

North York Moors National Park Authority

24 September 2012

Review of the Conservation Department

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To inform Members of proposals arising from a review of the Conservation Department.
- 1.2 To seek Members approval of those proposals.

2. Background

- 2.1 In order to inform decisions relating to work priorities following funding reductions and the Management Plan review, a wide range of consultation was carried out by the Authority. Responses from Members, the public and other stakeholders all emphasised the importance attached to the natural environment and the Authority's role in its conservation. As a result the Authority's Business Plan 2012-15, approved by Members on the 25th June, states that:

"Wildlife and landscape conservation has been identified as a significant priority for the Authority as part of the National Park Management Plan revision and the Prioritisation process; as a result a strategic decision has been taken to protect this area of work from being significantly impacted by the reductions in grant."

- 2.2 In addition the Business Plan establishes clear targets and allocation of resources to conserve the cultural heritage of the Park. Corporate Financial planning has reflected this commitment so that the Conservation Department has not been subject to the reductions in staff resources that have been seen across the rest of the Authority. However, it is appropriate that that the structure and capacity of the Department should be reviewed to ensure that it is capable of delivering its continuing work, the new priorities established by the Management and Business Plans and improving delivery efficiency. The changes proposed in this paper will also address the delivery requirements of the Authority's grant schemes, which are the subject of a separate report to this meeting.
- 2.3 The range of work carried out by the Department falls into a number of broad categories. These are:
 - Statutory functions and consultations including tree preservation orders, hedgerow regulations and trees in conservation areas,
 - Comment and input to planning applications, consultations from utilities, highways and other agencies.
 - Working with farmers and land managers, including liaison and working groups,
 - Assistance and delivery of national agri-environment schemes and the Authority's own grants.
 - Delivery of externally funded projects, such as the River Esk Pearl Mussel, Small Scale Enhancement Scheme and Monument Management Schemes.
 - Management of Levisham estate and advice on other Authority land holdings.
 - Advice to the public and input to interpretation, education and outreach activities.

- Maintenance of databases and records such as the Heritage Environment Record; Habitat Mapping and aerial photographs.
- Project development and external funding such as applications for Water Framework Directive, SITA, WREN, and LEADER funding.
- Development of strategic plans such as the Local Biodiversity Action Plan and Landscape Character assessment.
- Contributing to the development of Authority policy and input to policy and working groups at a regional and national level.
- Liaison with partner organisations such as NE and FC and the development of joint action plans and working arrangements.

2.4 New priorities for the Department arising from the Management and Business Plans are;

- Significant improvements to habitat connections across the National Park to strengthen biodiversity and improve ability to respond to climate change.
- Restoring traditional field boundaries via a new landscape grant scheme open to all land managers.
- Accelerating the restoration of Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).
- Improving the condition of Scheduled Monuments, listed buildings and other important historic features
- Identifying ways to continue work to enhance habitat for important species such as the Fresh Water Pearl Mussel and Alcatheo's Bat.
- Developing a project focusing on the industrial heritage of the National Park.
- A new initiative to work with farmers to deliver both improved profitability and environmental gains.
- Increasing volunteer and trainee involvement in Environmental work

2.5 There are already considerable strengths within the Department which will be key to delivering priorities and are therefore important to retain. These include technical expertise and professionalism, experience of practical delivery, negotiation and working with land managers, applications for grants and funding, and project development and implementation. Officers have a strong record of excellent working relationships with landowners and partner agencies. The department has also developed a flexibility of approach which enables the Authority to achieve its objectives in a wide range of different circumstances.

2.6 The aim of this review is to build on these skills and deploy them in such a way as to enable the Department to achieve its core functions and new priorities most effectively. In particular the processes to deliver habitat connectivity and PAWS restoration must be put in place, including clear responsibilities and targets for teams and individuals. An increase in capacity for project and funding bids and for strategic engagement at regional and national level is also needed. Finally, in line with all parts of the Authority, opportunities for volunteer and trainee involvement to help facilitate 'on the ground' delivery must be enhanced and measures taken to increase the profile of the Park.

3. **Proposals**

3.1 The proposals do not involve the disestablishment of posts or any redundancies although the detailed roles and functions of all posts have been reviewed and changed to reflect new priorities. A reduction in hours is proposed for several specialist staff (Ecologist, Archaeologist and Tree and Woodland officer) and for the current Farm and Moorland officer who is shortly due to return from maternity leave. The majority of these reductions are based on preferences expressed by the officers concerned and also fit in with the Director and Chief Executive's view of how best to structure the Department.

Changes in the role of other Department members and the further proposals contained in this paper will ensure that these specialist areas of work are adequately served.

- 3.2 Overall these changes will result in a reduction of senior officer capacity of 1.2 full time equivalent (fte). Members will recall that the Director of Conservation also reduced hours by 0.2 fte in October 2010. As a result there is a need to provide capacity for new project development, external funding bids and strategic work as well as a clear focus and coordination for the new priorities of PAWS restoration and connectivity. It is therefore proposed that a new post of Head of Natural Environment should be established to both deliver and free up staff time for these important areas of the Authority's work.
- 3.3 In order to promote PAWs restoration and new planting and assist land managers with implementation the Native Woodland Officer post is considered to be essential. The current contract for this post currently ends on 30 September 2012 and it is proposed that this post should become established. Finally, to increase vocational training opportunities and contribute to on the ground delivery in the department, a new 2 year graduate training placement is proposed.
- 3.4 The overall structure of the Department post review (as currently proposed) is given in **Appendix 1** but this may be subject to change dependant on further staff consultation and the skills of individuals recruited to the vacant posts. This structure will put the majority of the natural environment work of the Department in one group under a new middle manager. It will allow for a strong focus on priorities and will increase capacity for project development.

4. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

- 4.1 Although the proposals contained within this paper put slightly increased financial and staffing resources into the Conservation Department, there is no deviation from the budgets previously agreed by Members. The Head of Natural Environment post will be funded by using savings generated by these proposals. These, together with £7k from the existing Corporate Services trainee budget, will fund the graduate post.
- 4.2 Staff and UNISON have been consulted on this proposal and have made a number of helpful suggestions. It is intended that implementation will be phased over the coming months, with the filling of new/vacant posts being a priority.

5. **Sustainability Appraisal**

- 5.1 A Sustainability Assessment is not required because the report is an Administrative Issues report.

6. **Legal Implications**

- 6.1 The staff changes proposed within this report and the methods by which this will be achieved fall within the scope of the Authority's HR policies and comply with employment law.

7. Recommendation

7.1 That Members:

- i. Approve the proposals contained within Part 3 of this report.
- ii. Instruct the Chief Executive and Director of Conservation to fill vacant posts and make any further changes to the structure that they feel appropriate.

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Background papers to this Report

File ref

1.

Conservation Revised Proposed Departmental Structure – 7 September 2012

