

7. CHIEF EXECUTIVE REPORT (PM)

1. Purpose of the report

To up-date members of key items since the previous Authority meeting

2. Recommendation:

1. For Members to note the report

3. Key Items

Members should notice some small changes to Authority meetings (rollcall, declarations of interest, papers taken as read rather than presented by Officers) designed to allow more time for debate on substantive issues. I have also changed the content of the CEO report to go beyond the normal account of meetings attended so that I can give a wider update on what is happening and how the Authority is doing.

National issues

National Parks England (NPE) recently hosted a visit by Defra Minister Rebecca Pow. The meeting covered a broad range of issues which are picked up below. NPE also met with Labour shadow Defra lead Steve Reed, who took his team to Dartmoor for an extended visit. Secretary of State, Steve Barclay, is meeting with the Chair of NPE in the Yorkshire Dales. A visit to the Peak District is being organised for Toby Perkins, Labour shadow for Rural Affairs. Political engagement at a national level is clearly increasing both as there is a new Defra team and ahead of a general election. The Campaign for National Parks has produced a manifesto and asks for the political parties, National Parks England has developed a number of asks and the solutions we offer – these will be used in upcoming political engagement.

The new Protected Landscapes Partnership (PLP), which brings together National Parks, Protected Landscapes (new name for AONBs), National Trails and Natural England, is now seeking to appoint an independent Chair. Significant, but short-term, government funding is going into the Partnership. National Parks England is active in the Partnership and is trying to manage a potential risk that this informally becomes a 'National Landscape Service' with the distinctiveness and voice of National Parks becoming lost.

Defra's £2.5m of extra Access funding is being discussed with the hope of delivering a second round of Generation Green. £1m of extra funding for active travel is also being discussed with Active Travel England, for walking and cycling strategies across English National Parks, with each earmarked to receive £100k.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has recently assessed that only 3.1% of land in England is protected and effectively managed for nature, falling far short of the government's 30x30 ambition (30% of land protected by 2030). The IUCN is saying National Parks no longer qualify as protected areas in their entirety. About 5-6% of the Peak District National Park qualifies as being protected and in good condition. There is a risk that in trying to meet the 30x30 ambitions, resources will move away from National Parks.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements for new developments are about to come into effect. There could be opportunities for improving habitat within the National Park. The scale and potential impact needs to be better understood. It is proposed that an Essential Member Training session is organised on BNG.

Dartmoor National Park's recent High Court victory on backpack camping is going to be appealed. The outcome of this appeal will have implications for all English National Parks as the judgement involves defining what constitutes open-air recreation and could become linked to future arguments around extending a Right to Roam.

All 15 UK National Parks have now signed up to the UN backed Race to Zero, which involves committing to and measuring progress on decarbonisation. Formal announcement is expected in March, when we will become the first National Parks globally to sign up.

National Park Management Plan (NPMP)

The long-awaited new outcomes framework and guidance is due to be published just ahead of this Authority meeting. It is hoped this will focus on place-based targets rather than organisational ones. The government want to tie in the outcomes in National Parks more closely to the 25-year Environment Plan's targets. Guidance is also awaited on what the new strengthened power of National Parks means, i.e. the new duty for public bodies to 'strengthen the purposes' of National Parks, rather than just 'having regard' to them.

We now have an established Delivery Group to support the implementation of our NPMP. This group has met for the first time and will continue to meet quarterly. Representatives from all the main partners responsible for the NPMP are in this group. A Leaders Group has also been established which will meet annually with the purpose of continuing and reaffirming commitment at the highest level from partners. There will also be an annual Forum for wider stakeholders to be updated on the progress of the NPMP.

Alongside the NPMP we also have our five-year Authority Plan. At this meeting Members will be reviewing a revised Authority Plan and a forward look at what is proposed for year two. The NPMP is reviewed annually at the end of each year whereas the Authority Plan is reported on every six months (every 'decile' of the five-year period it covers). Sitting beneath the Authority Plan each Service has its own annual plan. These are currently being finalised for the year ahead and have for the first time been worked up from the bottom and across the organisation. This should help us deliver a more coherent and realistic work programme.

Some points to note under each of our four aims in the NPMP:

Climate Change

Moors for the Future Partnership is currently in delivery mode for its biggest ever annual programme of restoration. Opportunities for BNG, carbon credits and green financing are actively being explored alongside developing a programme of work to be funded over the next five years by water companies.

Our three-year Sustainable Travel Project has started with the appointment of a Sustainable Travel Officer (Matthew Eglin). Matthew has been working with various groups interested in decarbonising travel. We have submitted a bid to the Department for Transport for a Transport Decarbonisation Demonstration Project working on the practicalities of cross pavement EV charging points. Matthew is working on improving data collection to inform ways to increase the sustainability of travel in the Park.

Nature Recovery

We have secured £441k to help conserve habitats and wildlife on the Warslow Moors Estate via a new Countryside Stewardship grant. We are also in the process of using an additional Defra grant of £523k to buy some land adjacent to our Warslow Estate with a view to improving water quality and habitat restoration.

MorrIDGE Hill Country Landscape Recovery Project is progressing through an enrolment phase ahead of trying to secure two years of development funding to look at landscape recovery across a block of land. We are aiming to secure funding by early April. Our Landscape Recovery bid for the White Peak was unsuccessful but we are looking at ways we can maintain momentum and develop the concept further ahead of a revised application, which Defra are keen to see.

I will shortly be taking part in a retreat with key environmental organisations in the region to review opportunities for greater collaboration and increasing our shared ambitions around woodland creation, nature friendly farming, managing visitor pressure, reducing wildfire risk and achieving more inclusive access to nature. This follows a day I spent recently with the Peak District Moorland Group on Moscar Estate, to learn more about the complex and competing priorities of habitat creation and conservation associated with the wildlife impacts of creating and maintaining habitats that support grouse populations but which also benefit a number of other bird species such as golden plover and curlew. I also spent a day with Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, looking at how their newly acquired Ughill Farm can be used for showcasing nature restorative farming and seeing their partnership working with Yorkshire Water at Redmires Reservoir, where there are huge visitor pressures in a sensitive natural environment.

I am increasing my role and work on nature recovery nationally on behalf of National Parks England. Shortly I will be attending a stakeholder session with Natural England's Board and I will be attending the Nature North annual conference (Nature North is a partnership between the northern English National Parks, National Landscapes, environmental NGOs, Natural England, the Environment Agency and various donors).

Welcoming Place

The new Local Visitor Economic Partnership (LVEP) has come into effect and I am a member of its Board. The view of Visit England is that this should be the go to organisation for destination marketing but it is also there to help manage the visitor economy. The LVEP is currently trying to fund the development of a destination management/tourism plan. I will continue to advocate for the LVEP's role in helping manage visitor pressure.

Peak District Mosaic have been successful in their Lottery bid for 'Championing National Parks for Everyone'. This will fund training of community champions and provides a significant boost to our efforts in trying to attract more diverse audiences into the Park.

Consultants have begun work on reviewing our Visitor Centres, using funding provided through the Foundation. Our Visitor Centres were very busy before Christmas, with engaging displays that helped attract high footfall. Cycle hire operations have been quieter, with sustained adverse weather not helping. The generous donation we received to keep Visitor Centres open means we have time to really understand how they are performing and to consider ways in which they can change so that they can become financially sustainable.

Thriving Communities

Having an effective planning function is key to helping create thriving communities. Recently there have been some real successes for the Enforcement team with a High Court injunction gained against unauthorised developments over many years in Sheldon village. At Cressbrook Dale we have taken enforcement action against unauthorised development in the natural zone. Our Minerals team also managed to stop unauthorised mineral extraction being carried out at an old quarry site, the former Wagers Flat Quarry on Longstone Edge. I would like to pay tribute to the individuals and teams who helped secure these great outcomes in all three cases.

A joint letter from the Authority, Derbyshire Dales District Council and High Peak Borough Council / Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, has been sent to Homes England regarding the additional costs of building affordable housing within the National Park. A copy of the letter has also been sent to local MP Lee Rowley, Minister of State (Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety) and Sarah Dines MP.

I am about to launch a series of roadshow events across the Park, giving residents a chance to meet with me so I can hear their views. I aim to hold one such event a month throughout 2024 so that we can learn from local communities and become more enabling and responsive.

In the year ahead, I also want to establish ways in which the Authority can become more informed by and responsive to the views of younger people. The Member-led Governance Working Group will also be looking at the ways in which members of the public can participate at our meetings. The group will also review Standing Orders, which reports go to Authority/Planning/Programmes & Resources/Forum meetings, the format of our reports (to make them more accessible), Member learning and development needs and the role of Member Champions.

Resource issues

At this Authority meeting Members are being asked to approve our budget for the year ahead. The context of this is that we are continuing to experience a squeeze on our resources driven by a frozen Defra grant, increased activity costs and our desire to improve pay and conditions to help address our long-term recruitment and retention issues. In January we were able to implement our new pay levels as well as giving all staff a free pass for all our carparks. Both measures have landed extremely well. We will shortly be consulting on further recruitment and retention incentives, focused on hard to fill roles.

Our revenue position remains extremely challenging, although the Authority does have a good level of reserves. The additional funding we are being offered from Defra, whilst being welcome, does not address our revenue difficulties. Generally, the additional funding we are being offered is restricted for capital (such as the money to buy land in Warslow), one-off, very short notice and being shared across a wider range of partners such as the new Protected Landscapes. Additional funding for Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) is expected (due to other areas underspending) but it can be difficult to hire sufficient staff to deliver this when such funding is short term. We need, therefore, to focus on generating more unrestricted income which can help our revenue position. Our planned carparking developments will be aimed at trying to promote more sustainable transport and help manage visitor pressures but should also generate some additional income. We are also trying to increase income through more letting of surplus space at Aldern House. I am conducting a wider review of Aldern House to see what the best use of this asset is and how we can use restricted capital reserves to help generate future revenue.

Staffing update

Last year's restructure is now almost complete. Changed or shifted teams within the four Services are settling in, new roles are being filled and there is greater cross-organisation understanding and working. Our turnover rate has gone down from 17% to 11%, indicating our work to increase pay is having a positive impact and we are seeing higher numbers applying for roles and some longstanding hard to fill roles being appointed to. Softer benefits such as free carpark passes and time off to do volunteering are all helping to contribute to a more positive staff morale as has the introduction of staff name badges. The arrival of some new starters has also helped create energy and confidence.

Notably we have recruited Hannah Turner as our new Head of Assets and Enterprise and we have made an appointment to the Authority Solicitor/Monitoring Officer role (at the second attempt). Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in two attempts at appointing to the new Head of Resources role. This has necessitated the removal of the need for a financial qualification, to open the role up to a wider pool of candidates. We are also currently seeking to appoint a new Finance Manager, who will be the Section 151 Officer.

Looking forward, and attempting to diversify our workforce and address the aging staff profile we have, we are looking to create the Peak District National Park Training Academy. This is an exciting project that will be explained further in the Member Forum following this Authority meeting.

Alongside all of the above staffing developments we are developing a volunteer strategy that seeks to grow the number of volunteers we have, diversify the roles that volunteers undertake and diversify the profile of those that volunteer with us. This emerging strategy may be an interesting topic for a future Member Forum.

Recent external meetings

Since my last report on 10th November I have continued to meet with stakeholders, partners and organisations based in and around the National Park Authority including:

- Institute of Quarrying, National Stone Centre
- Sarah Dines MP
- Launch of National Landscape Partnership at the Royal Society
- Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust
- Lord & Lady Edward, Haddon Hall
- Neil Moulden, Chief Executive Derbyshire Dales CVS
- Craig Best, National Trust
- Richard Bailey, Peak District Moorland Group
- Stephen Vickers, CEO Chatsworth
- Victoria Manton, Natural England
- Chris Henning, Executive Director DCC
- Prof. Kathryn Mitchell, CEO University of Derby

Report Author, Job Title and Publication Date

Phil Mulligan, CEO, with input from Victoria Peel, Executive Support Officer
25 January 2024