

North York Moors National Park Authority Finance, Risk, Audit and Standards Committee

3 September 2018

External Scrutiny and Review at NYMNP: A Summary of Current Practice

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To provide Members with an overview of the main methods employed by the Authority used to gain an *independent* view of standards, customer service value for money and overall performance.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Authority's commitment to performance, accountability and learning is exemplified through an annual cycle of planning and review, with regular reporting back to members on progress and areas for improvement. At the moment this focuses on twice yearly updates against key performance indicators as well as an annual scrutiny meeting, which reviews progress on the Authority's business plan targets and progress on the objectives in the National Park Management Plan and Local Plan.
- 2.2 At officer level, individual departments are responsible for regular reporting back to management and directorate meetings through bi-monthly progress reports.
- 2.3 Aside from these processes the Authority is committed to gaining feedback from external audiences and service users, believing that having an independent view on performance levels and customer service is an important factor in maintaining high standards and looking for ways to improve. This short paper aims to provide members with a summary of the various tools that are employed to gain an independent view of individual elements of what we do as well as overall performance. (Officers are conscious, of course, that NPAs are fortunate to have members from a wide variety of backgrounds and sources – both from different authorities and from none, as well as an active Independent Person, which adds to external focus from the outset.)

3. For Consideration

- 3.1 **External standards** provide a means of validating organisational achievements as well as helping to highlight areas for improvement. The main standard, to which the Authority seeks ongoing accreditation, is the Customer Service Excellence standard – involving a written self-assessment review across 57 separate criteria and an annual rigorous on-site inspection/follow-up report from an external assessor. This allows comparisons across a wide range of public and private sector organisations. The Authority has held CSE accreditation and Charter Mark before that, for nearly twenty years.
- 3.2 The Education Team undergoes external scrutiny every 2 years to maintain its Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge which confirms that the team is delivering a high quality learning programme in a properly managed manner in which schools can have confidence. This accreditation is widely recognised by schools.
- 3.3 **Independent Awards** are another means of celebrating achievements as well as providing an opportunity to develop skills and look for ways to improve.

The Authority has been successful in gaining a number of awards in recent years, most notably in relation to its work with young people via apprenticeship programmes.

- 3.4 **Customer Satisfaction Surveys;** the 2-4 year residents' survey, visitor surveys and satisfaction surveys provide information on overall attitudes to our work and to specific services including planning, education and rights of way. They provide data that help us to continue to improve service delivery. Key statistics from recent surveys include:
- Overall satisfaction level with Authority services by users was 74% (2016)
 - 95% of Visitors rated the National Park as good/very good (2016)
 - 90% of respondents to the recent planning satisfaction survey were 'fairly satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service
- 3.5 **Internal and External Audit.** The Authority has an external internal audit provider and is subject to an annual value for money judgement from its independently appointed external auditor. The sharing of financial and legal services inevitably adds a helpful level of external input to our work, though this is not the prime reason for the collaboration.
- 3.6 **National Park Authority Benchmarking and Review Activities:** Every year the English National Parks share data on their contribution to the Government's 8 Point Plan for National Parks. This is supplied to DEFRA and sits alongside the annual meeting with the Minister and the Chairs of the NPAs. It also provides an opportunity for each NPA to compare its contributions towards the priorities in the Plan with other NPAs (accepting that local conditions and programmes vary for good reasons). The Director of Park Services is producing an analysis of the contributions to the Plan to allow this Authority to assess its input. This should be completed by December 2018. Members have already seen data on some of the key numeric targets.
- 3.7 In recent years two projects at a National level have benchmarked a range of financial information across National Parks. The Gateway report (January 2017) compared corporate costs across key functions in the UK National Parks. The 2017 National Parks UK *Working Together project* picked up on these results and identified opportunities for shared learning and procurement.
- 3.8 The Business Plan therefore commits this NPA to benchmark three areas of corporate activity and its Development Management performance during the life of the Plan. The UK NPA's Gateway Report did cover all back office costs - but was limited to the NPA family. We will have to decide what further effort to devote to this area of work in the light of the generally low costs attributed to this Authority.
- 3.9 The benchmarking work in Development Management has just been completed, by the same external company that carried out similar work across the Authority in 2012. The outcome of this work will be reported to Members later in the year.
- 3.10 **Direct Representation on Board from under-Represented Groups**
- The Authority's members (and staff) are not an accurate cross-section of society at large. To help ensure that members are kept aware of the interests of as many groups as possible, individuals/representatives of BME communities, disabled and young people are invited to address the full Authority. This takes place on a cycle, with substantial time given to discuss the issues and concerns raised. The individuals are free to raise the issues they want and are encouraged to explain where the authority could do better to meet their group's specific needs. This system of group representation was agreed at full authority, March 2010 to encourage opportunities for wider consultative and community engagement.

4. **Conclusion**

- 4.1 The Authority currently carries out a broad range of activities to gain an independent view of its work and is committed to continuing this commitment into the future in a way that is effective and efficient. In the light of the above, especially the annual external CSE assessment and the review of the 8 Point Plan, it is not considered that further external scrutiny would be cost effective. The one exception to this is that the Authority could usefully extend its external scrutiny when conducting its annual thematic reviews.

5. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

- 5.1 No additional ones beyond the involvement of external agents in the thematic reviews.

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

- 6.1 External scrutiny helps to affirm the Authority's achievements in contributing towards the ambitions in the National Park Management Plan.

7. **Legal Implications**

- 7.1 None arising directly from this report.

8. **Recommendation**

- 8.1 That Members review and comment on this report, and agree that external elements should be included in its thematic reviews.

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