

# ITEM 8

## EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

14 NOVEMBER 2006

### NATIONAL PARK CENTRES REVIEW

#### Report of the Head of Education and Interpretation

**Purpose of Report:**

To report to Members the findings and recommendations of the review of National Park Centres and set the strategy for establishing an enhanced information network by 2012.

**Legal Implications including Human Rights Act 1998:**

Environment Act 1995

Local Government Act 1999 (Best value)

**Financial and Risk Implications:**

To achieve the 2012 vision will require significant external funding for capital works. However, it is felt that to have an adopted strategy in place will enable a more confident approach to be made to potential funding bodies.

The Authority could be looking at a modest increase in revenue costs (staffing) of approximately £13,000 by 2012 to achieve the full vision set out in this report. A proportion of this might be offset by income from trading and sales (approx. £34,000 in 2005/06) and a more detailed business plan will need to be prepared as the arrangements for the new Centres are developed.

Failure to develop bespoke facilities at the Lynmouth site, and a site in the eastern side of the National Park would compromise the ability to deliver the 2012 vision.

In the short term, failure to develop the Minehead site by West Somerset Council would impact on the delivery of services in the Dunster/Minehead area. If planning permission is not approved for the Lyndale car park site, there is a remaining period (to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2007) at Blackmoor Gate. The decision on an extension to the Blackmoor Gate permission to 2010 has been deferred. Failure to extend the permission would compromise the delivery of National Park Centre services on the western side of the National Park.

**National Park Authority Business Plan:**

The report provides the outcome of the review of National Park centres as set out in objective D/22.11

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. SUPPORT the vision for National Park Centres and other information channels to be achieved by 2012
2. APPROVE the strategy for the achieving the National Park Centre vision
3. AUTHORISE the National Park Officer to implement the recommended deployment of resources including negotiations with potential partner organisations.
4. SUPPORT the approach to wider information provision across the National Park area working in partnership with other organisations.
5. APPROVE the inclusion of the Strategy in the draft National Park Management Plan for public consultation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following the development proposals for the National Park Centre, (NPC), at County Gate and the discussions concerning the Lynmouth Pavilion, and the National Park Authority Performance Assessment process in 2005, Members requested a review of the National Park Centre network as one of the Authority's best value reviews during 2006/7. The review process is attached at **APPENDIX 1**

## 2. CURRENT INFORMATION CENTRE PROVISION

- 2.1 The Authority currently operates five National Park Centres at Combe Martin, Blackmoor Gate, County Gate, Dunster and Dulverton.
- 2.2 There are Tourist Information Centres at Porlock, Lynton, Combe Martin (partnership with the National Park Authority); in the Greater Exmoor catchment there are Tourist Information Centres at Minehead, Ilfracombe, South Molton, and Bampton. Currently, the Authority only makes a very modest contribution to the Information Centre in Porlock. Further details are attached at **APPENDIX 2**

## 3. PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- 3.1 As a result of the review, it is clear that there are a number of 'channels' that provide opportunities for the dissemination of information and interpretation. 'Centres' are just one, but are a focus for 'people mediated', face to face interaction that provides information and orientation to both visitors and the local community, (**figure 1**).

### **Figure 1 – 'Channels' for communicating to visitors about the special qualities of the National Park during their visit**

- **National Park Centres** – run by the National Park Authority and providing a comprehensive range of information about the National Park. The strategy proposes two major centres, one likely to be in Lynmouth to reach visitors exploring the Exmoor coast and on the Devon side of the National Park, and another at a more central location to interpret the Exmoor landscape and historic environment.
- **Local Information Centres** – based in settlements within the National Park and run by local partnerships to provide a service to local businesses and information to visitors about the locality and wider National Park, e.g. the Centre at Porlock.
- **Local Information Points** – based in villages and smaller settlements with National Park information provided through local shops or other businesses.
- **Gateway Centres** – such as those proposed at Minehead and Aller cross near South Molton, that are located outside but close to the National Park and can help advise visitors about the National Park and surrounding areas.
- **National Park Authority Ranger Service** – providing a presence at more remote areas of the National Park such as Tarr Steps and Valley of Rocks, during busy periods.
- **Shows and events** – providing a presence at local shows and events with information

- 3.2 However, there is a clear and specific difference between other information centre providers and services provided by the Authority through its own National Park Centre network, primarily the focus on National Park purposes and its special qualities.
- 3.3 It is concluded that National Park Centres have a key specific role and provide an essential part of the information provision mix for the National Park. It is recommended that the Authority should continue to directly provide National Park Centres and associated services and contribute to and support a wider information network of local centres and local information points.
- 4.0 Detail on the **role, audience and messages** of a National Park Centre are attached at **APPENDIX 4**

5. **VISION AND STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL PARK CENTRE LOCATION AND ALLIED INFORMATION**

5.1 The primary focus of the Authority’s National Park Centre communications effort is for those people who are visiting the National Park. The primary messages will be focused around National Park *special qualities*. The services will support National Park purposes and particularly aim to help people understand and enjoy these special qualities and encourage behaviours and choices that ensure a sustainable future for Exmoor. However, these messages are equally valid and appropriate to the resident community.

5.2 The detail of the strategy is attached as **APPENDIX 5**, but the summary is as follows to be achieved by **2012**:

- 2 National Park Authority operated ‘flagship’ **National Park Centres**, one at a coastal location to interpret Exmoor’s coast and a ‘Heart of Exmoor’ centre to interpret Exmoor’s moorlands and historic landscapes.
- A number of **Local Information Centres** developed and run by local partnerships with some funding support from the National Park Authority.
- A number of Local Information Points also with some funding support from the National Park Authority.

5.3 If the Authority supports this longer term vision a series of actions will need to be taken over the next few years. The suggested timetable is set out in section 6.

6. **TIMETABLE**

6.1 The timetable set out below assumes that there is a commitment by local partners, particularly North Devon District Council, to the provision of a National Park Centre in a new building on the site of the Lynmouth Pavilion, on capital and revenue terms that are acceptable to the National Park Authority. Proposed timetable:

<b>Action</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
1. Subject to planning, relocate National Park Centre Blackmoor Gate to Lynmouth as a temporary facility using Portacabin technology until a suitable, permanent facility is available*	By March 2007
2. Increase financial support to Porlock Visitor Centre to subject to annual review and biennial satisfaction survey to National Park Authorities minimum standards.	From April 2007
3. Redeploy Authority staff from National Park Centre Dunster to the new Minehead Visitor and Information Centre for a trial period until December 2010. The Authority presence would be separate from the TIC activities although based in the same building. Arrangements would need to be in place to retain a local information centre in Dunster, through a local partnership.	From June 2007
4. Review the operation of the National Park Centre County Gate in the light of developments in the rest of the network.	By December 2007
5. Redeploy Authority Staff from National Park Centre Combe Martin to National Park Centre Lynmouth to support anticipated increase in usage at Lynmouth and to begin preparations for scaling up the operation at the new Centre. This would enable longer opening hours and a longer ‘season’ in Lynmouth.	By March 2008
6. Establish financial support for a Local Information Centre in Combe Martin subject to annual review and biennial satisfaction survey to National Park Authorities minimum standards.	By April 2008

7. Increase financial support to Local Information Points and provide greater support as well as requiring minimum performance standards for LIPs.	From April 2008
8. Relocate to the Lynmouth Pavilion site with a bespoke, year round flagship National Park Centre interpreting Exmoor's Coast	By 2010 dependent on securing funding and permissions
9. Establish an information presence at the Aller Cross 'North Devon Gateway' although we cannot commit to a staff presence here at this stage.	By 2010
10. Investigate options for a Local Information Centre in Dulverton	By 2011
11. Establish a new year round 'Heart of Exmoor' National Park Centre at, for example, Wheddon Cross or other suitable location as and when funding and permissions are secured and partnership arrangements are agreed. The main focus would be a major Centre to interpret the landscape and cultural heritage of the National Park based on the considerable research now available.	By 2012

- 6.2 \* This is subject to local commitment to a long term National Park Centre provision in Lynmouth. Lynton and Lynmouth Town Council and North Devon District Council have proposed a site for the temporary location of a National Park Centre on the Lyndale car park. subject to planning permission being achieved. It is anticipated that this temporary move from Blackmoor Gate to Lynmouth would send strong messages of support for the seafront development and a commitment to the local community from this Authority and would enable the seafront site to be developed.
- 6.3 No jobs will be lost as a result of this review.
- 6.4 It is suggested that this strategy will be put out for public consultation in the Draft National Park Management Plan as a core component of the vision for information provision.

**Tim Braund**  
**Head of Education and Interpretation**  
**November 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:-**

**Outputs form Staff and Member workshops**

**Independent community survey 2006, Lynne Dunn Associates.**

## **Appendix 1 - Review process**

A 'task and finish' group was established consisting of five members, the Head of Education and Interpretation, a Centre Manager and an Information Advisor to undertake the review.

The review focused on the mechanisms for getting high quality information related to the understanding and enjoyment of National Park special qualities to visitors and to local residents.

This meant that the scope of the review has extended beyond 'location' and 'role' of the Authority National Park Centre network and this report reflects on wider information provision.

A series of questions were posed to stimulate discussion and debate:

- Should the National Park Authority provide/run National Park Centres?

If 'yes':

- What is their purpose? Why do we have them?
- What is the message? What do we want people to know?
- Who is the audience? Who are we aiming the messages at?
- Why do we want people to get the message? What do we want people to do?
- Where is/are the best location(s) to deliver that message?
- What services should be provided?
- If the Authority provides an NPC network, is seasonal opening acceptable?
- What other services could the NPC network deliver?

If 'no':

- How do we best deliver information and interpretation to promote understanding of, and opportunities to enjoy, the special qualities of the National Park to the public?
- Who is best placed to provide the service?
- What is the message? What do we want people to know?
- Who is the audience? Who are we aiming the messages at?
- Why do we want people to get the message? What do we want people to do?

## **Appendix 2 - Background to current information centre provision**

The National Park Centres are open seasonally from Easter to the end of October; there is limited daily winter opening at Dulverton; there is limited winter opening on pre-Christmas weekends at Dunster; as resources allow, there is limited winter opening at Dunster and Blackmoor Gate for February half terms and weekends in March.

Three of the five National Park Centres, (Combe Martin, County Gate and Dunster), have been operational in their current locations for more than 25 years; similarly, the National Park Centre at Lynmouth had been located in the Pavilion since c1983, but had to be withdrawn in 2004 because of the deteriorating condition of the building. Prior to the current location of the Centre in Dulverton, there had been a National Park Centre at Exmoor House. The original intention appears to have been to locate National Park Centres in settlements to interpret and advise on the immediate, local area. County Gate is the obvious exception to this approach but was established before the independent TIC in Porlock was created.

The temporary relocation of services to Blackmoor Gate from Lynmouth was an opportunity to gauge how users would view and use a National Park Centre at a gateway to the National Park; and to have a National Park wide focus rather than a 'local' focus. At the close of the second season of operation, user numbers at National Park Centre Blackmoor Gate are 15,204, only 1,800 less than at County Gate which has been established for over 25 years. However, this is considerably fewer than the 133,000 users at Lynmouth during the 2004 season.

Although high levels of user satisfaction can be demonstrated through biennial surveys, the Authority network at five Centres spreads resources thinly and does not have additional capacity or great flexibility in terms of service delivery.

### Tourist Information Centres

There are Tourist Information Centres at Porlock, Lynton, Combe Martin (partnership with the National Park Authority); in the Greater Exmoor catchment there are Tourist Information Centres at Minehead, Ilfracombe, South Molton, and Bampton.

### Non-Authority led projects in the pipeline

There are independent plans for three information centre proposals close to the National Park:

- a 'North Devon Showcase' visitor attraction and orientation Centre at Aller Cross, South Molton, being led by the private sector in partnership with the authorities in north Devon;
- a Visitor Centre in Minehead being developed by West Somerset Council
- a 'discovery centre' in development at the Calvert Trust, Wistlandpound.

#### **Appendix 4 - The role of a National Park Centre**

- To increase awareness and understanding of the National Park's special landscape qualities, wildlife and cultural heritage and engender support for National Park purposes, both locally, regionally and nationally.
- To help people organise and enjoy their visit by providing information on recreational opportunities, facilities and services.
- To help influence visitor movements and activities in the National Park and encourage responsible behaviour and safe public use of the countryside.
- To provide interpretation to deepen people's knowledge and understanding of Exmoor's special qualities and issues facing Exmoor National Park through high quality formats and media, and interactive 'learning zones'.
- To provide opportunities for the sale of goods which serve or complement National Park purposes and potentially showcase local goods and products.
- To provide a point of contact with the local community.

This combination forms the 'unique selling point' for operating a National Park Centre service; these are the services that the National Park Authority (being the statutory body for the National Park) provides free of charge to users.

In order to achieve the maximum effectiveness, National Park Centres should be a destination in their own right and have a critical role for interpreting the wider Exmoor landscape, wildlife and traditions and promoting opportunities to understand and enjoy those special qualities rather than focusing on a locality within the National Park. The **message** and role is distinct from, but complementary to, other information centre providers because of the focus on National Park *special qualities*.

The main **audience for National Park Centres** is people who are visiting Exmoor National Park. Although the service is equally available for the local community, a specifically commissioned survey indicated that the present service, in the majority of cases, meets local needs and expectations. The perception is that the NPCs are and should be primarily for visitors with local people knowing where they can get the information they require when they need it.

*Local information centres*, operated by other organisations and local partnerships have a key role in providing information and orientation for areas surrounding the settlements in which they are located underpinned by broad National Park messages. There is an opportunity for the Authority to support these outlets in different ways that would benefit the local economy, local information provision and help achieve National Park purposes.

*Local information points*, located in businesses/shops in more outlying settlements, service immediate local information underpinned by broad National Park messages.

## **Appendix 5 - Vision for National Park Centres and allied information provision.**

It is recommended that the following network should be the aspiration pursued by the National Park Authority. This aspiration will form the strategy for a development programme that will be focused on high quality information and interpretation provided in locations and formats that are up to date and accessible to users when it is convenient for them.

The Strategy seeks to establish two strategic National Park Centres; support for a network of 'local information centres' working with local businesses, organisations and communities; support for a network of 'local information points'; and appropriate engagement with evolving 'gateway centres'.

The two flagship **National Park Centres** should be attractions in their own right identifying and interpreting Exmoor National Park's special qualities. These National Park Centres would have interactive 'learning zones', internet access, flexible exhibition space and a mix of state of the art and traditional interpretive facilities. Additionally, it is suggested that these two Centres would have remote office facilities for staff to further develop and embed an Authority presence in the wider community.

Concentrating resources in two, rather than five National Park Centres, will give an enhanced service, potentially year round, and capacity to support and develop other initiatives, (e.g. a 'shows and events' team to coordinate summer attendance; better support for Local Information Points).

The two proposed National Park Centres are suggested to be an 'Exmoor Coast' Centre provided at coastal location (e.g. Lynmouth) and a 'Heart of Exmoor' Centre at a central location. These developments will require major capital investment, external funding and detailed planning in terms of new build plus kitting out. Performance will be measured against nationally agreed minimum standards.

In addition to providing two enhanced National Park Centres, it is proposed that the Authority should support a number of **Local Information Centres** in partnership with local organisations. These would be independently run but have financial support and specialist input from the Authority when required. Combe Martin, Dulverton, Dunster and Porlock are suggested to be appropriate locations.

Services would be monitored through agreements setting out agreed minimum standards for National Park information and Authority support.

A third level of information provision is proposed through continued support for **Local Information Points** currently located at businesses in the scattered settlements of the National Park.

Appropriate engagement and support for **Gateway Centres** should also be considered. New centres are being developed at Aller Cross (South Molton), Calvert Trust Discovery Centre at Wistlandpound and Minehead, the latter being a focus for visitor information, interpretation and orientation in partnership with Visit Exmoor and Minehead TIC. There is, additionally, a longer term possibility to investigate the development of a purpose built facility on the eastern approach to Minehead/Dunster on the A39. At present, this is only a concept and may be more appropriately considered as a 'local information centre' dependent on location and resources that are available for its operation.

**Shows and Events team** to be brought together for specific occasions drawing on and using the skill and expertise of the core National Park Centre Team supported by colleagues from other Authority personnel. Local events that would be supported include North Devon, Exford and Dunster Shows. There are a variety of other opportunities (other shows within and outside Exmoor) that could be attended including the potential to take the message to town and city centres

The **Ranger Group** providing a National Park Authority front line service at peak times in key countryside, 'honey pot' locations, (e.g. Valley of Rocks, Tarr Steps, Haddon Hill, North Hill, Malmsmead).

In recognizing that the above 'channels' are primarily aimed at people that have already made a decision to visit Exmoor and are near or in the National Park, there are additional opportunities to reach potential visitors and users who may not yet have considered visiting Exmoor for a variety of reasons. This awareness raising is a key role for the Authority with the aim of turning 'awareness' into a 'visit' for a first hand experience. This activity is more than information provision within the National Park and is part of the core function of the wider Education and Interpretation Team. This could be reflected in staff effort being invested in the continual updating of the Authority website and attending or initiating promotional events outside the National Park boundary.