

# Scrutiny Newsletter

All the latest news on scrutiny at the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

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## 'The Authority provides an excellent planning service'

The above improvement objective was selected for a scrutiny review at the NPA in March 2013. The topic was narrowed to the Authority's **pre application service**.

The Panel for this review consists of five BBNPA Members and eight representatives of Town & Community Councils and Area Advisory Forums, plus a representative of NFU Cymru. This is not the first time that external representatives have taken part in a National Park scrutiny review and the Authority benefits massively from the enthusiasm, commitment and alternative perspective they bring to each study. It is hoped to continue this fruitful collaboration with members of the public for future scrutiny studies.

A range of evidence has been gathered via methods including a focus group with agents, architects and consultants; interviews with Principal Planning Officers; telephone interviews with developers and housing associations; and questionnaires were sent to all Welsh Local Authorities and UK National Parks. The research data has been collated along with a wealth of secondary evidence.

The Panel met for what is expected to be the final time on the 23rd September 2013 to discuss the findings of the review and also to draw conclusions and identify any recommendations arising. The report is being prepared and will be presented to Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 8 November and then to National Park Authority on 13 December of this year.

### STOP PRESS.....STOP PRESS.....STOP PRESS.....

The Chairman and CEO gave evidence recently to the Williams Commission which is looking into governance in local authorities. They highlighted four areas of our work on which they wanted more details, and this included scrutiny. They were very interested in our scrutiny model and a further report has now been prepared for the Commission which shows how this was developed during the joint scrutiny project with Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. You can see the report here <K:\Documents\Corporate Governance\Scrutiny Project\Final Report on Scrutiny to Williams Commission Oct 2013.doc>

## Outcomes from Previous Studies

It is essential and key to the whole process that the report produced following each scrutiny study and approved by the National Park Authority does not then sit forgotten on a shelf gathering dust. Each study is relevant and has the potential to promote good governance, openness and improve service delivery. To this end, the Authority's Audit and scrutiny Committee operates a cycle of monitoring and reporting on progress for every recommendation of each report.



## Minimising Damage to the Environment

The first study on Improvement Objective 5/Minimising Damage to the Environment and led by Professor Alan Lovell has brought together recommendations from research and Authority work that has been developed over the last 18 months as we have all seen the logic of directly linking our corporate goals and objectives to the National Park Management Plan. It has also confirmed the need for improved baseline data and highlighted the fact that if we are to extend the area of the Park in which we have a direct effect, we will have to forge new partnerships with landowners and other organisations.

### The key recommendations of this report:

1. **That the Authority strengthens** the quality of baseline data, demonstrating why the areas identified are the key indicators and how the data collection is to be achieved.
2. **That the Authority places** a time continuum against the NPMP and using the resulting milestones as annual improvement objectives, certainly over the next five years of the NPMP. Whilst this scrutiny study has focused upon projects associated with minimising harm to the National Park, this should be treated as a recommendation for the NPMP as a whole.
3. **That the Authority broadens** the area of the National Park which is the focus of improvement projects to conserve and enhance the environment.

### Progress...

- The Authority now uses the NPMP themes as its corporate goals and the priority actions as annual objectives, providing a structure for delivery of Park purposes in the current and future years;
- The National Park Management Plan and State of the Park Steering Group has been debating how we might further develop strategic partnerships to progress environmental projects, using an area based approach and seeking commitment from local people and organisations.

## National Park Communities recognise the benefits and are inspired by where they live

This study led by Mrs Margaret Underwood has been described by the Chair of Audit and Scrutiny Committee as 'groundbreaking' as we attempt to define inspiration and the role that the National Park Authority has in helping communities to feel inspired.

### Recommendations:

1. Officers need to take responsibility for recognising that where they may not have direct KPIs, that they do have relevant data to demonstrate delivery of an objective.
2. Working with the Communications and PR Department, the planning department gives some thought as to how it might increase interaction with the public, particularly with the business sectors, through the Rural Alliances Programme and other networks, to promote understanding of the planning processes and regulation that governs how the NPA must manage its planning function. However, this should not be to the detriment of planning service delivery.
3. We introduce Results Based Accountability methodology for all external surveys and data collection currently undertaken.
4. The Ffynnon system has the capacity to allow the addition of supporting data. Officers investigate methods of ensuring that relevant data / results from our various surveys to be added as supporting documents on the Ffynnon system to further evidence our set performance measures. All those undertaking surveys are encouraged to add this data as part of the general survey process.
5. The practicalities of using the Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index as a tool to measure the benefits of NPA activities in the round is investigated.
6. CMT considers how the ethos of customer service can be further reinforced to members and all staff who have an impact on customer service delivery, at every level within the organisation, to aid our interaction with those who live and work within the NP boundaries.
7. Providing a list of our direct responsibilities and a 'who does what' contact list as part of the BBNP website front page should be undertaken and also provided to all front line staff.
8. Working with the Communications and PR department, promoting understanding of a quality planning service more widely within the NP to increase general levels of awareness and understanding should be investigated. It is accepted that we will never satisfy all diverse interests, however, the NPA needs to make more of the direct and indirect benefits of operating a quality planning system.
9. Officers investigate how we ensure that our outward facing, accountability philosophy remains enshrined in all future policy making. This will in turn link into the development of methodologies to ensure that sustainable development remains at the heart of our decision making processes. While many of the fundamental changes taking place within the NPA in terms of its public facing persona such as webcasting and use of social media will undoubtedly serve to highlight and increase public benefit from our services and activities, the fundamental question we need to be asking after 'does it deliver our purposes and duties' is 'how will local people be better off' as a result of the NPA undertaking the proposed course of action.
10. A programme of briefing / awareness raising on the benefits and uses of evaluation is carried out with relevant staff across the NP authority.
11. The production of a biannual paper newsletter is investigated perhaps in conjunction with the other Welsh National Parks as part of a wider communications strategy for promoting BBNP.

### Progress...

The Sustainable Communities Manager co-ordinated development of an **Action Plan** addressing the above recommendations and working with officers across the Authority to identify actions, including those existing, proposed and possible, and associated timetables. Following consultation with the Corporate Management Team and the lead Member for the Scrutiny review it was presented to Audit & Scrutiny in August 2013. This Action Plan will be monitored and its progress tracked on a six monthly cycle at Audit & Scrutiny Committee.



## Evaluation

This is the first year that the Authority has carried out in-depth scrutiny studies, and an evaluation exercise will be needed to confirm the value of putting resource (both member and officer) into these studies. It was agreed by the Authority on 30 September 2013 that a **Scrutiny Working Group** would be reinstated and part of their revised remit will be to evaluate the process and assess its benefits to the Authority and the public. Members to this Working Group will be selected at the next full Authority meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2013 and the first evaluation will be carried out at the end of the current financial year.

## Scrutiny – Put to the Vote

With the chance to enter a draw to win afternoon tea for two at the Gliffaes Country House Hotel, Crickhowell there were a substantial number of votes cast by the public for the Improvement Objective to be scrutinised next. At the National Park Authority meeting on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2013, Members took into account the results from the voting and selected the improvement objective for **heritage (the Park's historic environment and cultural heritage will be conserved, enhanced and promoted)** as the next focus for a scrutiny study. The exact topic will be scoped by members on 25 October.

This selection process will continue for future scrutiny reviews and members of the public will be able to vote for an Improvement Objective which they feel should be scrutinised. The Authority Members will then consider the voting results before selecting the topic.



## Scrutiny – Upcoming Events

**Scrutiny in the Spotlight: Investing to Maximise its Impact** – On 28 November 2013 the Wales Audit Office is hosting a scrutiny event in Cardiff with workshops including 'Role of the Networked Councillor in scrutiny', 'Public Engagement in Scrutiny', 'Evidencing the impact' and 'Taking the fear out of budget scrutiny'. The Brecon Beacons National Park Authority will have good Member and officer delegate representation at this event.

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