

Feedback from Lead Members on Forums

Awareness, Recreation and Business Forum, 10 September 2020

Members enjoyed a beautifully sunny, socially-distanced ARB Forum at Sutton Bank on 10th September. It provided the perfect opportunity to see the work that has been undertaken at and around the Centre over the past year, as well as to understand the impact of the recent COVID-19 restrictions on the Centre operations and staff. We also heard from Debbie Trafford and two of the NPA's apprentices about the work they have been undertaking, the changes coming to apprenticeships (due to Government changes) and the challenges of having such a large and successful apprenticeship scheme.

After arriving, and refreshed by a take-out coffee from the Park Life café, members heard from the team who were awarded the franchise of this and the Danby Centre café earlier in 2020. It was clear that their vision and the energy that they are bringing to the café offer at our centres very much fits with the National Park's ethos and approach. Locally sourced, environmentally sustainable and with a warmth of welcome that we all appreciate. I can also testify to the food being excellent after staying for lunch! The team that undertook the tender process to find a café operator has clearly done a good job.

Members were shown the new cycle trail that has been installed, forming part of the existing trail routes as a family-friendly route, but also providing a Cyclo Cross track in its own right. The way in which the trail has been integrated into the plantation is excellent, making minimal impact on the environment and with plans for further enhancements such as sowing wildflower meadow and turtle dove seed mix, to support the wildlife. Even as we were there on a sunny autumn morning we witnessed several people using the track and heard from two regular cyclists who love what the Park has provided. We were also all treated to a demonstration of the new Pump Track (the first of its kind in North Yorkshire) by Simon Bassindale who impressed us all with his cycling skills. Both tracks have had a soft, quiet opening over the late summer / autumn which means that the NPA and Sutton Bank Bikes (who were very much part of the planning and design) can understand better how people will use them, and what is needed to support this use. Signage is planned for later in the year.

We were also shown the site of the new Dark Skies viewing area and bird hide (being installed in September) which will enhance Sutton Bank's offer further and support its year-round use. These have been developed along with the cycle tracks and new signage / interpretation and the car park extension through European funding. Completion of the whole scheme is due by the end of 2020. That the team have been able to both secure the funding and also achieve this work, despite recent restrictions, just shows the benefits of thinking ahead. Ideas for the cycle tracks began some 4 years ago, but thanks to NPA staff continuing to think creatively and seize opportunities, as well as build on the Sutton Bank Working Group's work, the NPA has been able to deliver a range of new activity opportunities.

We rounded off the ARB Forum by hearing about the recent work of the apprentices in engaging with visitors, often new audiences, using the National Park. Once again we were all delighted to hear how positively the apprentices view their experience working for the National Park. One of the challenges that emerged was actually around housing the numbers of apprentices we have, especially in the northern area where facilities are limited, and being able to provide them with suitable rest, wash-up and also work spaces (increasingly challenging as now college teaching is largely online). Members were also made aware of the Government driven changes to apprenticeships which mean that we will have changes to the Apprenticeship levels and therefore to the expectations of experience

and skills that apprentices should gain at each level. This is something the NPA staff are having to work on to ensure our apprenticeship offer continues to meet national requirements.

Members and staff agreed that the work that has been done at Sutton Bank and the changes achieved have put the National Park in the right position to be able to really support the nature / health and well-being and Green Recovery agendas. There is, of course, opportunity to do more, as and when capacity and funding allows, and members noted so ideas including:

- improving the toilets
- looking at changes to opening hours in the winter months to facilitate year-round use
- trying to capture more information on and from the new audiences
- reviewing signage and information provision across Sutton Bank and ensuring it meets the needs of audiences
- plans for woodland management around the cycle tracks working with Tilhill

Some members were able to also chat to staff and volunteers in the Centre and hear how the past few months have been for them and the visitors. Clearly the extraordinary circumstances of this year have brought challenges but also new opportunities including an increase in visitors (despite the period of lockdown closures) and also a new range of audiences who have never experienced the National Park before. One upside of not having card-payment / contactless payment ticket machines in the carpark yet has been the increase in people coming into the Centre to purchase parking, giving an opportunity for staff and volunteers to speak with them, to see how much the audience is broadening.

Many thanks to everyone who facilitated the visit to Sutton Bank and gave their time to us.

The next ARB Forum was due to be held on 5th November. However due to the number of other meetings, members seminars and training in October and November, it has been decided to cancel. Instead we will look forward to the next ARB in Spring 2021.

Sarah Oswald
ARB Chair