

# ITEM 12

## EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

14 NOVEMBER 2006

### SNOWDROP VALLEY PARK AND RIDE SCHEME

#### Report of the Head of Recreation and Tourism

**Purpose of Report:**

To advise Members of the work involved in preparing for and operating the Snowdrop Valley Park and Ride Scheme and the opportunities for revised management of the project for 2008 and beyond, involving the local community.

**Legal Implications (including Human Rights Act 1998 and Equality Issues):**

Environment Act 1995, section 65 - General power - to do anything which, in the opinion of the authority, is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to –

- (a) the accomplishment of the National Park purposes, or
- (b) the carrying out of any functions conferred on it by virtue of any other enactment.

**Financial and Risk Implications:**

The Authority anticipated a greater role by the local community in organising the Snowdrop Valley event in 2007 and has set aside a budget of £500 for this financial year to enable the Authority to undertake the road closure order. However, whilst progress has been made, there is concern that the event will not be a success next year unless the Authority continues to play a lead role. This will require additional funding and staff time from the Authority.

**National Park Authority Business Plan:**

B/15.02 - Support the local community and businesses in the continuation of the Snowdrop Valley park & ride scheme during January/February 2007 by implementing the road closure order.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Members are recommended:

- 1 To NOTE the details of the current operation of the Snowdrop Valley Park and Ride Scheme and
- 2 To APPROVE the general principles for its future management set out in the report.

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## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Snowdrop Valley Park and Ride Scheme has been operating since 1997 and in that time numbers of people using the bus to visit the Valley have grown from around 1,500 to 6,000 in 2004. Snowdrop Valley (Drapers Way) attracts large numbers of visitors in and around February each year, when there are spectacular displays of snowdrops along the Avill river and in the adjacent woodland.

- 1.2 The land in the valley bottom, where most people want to go, is owned by the Badgworthy Land Company who, many years ago, created a path providing a circular trail through the woods
- 1.3 Access by road from the Wheddon Cross direction is steep and narrow with few passing places, and there is only roadside or verge parking for a few vehicles at the bottom and very limited turning space. Access from the Timberscombe direction is somewhat easier, having more passing places though it is still not suitable for large numbers of vehicles. People arrive mainly in cars which, prior to the introduction of the park and ride scheme, were causing congestion, localised pollution, nuisance to local residents, farmers and other landowners (and those such as delivery services seeking access along the valley) and damage to hedgebanks.
- 1.4 Over the years prior to 1997 the Highway Authority had attempted to manage access by advisory signing and by small scale road improvements, particularly by localised road widening. The National Park Authority had also been involved in attempts to achieve a solution with the co-operation of the local community, but without success.
- 1.5 The Authority undertook a survey of visitors to the Valley in 1996 and ascertained that there was strong support for taking action to prevent access by cars whilst providing more sustainable access for visitors. Subsequent surveys have shown that this support has been maintained despite increases in the fare necessitated as costs have risen.
- 1.6 Since that time the annual number of people using the park and ride bus or parking and walking to and from the Valley has risen to a peak of around 6,000. A visit to Snowdrop Valley is now a regular annual event for many people living within driving distance (a radius of 60 miles or so) and it is clearly important that people should be able to visit and enjoy the Valley but this should not happen at the expense of the environment and the local community. New car parks and/or an improved road system are not desirable or feasible within the Valley.

## 2. **CURRENT POSITION**

- 2.1 The park and ride scheme is straightforward. Car parking is provided in the public car park at Wheddon Cross, the village hall parking area and at various other locations throughout the village. A local workforce assists the public in finding parking space, sell bus tickets in advance and provide information. Buses run every 20 minutes or so from the public car park through the Valley on a circular route, depositing visitors in the bottom of the Valley and picking them up on the next or subsequent trips. The number of buses used at any one time is determined in advance based on experience of the pattern of demand from previous years. The period of operation of buses and the road closure is also determined in advance. The major uncertain factor is the weather, which affects the number of visitors and the time of flowering of the snowdrops.
- 2.2 Visitors can walk into the Valley on several footpaths having parked at Wheddon Cross or nearby. One bridleway from the village is way-marked and shown on leaflets, but other paths are available and signed and kept in good condition. One additional path has been created with the consent of the Badgworthy Land Company to provide a route avoiding the need for people to walk in the narrow road and coming into conflict with the buses.
- 2.3 By far the largest area for parking in Wheddon Cross is provided by the Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auction Company on the cattle market site. Without this the scheme, as it currently operates, would be extremely difficult, and probably impossible, to administer. For the scheme to continue to operate from the village, a large level field would be required, with good access from the public road, with reinforcing mesh laid to provide a sufficiently robust site for around 200 - 300 cars to be parked. This would involve a substantial capital cost and space for storage while not in use. The redevelopment of the Cattle Market site will probably require a re-appraisal of the park and ride scheme.
- 2.4 As surveys show, the park and ride scheme is popular among visitors to the Valley who are willing to accept that they cannot access it by car and must pay for the bus trip. As a result, residents of the Valley do not have to suffer the problems of ten years ago. The community of Wheddon Cross has seized the opportunity to raise income for local causes by offering light refreshments to the large numbers of visitors and by sales of postcards and plants.

Businesses in Wheddon Cross benefit from increased trade during February, traditionally a quiet month for tourism. The more progressive accommodation businesses in the area are capitalising on the park and ride scheme and offering imaginative holiday packages to staying visitors assisted by the fact that the half-term school holidays fall in February. An estimate of the economic impact of the park and ride scheme in 2006, based on a survey of tourism businesses, indicated that at least £80,000 of additional spending went into the local economy. The actual figure is probably considerably higher when spending in all businesses are taken into account.

- 2.5 The impacts on the natural and cultural environments are mixed. The Valley has been protected from damage by vehicles and further localised road widening, while Wheddon Cross village suffers congestion of parking (albeit managed) during periods of peak demand in February. The park and ride buses offer a more sustainable form of transport than the private car, yet the scheme as a whole is now widely seen as a tourism attraction and attracts visitors in cars from a wide area, which is not environmentally sustainable in the wider context.
- 2.6 The costs of the scheme have risen steadily since its inception. Any shortfall in income over expenditure has been met by the National Park Authority and it has always been an objective of the scheme to keep costs to a minimum consistent with ensuring the effective operation of the scheme. The Appendix shows the breakdown of income and expenses for the period since 2001 and the tasks which need to be undertaken annually to ensure a successful project. The employment of a seasonal part-time project officer in 2000 to plan and manage the operation of the scheme, negotiating contracts with bus operators, recruiting local people to assist with parking and ticket sales, and numerous other functions, has been important and necessary in improving the quality of experience for visitors and local people and ensuring public safety. This, however, has added an extra element to the overall cost of running the scheme. The current project officer will leave his post after February 2007.
- 2.7 This review of the scheme has been prompted by the need to prioritise National Park Authority expenditure and the use of staff resources against the stated objectives of the National Park Management Plan and Business Plan. While the park and ride scheme does support both the first and second National Park purposes, the costs are significant and there may be scope for reducing overall expenditure by encouraging more community and business involvement. Furthermore, the Authority does not have the capacity to organise and run similar events elsewhere in the National Park unless it can reduce its commitment in this particular location. Ideally, local management will enable the event to become sustainable and provide continuing benefits to the local community.

### 3. **OPTIONS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT**

- 3.1 Snowdrop Valley park and ride is successful in that:
- It protects the environment of the Valley and the interests of residents
  - It benefits local businesses and community organisations
  - It provides good public relations for the National Park Authority (and the Badgworthy Land Company and Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auctions)
  - It provides a good experience for visitors, who understand and support the principles of the scheme
  - It enables the National Park Authority to make contact with several thousand people each year
- 3.2 On the other hand it uses National Park Authority staff time and financial resources which might otherwise be targeted at other work
- 3.3 There is probably no realistic alternative to continuing the scheme in more or less its current form. If it were to be discontinued entirely, the problems that existed before the scheme was put in place would quickly recur. It may be an option to close the road and allow people to walk in from Wheddon Cross but this would prevent less fit people from enjoying the Valley and there would probably still be parking difficulties in Wheddon Cross. Enforcing the road

closure would be a problem and this approach is likely to cause ill feeling amongst local people and visitors alike.

- 3.4 The local community is playing an increasingly influential role in the scheme overall, supplying the local workforce as well as providing refreshments in the village hall. The income from the latter is a significant contribution to the funding of local organisations.
- 3.5 The visiting public clearly values the fact that the scheme is run by the National Park Authority and discussions with members of the local community already involved in some way with the park and ride scheme has shown that the community believes the National Park Authority should continue to have a central role in its operation. However, there appears to be support locally for the community to play a more active role in managing the scheme, while the National Park Authority assists the process. Funding for some of the initial costs in the first year of local management might be obtained from the Exmoor Sustainable Development Fund and other sources, and a bid will be made for 2008.
- 3.6 The local community will discuss the possibility of taking on more responsibility for running the park and ride scheme at a public meeting to be arranged in Wheddon Cross later in November. If the outcome is support for more local involvement, further discussions will be held with the community to agree the respective roles. In the absence of the Project Officer, existing staff of the Recreation and Tourism section and the Rangers will undertake the tasks that the National Park Authority agrees to do.

**Martin Evans**  
**Head of Recreation and Tourism**  
**5 November 2006**

**Table 1: Snowdrop Valley Costs and Income 2001 – 2006**

Item	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
	(£s)	(£s)	(£s)	(£s)	(£s)	(£s)
Hire of buses	3,660	3,810	6,395	10,260	9,125	10,638
ENPA staff costs	2,000	2,100	2,700	3,000	3,000	2,700
Local staff costs	1,552	2,117	2,720	2,672	2,300	2,772
Other costs	1,720	1,316	1,567	1,767	1,314	686
Total costs	8,932	9,343	13,382	17,270	15,739	16,796
Income (mainly ticket sales)	*	6,057	13,722	12,236	10,375	11,393
Cost to ENPA	-	3,286	340	5,034	5,364	5,403

\* N.B. The Foot and Mouth outbreak prevented the scheme from operating in 2001

**Table 2: Principal Tasks**

October – January

- Determine days of bus operation\*, number of buses per day\*, hours of operation\*, negotiate contract with operators\*, apply for road closure
- Recruit local workforce\*, prepare work rotas\*, conduct training, provide equipment
- Consult with local residents and businesses, including the pub\*
- Liaise with Badgworthy Land Company, Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auction Company on access to land, parking areas and costs of any works needed\*
- Engage Field Services Team to carry out routine safety and other work and to ensure footpaths are maintained and way-marked
- Liaise with the Hunt on dates and times of meets, etc.\*
- Prepare information for the public, distribute to TICs, businesses, place on web site, prepare press release for the media
- Liaise with coach companies on dates and times of group trips, with accommodation providers bringing groups of guests and with rambler groups\*
- Liaise with the Police on road closure, operation of scheme, enforcement of road closure and parking controls at locations where informal roadside parking occurs\*
- Prepare mobile information unit
- Erect signs to car park\*
- Deal with requests for information from the public, media and others
- Liaise with Highways Authority on road maintenance, sweeping and signing
- Arrange for overhanging trees to be lopped\*
- Liaise with Parish Council on cleaning and maintenance of public toilet\*
- Review and update risk assessment

## February

- Administer staff rotas\*
- Manage operation of scheme including overseeing parking, issuing of tickets, collection, recording and banking of money (with the ENPA Finance Team)\*
- Dealing with emergencies, lost property, etc.\*

## Post-February

- Prepare report on the operation, including numbers of visitors based on actual ticket sales and estimates of walkers, together with a financial report
- Remove signs, etc.\*

\* denotes tasks the community could undertake