and transport of the cist to a secure storage/specialist laboratory. The balance is starting to pay for the micro-excavation. We are working with Dartmoor Preservation Association and the Dartmoor Foundation to create a Crowdfunding campaign to support this work and to limit the financial implication on the Authority. The excavation was filmed by 'Digging for Britain' (BBC) and they are also filming the micro-excavation via a time-lapse camera.

Mr Sanders attended the Dartmoor Trust AGM and thanked Lee Bray, Archaeologist, for his fabulous, informative first-class presentation.

Resolved:

Members noted the content of the report.

3615 Business Plan Monitoring 2024/25

Considered:

The report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/24/036).

In response to Member comments / queries:

- The Head of Organisational Development responded to questions about staff turnover and recruitment, advising that the issues have been twofold; lower number of applications being received together with the quality of those applications. The Landscape Recovery Manager position has been advertised three times; the position was offered to a suitable candidate but was declined.
- Regarding item 2.6, the Head of Conservation and Communities advised that it was crucial that Members are aware of the challenges and how we are working through them with partners. Officers are seeking confirmation of funding for the peatland restoration work from Defra and Natural England beyond March 2025. There is a concern that staff will look for new roles, and the impact that this has on staff morale. With regards to natural flood management, we are in talks with the Environment Agency who are working through their business case. We have been assured that the programme and revenue are in place until 2027 and have reiterated that we need this in writing.
- With regards to item 2.4, Integrated Management Plans for land owned by the Authority, the Head of Conservation and Communities said that he was drafting a tender document for work to be carried out on our behalf by a third party as there was no staff capacity to complete the management plans.

Members wanted it noted to staff that they are behind them and broadly supportive of their work.

Resolved:

Members noted the content of the report and commented on performance against the key actions identified in the 2024/25 Business Plan.

3616 Performance Indicators 2024/25 and Annual Ombudsman Letter

Considered:

The report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/24/037).

In response to Member comments/queries:

- The Head of Organisational Development advised that DEFRA Generation Green 2 is a funding programme to support outreach and engagement with young people.
- The Principal Planning Officer said that the quarter two outcome for 'planning applications validated within five days was disappointing but not surprising given staff vacancies. We are currently advertising for the role of Senior Planning Administration Officer. The Planning Administration Team are facing additional work and Planning Officers are now assisting with the validation process. Further delays are being caused by the poor quality of applications being received, together with validations being more complex (for example, including aspects such as biodiversity

net gain). Validation checklists are being amended to try to improve quality of applications being received. The target set for 5 working days is an internal standard.

- The Deputy Chair highlighted Member Attendance at meetings, currently below target at 79%. He raised the importance of getting this back on target, having all Members in attendance makes a positive impact on debate.
- The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) noted that overall, the Performance Indicators demonstrated high performance but with some pressure points.
- The Head of Organisational Development advised that the Ombudsman published their Annual Review Letter in July 2024, detailing complaints and enquiries received up to 31 March 2024; there were no investigations for the Authority.

Resolved:

Members:

- Noted the content of the report;
- Analysed the performance for 2024/25 to date and agreed actions to be taken to maintain and/or improve performance or to address under performance; and
- Noted the Annual Review Letter for 2023/24 received from the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

James Aven (Principal Planning Officer) left the meeting.

3617 Strategic Risk Register

Considered:

The report of the Head of Organisational Development (NPA/24/038).

In response to Members comments/queries:

- The Head of Organisational Development advised that under 'planned residual risk', the colour coding of red/very severe is only used if and when fundamental works need to be done immediately (as per Risk Management Policy).
- There will be a review of the Organisational Development Strategy in 2025.
- The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) asked that Members respond promptly to email requests from staff, to avoid staff having to chase.
- The Chief Executive (National Park Officer) explained that the Authority had limited ability to gain an income from the sale of carbon credits associated with peatland restoration as the work was not taking place on land owned by the Authority. Whilst we are continually examining how we might generate income, we need to recognise that the Authority was established to deliver National Park purposes which are all about public benefits. Perhaps there is a need for a national debate going forward.
- The Chair advised that we need resource to generate income, it's a question of balance.

Resolved:

Members approved the updated Strategic Risk Register.

3618 Financial Planning 2025/26 and beyond

Considered:

The Report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/24/039).

In response to Member comments/questions the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) responded as follows:

- Following the budget, the main change for the Authority is the increase in employer National Insurance (NI) contributions and the reduced threshold in which the NI contribution as an employer is paid. This is estimated to cost the Authority an additional £90K in the next financial year. The budget mentions Treasury support for public organisations but there is no clarity on this from Defra. Early indications are that the Authority may not receive 'compensation' for this additional cost.
- The other main announcement in the budget was Defra's confirmed spend of £7.5 billion for 2025/26. This figure combines revenue and capital expenditure. Whilst Defra's capital budget has increased the revenue budget is decreasing by 1.9%. This is potentially bad news for the Authority as National Park Grant is funded via the Revenue Departmental Expenditure Limit. This 1.9% decrease for Defra compares with a 10.2% increase for local authorities (National Park Authorities are a special purpose local authority). Officials had indicated that they hoped to conclude discussions about National Park grant by Christmas 2024 but experience suggests that this is an optimistic timeline and a more realistic timeline is probably February 2025.
- It is the uncertainty over future funding that is driving the recommendation to use Reserves and to delay the Business Review until we are clear about financial settlement for 2026-27.
- The forecast budget deficit of £510K for 2025/26 in the Medium-Term Financial Plan is the most accurate figure available but will be subject to change given potential cost of the increase in employer National Insurance contributions.
- A third recommendation will be added to scrutinise and minimise the call on Reserves (see below).
- Dartmoor is working with other National Parks to make the case for an increase in funding for National Parks. December 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the legislation that established National Parks in England and Wales. That legislation was described by the then Government as a 'People's Charter' for everyone who enjoys the countryside. Now is the time to renew the 'People's Charter' – for Government to set out a bold vision of reform and investment in National Parks so they can deliver for the Nation and all parts of society.

Resolved:

- Members noted the financial uncertainty facing the Authority and the financial pressures associated with 14 plus years of continued austerity.
- Members agreed to use reserves to balance the revenue budget for 2025/26, noting a potential call on reserves of £510,000 and need to complete a major business review in 2025/26 if further funding is not forthcoming from Defra.
- Members noted that Officers always 'zero base the budget' and emphasised the need to scrutinise budgets to identify in-year savings to reduce the call on Reserves.

Part I meeting ended at 13:00 and Ms Samuel left the meeting.

It was proposed, seconded and agreed by Members to move to Part II – items to be taken in the absence of the press and public on the grounds that exempt information may be disclosed.

Public Summary of Items considered “in private” at the meeting of the Dartmoor National Park Authority on 1 November 2024

3619 Duchy Hotel Lease and National Park Visitor Centre, Princetown

Considered:

The Report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) (NPA/24/040).

Resolved:

Members noted the content of the report and agreed the recommendations stated within the report.

There being no other business, the Part II meeting ended at 15:30

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