

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

INVOLVEMENT IN THE VISIT EXMOOR PARTNERSHIP

Report of the National Park Officer

Purpose of Report: To seek the Authority's views on a request by Visit Exmoor that the Authority provide for the secondment of two staff to enable the Company to function more effectively in the promotion of sustainable tourism in the Greater Exmoor area.

Legal Implications including Human Rights Act 1998:

None in relation to the services provided by the Authority

Financial Implications:

The requested secondment of two full time staff represents a significant financial investment in Visit Exmoor by the Authority, representing an opportunity cost that might otherwise be deployed in other ways in accordance with the Authority's priorities.

National Park Purposes:

This proposal will ensure a more effective development of sustainable tourism on Exmoor and a close synergy between the activities of Visit Exmoor and the achievement of National Park purposes

RECOMMENDATION:

Members are asked to:

- INDICATE whether the Authority APPROVES IN PRINCIPLE the proposal from Visit Exmoor for the secondment of two Authority posts to the organisation
- If the principle is supported, DELEGATE the negotiation of more detailed terms for the secondments to the National Park Officer in consultation with the staff involved and the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Authority

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Visit Exmoor Partnership is a grouping of private and public sector organisations established in 2004 to promote sustainable tourism and to co-ordinate the marketing and promotion of tourism in the Greater Exmoor area of West Somerset and North Devon, defined as the National Park and the area within approximately 10 miles of its boundary. The lead organisations in the Partnership are West Somerset District Council, Exmoor National Park Authority and the tourism industry.

1.2 The Partnership has the following functions and undertakes work in support of them:

- (i) *To provide leadership for the task of developing Greater Exmoor as a successful and sustainable tourism destination* - Visit Exmoor will speak on behalf of the Greater Exmoor tourism industry, WSDC and ENPA on tourism matters relating to the area and will represent the interests of the partners on bodies at the local, sub-regional and regional levels

- (ii) *To promote and market the Greater Exmoor area for tourism and co-ordinate, facilitate or influence the work of other organisations promoting Greater Exmoor - at present the Exmoor Coast & Country Holiday & Short Breaks Guide, in its printed and/or web version, is the principal means of marketing for the Greater Exmoor area for the foreseeable future. Currently, tourism industry representatives work closely with staff from WSDC and ENPA on the production of the brochure.*
 - (iii) *To develop the tourism “product” to meet the needs and expectations of visitors;*
 - (iv) *To provide the first point of contact for Greater Exmoor tourism businesses;*
 - (v) *To work towards co-ordinating the provision of information for visitors before, during and after the visit, and provide a key point of contact for the local community, and;*
 - (vi) *To act as a focus for co-ordinating funding from within the Greater Exmoor area and for attracting funding from external sources to help achieve the objectives set out in the Strategic Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism for the Greater Exmoor Area.*
- 1.3 The task of promoting sustainable tourism on behalf of the Partnership is led by Visit Exmoor, a company limited by guarantee, which has a board of nine directors, seven drawn from the tourism industry and one each from West Somerset District Council and the National Park Authority. The latter are non-executive (i.e. non-voting) directors.
- 1.4 Work is carried out under the banner of Visit Exmoor by staff of the Authority and WSDC as well as members of the tourism industry. The starting point is the Strategic Action Plan which has identified priorities for work which are being addressed by the Partnership. The National Park Authority’s principal resources are the Head of Recreation and Tourism and Sustainable Tourism Officer, in association with the QUEST Project Officer. The QUEST Project has played a major part in producing, and getting support for, the Strategic Action Plan.
- 1.5 A major outcome of this first phase of work was the identification by the tourism industry of the need for a single organisation to represent tourism interests on Exmoor. The second phase of the QUEST Project involves an extensive programme of work with tourism and other businesses on improving the quality of the Exmoor tourism offer, particularly through business training, web site development and survey and research which is essential for long term development of tourism. However, the Project will end on 31st March 2006, when funding from the Countryside Agency ceases, unless resources can be found. The Countryside Agency has indicated that they may be prepared to contribute towards a further two years of QUEST, and Visit Exmoor has indicated its support for the project. Subject to setting its final budget for 2006/7, this Authority may be able to allocate a balancing contribution from redirection of some reserves.
- 1.6 There is currently much work on developing tourism being carried out by the District Council and the Authority under the banner of Visit Exmoor, but there is no formal mechanism for co-ordination or overall leadership. Co-ordination tends to be through the Visit Exmoor Forum, which is an advisory body made up of representatives of the various sectors of tourism in the Greater Exmoor area and meets every two months, or by Board members working directly with staff in the District Council and National Park Authority. There is currently no formal mechanism for forward planning or budget setting. Again, this tends to be undertaken through the Visit Exmoor Forum.
- 1.7 The Authority provided a small amount of funding in 2005/6 and in previous years for grants to tourism initiatives and has provided office space, IT and office equipment and support services for the Tourism Marketing Officer, employed by West Somerset District Council to work on behalf of Visit Exmoor, principally by producing the Exmoor Coast and Country Holiday Guide.

- 1.8 West Somerset District Council staff members undertake tasks for tourism from time to time as required and the Council provides an annual grant for tourism, including support for the Minehead, Watchet and Porlock Tourist Information Centres as well as office space and equipment for the Tourism Marketing Officer who is currently based at the District Council offices in Williton. With the agreement of DEFRA, the Council has also allocated £100,000 of funding (originally made available as loans to businesses affected by the Foot and Mouth crisis and subsequently repaid) to Visit Exmoor to help achieve its objectives over the next two to three years.
- 1.9 Currently, there is insufficient funding from the partners in Visit Exmoor, including the tourism industry, to enable the direct appointment of a Manager to work directly to the Board and to take the Company forward on a self-sustaining basis. Visit Exmoor has been seeking ways to fund the appointment of a Manager to carry out this task for some time and, during 2004/5, the National Park Authority spent considerable time and resources on a bid to the Somerset Rural Renaissance Partnership for funding to support the establishment of Visit Exmoor as an effective organisation, including a Manager's post. Unfortunately, the bid was unsuccessful, although some additional funding was obtained for the Coleridge Way Project.
- 1.10 This is the background against which the Visit Exmoor Board has been working to secure the long-term future of Visit Exmoor. The Board has identified the need to bring together all available staff and financial resources as an urgent priority and in this context have now written to the National Park Officer requesting that the Authority gives consideration to seconding two staff (Head of Recreation and Tourism and the Sustainable Tourism Officer) to Visit Exmoor. Under these arrangements, the Head of Recreation and Tourism would act as full-time Manager of the organisation under the guidance of the Board. Staff would remain employed by the National Park Authority and all terms and conditions of employment would be maintained. The Board has also expressed its wish to achieve continuation of the QUEST Project Manager's post as part of the Visit Exmoor team.
- 1.11 The priority tasks of the Visit Exmoor team would be to prepare a business plan, work programme and marketing plan, seek long-term funding for Visit Exmoor and represent Visit Exmoor's interests in the process of developing tourism Destination Management Organisations (which is being undertaken by Devon and Somerset County Council tourism partnerships in conjunction with South West Tourism). These tasks might be achieved within two years.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORK OF THE AUTHORITY

- 2.1 Under the suggested new arrangements, the Authority's interests in sustainable tourism would continue to be represented within the Visit Exmoor partnership through the Head of Recreation and Tourism / VE Manager. However, while the work of the Sustainable Tourism Officer would continue much as it is at present, the secondment of the Head of Recreation and Tourism to undertake the tasks indicated above would require his full attention and this would have implications for the recreation management, traffic and transport and corporate responsibilities of the post, including a key role in the Dunster Action Plan. In addition, the postholder is a member of staff of considerable experience who has made a great contribution to the work of the Authority and the requested secondments ought only to be supported if the Authority is prepared to accord the development of Visit Exmoor a high priority.
- 2.2 Discussions have been held with the staff involved and they can see the merits of the proposal and the potential to provide a clear focus and impetus for the launch and development of Visit Exmoor. Further negotiations will be required to set out the terms and working arrangements in more detail. These will need to be worked up if the proposed secondments are supported in principle by the Authority. Given that the ultimate aim of the secondments would be to enable the effective establishment of Visit Exmoor as a self-supporting organisation, it is proposed that any secondment be limited to two years in the first instance with a review before the end of this period.

- 2.3 Furthermore, whilst the Authority would not be seeking any close involvement in day to day management of the staff during their secondment, it has a duty to ensure that full consideration is given to the welfare and support of its staff and a formal link will need to be maintained with the Authority. This will require a continued regular liaison between the Head of Recreation and Tourism / VE Manager and the National Park Officer. The Visit Exmoor team will also need to retain close links and liaison with staff within the Authority and District Council to gain the benefits of close working and collaboration.
- 2.4 In the first instance, it is proposed that the Authority continues to provide office accommodation for the Visit Exmoor team. It is envisaged, however, that Visit Exmoor will ultimately wish to establish an independent base that is most appropriate to its needs and independent status and that this would form an element in establishing the organisation as a self-sustaining unit.

Nigel Stone
National Park Officer
31 January 2006

Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:-

Letter from Visit Exmoor, December 2005

Visit Exmoor Structure

- SWT South West Tourism
- SWERDA South West Regional Development Agency
- SCC Somerset County Council
- DCC Devon County Council
- WSDC West Somerset District Council
- NDMB North Devon Marketing Bureau
- ENPA Exmoor National Park Authority
- MHA Minehead Hoteliers Association
- MTC Minehead Town Council
- QUEST Quality Underpins Exmoor's Sustainable Tourism
- EQFLP Exmoor and Quantocks Food Links Project
- EFP Events and Festivals Project
- GETC Greater Exmoor Tourism Consortium
- TAs Tourism Associations
- EPA Exmoor Producers' Association
- TICs Tourist Information Centres
- ETA Exmoor Tourist Association

