

North York Moors National Park Authority

23 March 2020

Dark Skies Reserve Status for the North York Moors National Park

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To seek Members' approval for an application for International Dark Skies Reserve Status for the North York Moors National Park in 2020.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Dark Skies are one of the National Park's special qualities and part of the recent EAFRD funded project; 'Destination Partnerships Moors and Dales(2017 – 2019)', was to develop a Dark Skies Festival, introduce a Dark Skies Friendly scheme for tourism businesses, and to undertake the background work that will lay the foundations for a potential International Dark Sky Reserve Status (DSRS) bid to the International Dark Sky Association.
- 2.2 This paper reviews the current position in relation to a potential application for a DSRS bid, summarising the work already done, what still needs to be done and what 'in-life' obligations would need to be met.

3. Background

- 3.1 In recent years, the Authority has successfully nominated Dark Sky Discovery Sites at both National Park Centres, and there is a third in Dalby Forest (Forestry England). A dark skies festival has been running for 5 years now and in 2019 ran 100 events, which attracted around 8,000 people. A conservative estimate for the 2019 festival showed an economic benefit of almost £300k over two weeks when many businesses would normally be closed or very quiet, giving an early boost to the tourism sector.
- 3.2 A new s106 project is currently underway to deliver a lighting improvement scheme. A key part of the 'in life' obligations for any Dark Sky Reserve is to ensure that work is undertaken to protect Dark Skies by improving lighting year on year. Planning controls already help restrict or control lighting on new developments and the new scheme will target areas where improvements can or should be made. It is anticipated that ongoing funds will be allocated from s106 to help with this in line with the original s106 costings rationale. In addition to the new lighting improvement scheme, there is a commitment from NYCC that all future road lighting will be of a type (and temperature) considered to be Dark Skies Friendly.
- 3.3 Whilst there is a special dispensation for military zones to be excluded from the core Dark Skies Zone, this has been discussed with RAF Fylingdales at this year's liaison meeting and as a result the RAF have agreed to look at what they could do to reduce lighting around the base (much of which is not related to the security element, but the living accommodation).

4. Applying for DSRS from the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA)

4.1 Though not in the current Business Plan, there are significant benefits to applying for DSRS in 2020/21 in that most of the work required for an Application has already been undertaken recently as part of our work on developing the new Local Plan and on the background work for the s106 Compensation and Mitigation activities. The data collected (light measurements, Lighting Audit and Light Management Plan) has a shelf life and if it is not used in the next 12 months it would be considered invalid by the International Dark Skies Association as part of an application for DSRS. This would mean repeating all the work should we decide to defer a decision on an application to a date beyond this time period. The required criteria and obligations are as follows:

- Minimum sky quality levels are met (proven through measurements)
- A Lighting Audit has been conducted and a core zone (darkest area) identified
- A Lighting Management Plan (LMP) is being produced to control what new lighting is/isn't allowed
- There's a commitment to reduce non-compliant lighting in core and non-core areas (s106 is looking after this side of things)
- There is an ongoing public outreach programme including festivals/events throughout the year
- An annual report summarising the above is produced (most of this information is already reported).

4.2 With much of the above completed or in progress, the following outstanding tasks are required in order to apply for DSRS;

- signing off the draft Light Management Plan undertaken by a consultant (and expert on DSRS applications and lighting plans, Jim Paterson) which was funded by s106 and is nearly complete. When this is complete, it will be assessed for adoption as supplementary planning policy.
- Letters of support will be sought and consultation with Parish councils is needed. The latter is being carried out by the Head of Polyhalite Projects as part of his work engaging groups for the lighting improvement grants.
- An application form will need to be completed which could be contracted out at an estimated quote of between £3k-£4k to an experienced consultant and financed from existing tourism budgets.

5. Ongoing Requirements

5.1 Once DSRS is awarded, there are ongoing monitoring requirements. The International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) requires an annual report that records and collates the things being done already including: planning decisions and recommendations on lighting, Dark Skies Festival details, work with tourism businesses such as Dark Skies Friendly and other events/developments throughout the year (the development at Sutton bank will be of significant benefit to an application). Also documented would be lighting improvements including any NYCC installations and updating night sky meter readings. This report will draw on the work of other departments and will be led by Park Services. It is estimated that this would require a maximum 3-5 days of work for one person per year.

6. Benefits of being a Reserve

6.1 By becoming a Dark Sky Reserve, the North York Moors would join a worldwide family of landscapes (including the Grand Canyon and Aoraki Mount Cook National Park, New Zealand) and gain national and international recognition.

Without this promotional asset, the risk is that the National Park will be overlooked as a stargazing destination in favour of areas which have achieved the distinction.

- 6.2 Stargazing takes place in autumn, winter and spring and despite much of the recent focus being on Northumberland, the North York Moors is well known to enthusiasts for the clarity of the night skies due to the relatively dry climate. One of the longest running current public stargazing events called Starfest began in Dalby Forest in the early 1990s. Since then urban light pollution has grown worse, with nearly 90% of Britons unable to see the Milky Way from their home, which provides an added incentive for people to travel to rural areas for a good view of the stars. This offers an opportunity to increase visitor numbers in the shoulder season with a stargazing offer. DSRS would also help promote our National Park Centres and the opening of the Dark Skies (and Nature) viewing facility at Sutton Bank in mid-2020 could be a timely opportunity to announce the intention to apply.
- 6.3 Coincidentally the Yorkshire Dales National Park is applying for DSRS in 2020, and this would make a very strong PR story if both National Parks were to do this in the same year. The two already work closely together on the Dark Skies Festival and the Dales started their DSRS bid within the joint EAFRD project. The Lake District have also recently announced their intention to apply and Northumberland National Park already has DSRS. This would then make the NYMNP part of a larger picture of protected Dark Sky Places across Northern England including National Parks and AONB's. Forestry England would be very supportive of an application as it would directly support work they do and development work under consideration in Dalby Forest may be influenced by a North York Moors application for DSRS.
- 6.4 In a recent meeting with CPRE, they were extremely keen to look at ways they might help us develop Dark Skies credentials with an offer of resource to help where appropriate. This will be explored further.
- 6.5 Protecting Dark Skies has multiple benefits that touch many functions of the National Park and our objectives. Astro tourism is the obvious one with associated out of season benefit. Added to this, lighting improvements also help climate change through energy reduction, improve feelings of tranquillity, deliver ecological benefits by reducing impact on wildlife and even help protect human health..

7. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

- 7.1 Given that much of the preparatory work is done or being completed as a part of regular daily roles, the envisaged additional effort would be managing a contract to apply for DSRS and compiling the annual report. Therefore it is considered that no additional staff resource would be needed to apply for and maintain DSRS.

8. **Contribution to the National Park Management Plan**

- 8.1 Being awarded DSRS would directly support the following Management Plan objectives and special qualities:

E19: Existing tranquil areas will be protected and expanded where possible
E20: Dark Skies will be protected and improved. New development in the National Park will not cause unacceptable light or noise pollution.
SQ: Strong feeling of remoteness - A place for spiritual refreshment
SQ: Tranquillity - Dark skies at night and clear unpolluted air

- 8.2 The Management Plan also cites ‘dark skies and tranquillity’ as being important to residents and visitors’ and recognises the challenge of ‘the potential for increases in levels of light pollution, noise and disturbance from both within and beyond the National Park.
- 8.3 When the Management Plan was written, the vision was that “In 15 years’ time most of the National Park is considered to be a tranquil place. Increases in visitor numbers and new development do not undermine the tranquillity of the National Park”. DSRS will help deliver this vision.

9. **Legal Implications**

- 9.1 There are no legal implications envisaged.

10. **Recommendation**

- 10.1 That Members instruct Officers to submit an application for Dark Skies Reserve Status for the National Park in 2020/21.

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Background papers to this Report

File ref

1. Light Pollution Map ([link](#))
2. North York Moors Dark Sky Measurements (auth. Richard Darn)
3. North York Moors Lighting Audit (auth. James Paterson)
4. North York Moors Lighting Management Plan (draft – auth. James Paterson)