

ITEM 6

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY RESOURCES COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Resources Committee of the Exmoor National Park Authority held on Tuesday, 26 September 2006 at 10.30 am in the Lecture Room, National Park Centre, Dunster.

PRESENT

Mr M A Collins (Chairman)
Mr R Morrison-Smith (Vice-Chairman)

Miss A Davis
Mr W J Dyke
Mrs E I Marsden
Mr M J Pile

Mr M E Taylor
Dr J F Travis
Mr R J Webber

Also present for Minute 19 – Mr M Jones and Mr C Bowell, RSM Robson Rhodes (External Auditors).

Observers – Mrs A Amory, Mr S J Pugsley (for Minute 25 and he also contributed to the debate) and Mr B O Windsor (NPA Members) and Mrs J Ernest (Independent Member of the Standards Committee).

Apologies for absence were received from Mr J C Edwards and Mrs A M Foxhuntley.

17. **WELCOME**

Mr Melvin Jones and Mr Clive Bowell from RSM Robson Rhodes (External Auditors) were welcomed to the meeting, as was Mrs Judy Ernest, an independent member of the Authority's Standards Committee.

18. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Mr Webber declared a personal interest in Minute 25, Extension of Pay and Display in Car Parks, as the portfolio holder for car parks for West Somerset Council.

19. **STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2005/06 AND REPORTS OF THE AUDITORS**

The report of the Chief Finance Officer introduced the report of the External Auditors on the Audit of Accounts for 2005/06 and the Best Value Performance Plan. The External Auditors report was attached to his report and the Statement of Accounts was circulated at the meeting. The following was reported to members concerning the Auditors report:-

- Regarding the current status of the audit, the Authority's pension deficit since the accounts were prepared had increased by £20,000, as the result of a revaluation of the

Pension Fund managed by Somerset County Council. Miss Davis declared a personal interest as a member of the Local Government Pension Scheme.

- The 'Matters Outstanding' (paras 1.11/1.12 of the Auditors report) had now all been completed, including receipt of the Authority's Letter of Representation.
- Concerning the Audit Conclusions (para 1.13), three unqualified opinions were given.
- Under Key issues under ISA 260:-
 - In para 2.2 (section A), the statutory audit did not include the ongoing audit of grant claims where there was deemed to be an element to pay for the audits.
 - In para 2.2 (section C), more detail to support the audit trail would be included in future years.
- In respect of the fixed asset records (paras 2.5/2.6), the fixed asset register was now up to date.
- The External Auditors had not been required to undertake a further audit of IEG grant (para 2.1). It was suggested that this should have been made clearer in their report to avoid any inference that the money had not been used in accordance with the ODPM's requirements.
- Whilst the External Auditors acknowledged that arrangements had been put in place by the Authority for the management of its land and property, they indicated that the required standards had not been achieved. There was member concern about the auditors seeking to judge how these areas were managed, but the Chief Finance Officer explained that the end date of the auditors work was 31 March 2006, which had been when the review of the Authority's estate was in embryonic form. It was, therefore, noted that the conclusion of the auditors was likely to be very different in future years. Members felt that this situation should be more accurately reflected in the report.
- Data quality (paras 3.3-3.6) was scored on a four point scale and the Authority should be aiming at level 3; level 2 was acceptable and level 4 was exceptional which few authorities achieved. The Authority needed to identify key documents it produced (such as the National Park Management Plan) as part of its audit trail for demonstrating planning and performance, but it was up to the Authority as to which ones it used. The Auditors advised that the criteria needed to encompass 'what was planned to do', obtaining the information and how it would be used. They also said that evidence of consultation needed to be demonstrated, e.g. through suggestion boxes in National Park Centres. Their review did not show a planned use of comments or sharing of them with others and the output was not addressed as much as it could be. In response, the National Park Officer/Chief Executive explained that the Authority had mechanisms for feedback but they were not in a single place and there was monitoring of surveys and consideration of what to do with the data, including informing members. However, he acknowledged the need for a more documented and strategic approach. The Auditors also emphasised the need for

measurement and monitoring of the data to ensure it was reliable, which needed a review of collecting the data. The audit standard was designed for larger authorities but the principles were still applicable for smaller ones. Nevertheless, the Auditors had not found any issues on the validity of information in the Authority's performance indicators.

- The Auditors were content that the Authority had adequate arrangements concerning value for money, apart from the management of the asset base.
- The External Auditors took account of the work of the Internal Auditors and, because the latter were a part of Somerset County Council which the External Auditors also audited, it enabled an analysis of their reports and recommendations.

The External Auditors agreed to update their report to clarify matters discussed and the Chairman on behalf of the Authority thanked them for their work and support. Members expressed thanks to the Chief Finance Officer and his Finance team.

RESOLVED: (1) to receive the report from the External Auditors and agree the responses to the recommendations made for improvement as set out in paragraph 2.2 of the Chief Finance Officer's report; and

(2) to re-adopt the Statement of Accounts for 2005/06.

20. MINUTES

(1) Confirmation

The Minutes of the Committee's meeting held on 27 June 2006 were agreed as a correct record.

(2) Matter Arising – Development of Exmoor House

It was noted that West Somerset Council's Cabinet's visit to Dulverton recently had enabled them to gain an understanding of the issues concerning the future development of Exmoor House.

21. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

22. REVIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION SERVICES, INCLUDING THE PINKERY CENTRE FOR OUTDOOR EDUCATION

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Education and Interpretation on the recent review of the Authority's environmental education services and options for the future.

The following points emerged from discussion:-

- A three to four day 'countryside experience' could be provided at the Pinkery Centre, which was being lost in other establishments.

- The remoteness of the Pinkery Centre, lack of modern facilities and opportunity to experience wild countryside were a selling point and draw for users. The Authority had made some improvements in terms of en suite facilities and access for people with disabilities but no major changes were anticipated.
- 65% of the youngsters attending the Pinkery Centre came from the less affluent local areas.
- The cost of operating the Pinkery Centre of £20,000 per annum represented good value for money compared to similar establishments. Costs for users had risen slightly because of inflation and recent investment. However, there were also hidden costs for which charges were not currently levied, e.g. some of the activity undertaken by the Education Officer.
- There was an opportunity for the Authority to work with the Youth Hostels Association, in view of their network of hostels, and particularly as they were reducing their provision for the 'countryside experience'.
- Charging levels at the Pinkery Centre reflected the quality of accommodation provided, but the annual budget round presented the opportunity to re-consider them. There was the need for the Authority to understand the contribution the facility was making and assess its priorities. There were suggestions that future charging should reflect more on the activities provided rather than increasing the accommodation charge and for groups using the Centre to be supported rather than focusing more funding on the Centre itself (e.g. the Sustainable Development Fund had allocated grants to certain groups to enable them to use the facility).
- Whilst there had been capital replacement at the Pinkery Centre, it would be useful to set out a replacement programme and management plan for the Centre, similar to that being developed for Exmoor House.
- There was some scope to increase bed nights at the Pinkery Centre during the shoulder months, but the 32 beds were fully occupied from early March until early December and at weekends.
- It would be possible to contact local schools again (as had occurred three years earlier) to make them aware of the facilities the Pinkery Centre provided and of the opportunity for 'taster' sessions. The experience would increase pupils' knowledge of Exmoor. However, much was dependant upon where the Heads and teachers wanted their pupils to go. It was also noted that Ranger Ione Willcock made annual visits to each school on the western side of the National Park, which could be built upon, and it was suggested that information concerning the Pinkery Centre should be included in Park Life.
- There were potentially other opportunities to expand activities at the Pinkery Centre both through the Education Team and developing partnerships with bodies such as Active Exmoor and also linking with Exmoor's land/farm asset and the issues affecting it.

RESOLVED: (1) to note the content of the report;

(2) to authorise the Head of Education and Interpretation to enter into further negotiations with potential partners, particularly the Field Studies Council and the Youth Hostels Association to optimise the financial return on the Pinkery Centre operation whilst retaining Authority control of the facility; and

(3) to congratulate the Head of Education and Interpretation and the Education Team on the review of the environmental educational services and their ongoing work to provide those services.

23. **ESTATE REVIEW 2006/07 – PROGRESS REPORT**

The report of the Head of Conservation and Land Management updated the Committee on the progress with the Estate Review and invited member participation.

It was acknowledged that the Authority could do only so much for the estate in terms of resources and had to identify priorities. This meant that other opportunities as set out in the report to maximise income or to sell off parts of the estate needed to be considered. A smaller estate was likely to mean that additional funding for other activities would be available, and it was also possible that other bodies may be able to allocate extra funding to estate items currently held by the Authority. It would also be necessary to demonstrate why the Authority was doing certain things through good practice.

Comment was also made that any further acquisitions or gifts of land needed to be carefully considered as there could be liabilities for the Authority. In response, the National Park Officer/Chief Executive explained that there needed to be good reasons for the Authority to acquire land and referred to the acquisition of woodland at Tarr Steps/Barle Valley a couple of years ago, which had been purchased at one of the most prime locations within the National Park, to secure the best means of access and provide for its effective management. This had been the only acquisition within the last fifteen years.

Under Table 7 (page 7), Public toilets leased to the National Park Authority, the officers removed Luccombe, Malmsmead and Parracombe, as the Authority had no interest in their operation.

RESOLVED: to note the progress on the Estate Review and to nominate the following four members – Mr Collins, Miss Davis, Mr Dyke and Mr Taylor – to meet on three or four occasions over the next six months to act as a steering group/sounding board for the Review.

24. **PROCUREMENT**

(1) A Draft Sustainable Procurement Policy was presented to the Committee.

In response to members' comments, the officers explained that:-

- A procurement policy made purchasing a more certain process, which could be understood by all, and would be undertaken by a relatively small number of nominated staff.

- The Sustainable Procurement Checklist (Appendix 1) meant that, while value for money was important, it had to be set against environmental considerations. There was also member comment that purchasing locally needed to be flagged up, as this would benefit the local economy.
- The Sustainable Procurement Policy also applied to the Authority's vehicle fleet and fuel used. However, there were currently difficulties in securing biofuels locally, but the situation was likely to change over time.

RESOLVED: to approve the Sustainable Procurement Policy, noting that it included the vehicle fleet and fuel used and also the need for products to be locally sourced where possible, taking account of cost and availability considerations.

- (2) A Report and Action Plan in relation to e-Procurement, together with a covering report by the Head of Business Management, were presented to the Committee.

RESOLVED: to note the e-procurement Review and Action Plan.

25. EXTENSION OF PAY AND DISPLAY IN CAR PARKS

The Head of Business Management's report asked the Committee to consider the extension of pay and display to the Authority's car parks at Bossington, Horner, Tarr Steps and Exford.

In paragraph 1.1 of the report, "self generated income" was substituted for "self generated crime".

Members had concerns that the Parish Councils and the Highway Authority had not had sufficient opportunity to comment on the proposals prior to their being developed and particularly about the arrangements for the Exford car park. The proposed decriminalisation of parking enforcement in West Somerset was also identified as being significant in determining where vehicle parking could take place.

Members' concerns in relation to Exford were that charges could encourage motorists to seek to park elsewhere in the village, in a situation where vehicles were already being parked on unsuitable roads and there were few places to be found. The need to involve the Parish Council and Highway Authority was highlighted. Also, the officers commented that the car park was currently widely abused with horse boxes, lorries and agricultural equipment which were being left there for days, weeks and even months in some cases. They said that charging would deter this.

The position at Tarr Steps was more straightforward as it was not associated with a settlement. Charging was already in place in the car park, from which income was being derived, and vehicles were not being parked elsewhere. At the other sites it would be necessary with the decriminalisation of parking enforcement to consider how locations where vehicles could not park were to be identified, e.g. yellow lines in the attractive locations of Bossington and Horner would be inappropriate.

Regarding season ticket arrangements in all car parks operated by West Somerset Council and the Authority, it was confirmed that they could be applicable to both. However, the National Park Officer/Chief Executive advised that for this to work there needed to be no free car parks.

There was also comment that the Authority should not seek to charge at car parks such as Blackmoor Gate where they were being used for park and ride. If those car parks had charges, it was suggested that the public would not make use of the bus services.

It was the officers intention to start charging in the car parks identified from 1 March 2007 but, as members wished to see fuller consultation with the Parish Councils, this may need to be delayed; particularly at Exford, where members suggested that parking on side streets/displaced lorries etc needed to be addressed as part of the package, which they felt had to involve the Highway Authority. There was also a suggestion from the National Park Officer/Chief Executive that the Exford car park need not remain in the Authority's ownership.

The officers also advised that there was vendor interest at Blackmoor Gate and County Gate car parks for the next Summer season.

RESOLVED: (1) to approve, in principle, the introduction of Pay and Display at Bossington, Horner, Tarr Steps and Exford car parks as set out in the report; and

(2) to authorise the National Park Officer/Chief Executive to continue discussions and negotiations with West Somerset Council, the Parish Councils and the County Highway Authority on the arrangements.

26. **PERSONNEL UPDATE**

The report of the Head of Business Management updated the Committee on personnel matters and issues.

Regarding pay benchmarking, members were advised that the review was necessary as the last job evaluation exercise had taken place three years ago and the Authority needed to ensure that its pay levels were comparable to that paid by similar authorities. The Staffing Complement Review Group would be asked to carry out the exercise and it would also investigate recruitment and retention.

Miss Davis declared a personal interest as a beneficiary of the Local Government Pension Scheme, which was currently subject to a further Government consultation document.

RESOLVED: to note –

- the personnel changes that have occurred;

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- the arrangements for a pay benching exercise; and
- the issue of a consultation document on a new-look Local Government Pension Scheme.

(The meeting closed at 1.10 pm)

Chairman