

GOVERNANCE REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEFRA

1. Purpose

To inform government of the Authority's appetite for changes to be made to improve National Park governance.

2. Context

2.1 The new government has made clear its intentions to review certain governance arrangements for National Parks and this paper presents government with the views of this Authority in terms of what areas of change may be supported.

2.2 Recently, the Chair of National Parks England (NPE), Vanessa Rowlands, wrote to the Minister for Nature, Mary Creagh, with a set of proposals for reforms to our powers and purposes. Within this letter a specific proposal was made for government to "Reform our governance to embed genuine co-creation and greater diversity." The response from the Minister stated the intention to develop new legislation to "update governance to ensure it creates the conditions for innovation, inclusion and collaboration."

2.3 The correspondence between NPE and Defra followed the National Parks UK Conference held in September 2024 which focused on 'National Parks for everyone' and featured a key note address by the then Chair of NPE and Chair of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, Neil Heseltine. In that address an impassioned plea was made by Neil Heseltine for government to change the way National Park Members are appointed to allow for greater diversity and to respond to structural issues that currently limit the possibility of National Park Boards reflecting the diversity of wider society and of those using National Parks.

2.4 At the Peak District National Park Authority, the diversity of the Members is similar to the Yorkshire Dales Authority, and other National Parks, in that it does not reflect the diversity of wider society and especially the communities that live close to the National Park and form a significant part of the regular visitors to the Peak District.

2.5 The ways in which Members are appointed to an Authority and numbers being appointed via different routes are set out in the National Park Authorities (England) Order 2015. An individual Authority has no say or control over what is set out and the arrangements in place reflect historical circumstances, not least that older National Parks were previously funded via County Councils. For the Peak District National Park Authority, our Membership arrangements are as follows:

- Appointed by Local Authorities = 16 Members
- Appointed by Parishes via Secretary of State = 6 Members
- Appointed directly by Secretary of State = 8 Members
- Total = 30 Members

3. Proposals

3.1 It is proposed that the Authority writes to the Secretary of State to emphasise the Authority's willingness to support potential governance changes, and that the Authority makes specific suggestions as to what the government might want to consider changing.

3.2 The Authority has always enjoyed the experience and input of many local authority Members. It is not the fault of Members that structural factors make it very difficult for the diversity of the Board to ever reflect the diversity of wider society and those using the National Park. The resident population of the National Park is predominantly from a white British background and older demographic than the national average and

surrounding areas. The need for 22 of our 30 Members to have first been involved in local or Parish politics also creates a structural bias. All 22 of those Members need to have been first elected as a Parish or local councillor. There are many people who do not have the opportunity, capacity or interest to do all that is involved in being a local councillor or member of a Parish Council but who otherwise might make good National Park Authority Members. Parish Councils in particular tend to attract an older demographic and being residents of the National Park, the vast majority of them will also be white. Local politics is also skewed to an older demographic. The lack of ethnic diversity of local councillors in some of our appointing local authorities also makes it difficult for the Board to achieve ethnic diversity via this route.

- 3.3** Secretary of State appointments do allow for the potential of more diverse candidates to come forward, however, applicants remain disproportionately lacking in diversity and even when a range of candidates, including some who are diverse, is put forward to the Secretary of State for selection, the Authority is not in control of who gets appointed.
- 3.4** Current structural weaknesses have rightly been picked up by government and in the media. National Park Boards make decisions for the benefit of the nation and for those communities visiting and using the National Park, as well as the residents. The structural weaknesses in our system mean important decisions about our National Park are not as informed as they could or should be by the experiences of those using or wishing to use it. National Parks are here for the nation and should be welcoming for everyone. It makes it difficult for the Authority to deliver these remits when our Board, on the whole, does not reflect the diversity of wider society.
- 3.5** The Peak District National Park Authority also has the highest number of Members of any UK National Park. This could in theory allow for more diversity but due to the factors above does not deliver this. The size of the Membership does however involve higher costs and administrative requirements compared to Authorities with lower numbers of Members or with comparable commercial, public or third sector organisations. There are also implications for the efficiency of decision making with such a large board.
- 3.6** The Peak District National Park Authority has an ambition for the diversity of its Members to be more reflective of wider society and National Park users and for the number of Members to be reduced. The Authority lacks the power or ability to be able to achieve either of these things without government making changes to how Members are appointed and without government reducing the number of Members we are required to have.
- 3.7** Other National Parks have used the mechanism of cooption to bring in more diverse Members, however these coopted Members do not have voting rights and in the case of the Peak District would increase the size of the Board, further impacting on the efficiency of decision making and our resources.
- 3.8** Having discussed this topic at a recent Member Forum, it is proposed that the Authority informs the Secretary of State that:
- It is aware of the current imbalance within its Membership structure, and that it wishes to work with partners and with the government to address the problem.
 - The Authority would be supportive of proposals to change the law to reduce the number of Members there should be on the Authority.

- The Authority would be supportive of proposals to change the law to allow coopted Members to have voting rights and sit in parity with appointed Members.
- The Authority would be supportive of being given powers to appoint some of its own Members, similar to the system in place for Scottish National Parks.

4. Recommendations

- 1. That a representation is made to the Secretary of State setting out the Authority's support for a reduction in the number of Members the Peak District National Park Authority has and changes in the ways in which Members are appointed.**
- 2. That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive, in agreement with the Chair and Deputy Chair, to draft and send the representation.**

5. Corporate Implications

- a. Legal**
There are no adverse legal implications in relation to this proposal. The relevant legislation regarding membership of the Authority is set out and explained in the report.
- b. Financial**
It is possible that a significant reduction in the number of Members, should this result, may reduce overall costs to the Authority.
- c. National Park Management Plan and Authority Plan**
These proposals do not in themselves contribute to the delivery of the National Park Management Plan.
- d. Risk Management**
There is little risk associated with these proposals, the greater risk would be from not taking any action. Should no action be taken there is some risk that governance changes may be proposed by government that do not reflect the needs or wishes of this Authority. By proactively writing to the Secretary of State to suggest the types of changes that would be supported, it is hoped that these risks can be mitigated.
- e. Net Zero**
These proposals do not impact on net zero plans.

6. Background papers (not previously published)

None.

7. Appendices

None.

Report Author, Job Title and Publication Date

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