

THE NATIONAL PARKS JOINT SCRUTINY GROUP ON THE ECONOMY
17 April 2015

Present:

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority representatives:

Members: Mrs G Hayward (Chair), Councillor B Kilmister and Mr AE Sangster.

Officers: Mrs Janet Evans, Administration and Democratic Services Manager.

Snowdonia National Park Authority representative:

Members: Dr I ap Gwyn and Councillor A Gruffydd.

Officers: Mr. G. I Jones, Director of Corporate Services,
Mr. J Cawley, Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage.

(Aberystwyth Park Lodge, Aberystwyth: 10.30am – 1.00pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors DGM James, SW Jones, RM Lewis, EC Roberts, J MacLennan and E Roberts, and Messrs Tegryn Jones and Emyr Williams, Chief Executives of the Pembrokeshire Coast and Snowdonia National Park Authorities respectively.

2. Disclosures of interest

No disclosures of interest were received.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on the 11 March 2015 and 25 March 2015 were presented for confirmation and signature.

It was **AGREED** that the minutes of the meetings held on the 11 March 2015 and 25 March 2015 be confirmed and signed.

4. Review of the work undertaken and the Evidence received to date

a) Meeting held 11 March 2015 (Pembrokeshire Coast NPA)

The opinion was expressed that Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority's (NPA's) Local Development Plan (LDP) was in need of review as it no longer addressed the economic needs and direction as intended when adopted, and that this point needed to be made in the report. Officers from Snowdonia NPA noted that they were about to embark on a review of the LDP, however guidance was awaited from Welsh Government as to how this should be carried out. The officer added that Snowdonia were also carrying out a review of their National Park Management Plan, however Pembrokeshire Coast NPA's plan had

recently been reviewed and a new version had now been adopted. Members of both Authorities stated that the issue of planning had been raised by all businesses interviewed and it was hoped that a simpler development plan would result from the reviews.

It had been widely agreed that the National Park Authorities' current duty to foster the economic and social well-being of communities living within it should have parity with the existing purposes. It was hoped that the scrutiny report would be available in time for Welsh Government to consider its conclusions in this respect as part of the current Review of Designated Landscapes.

It was acknowledged that the Authorities did not currently have the resources to deliver economic development, and if the duty were to become a purpose this would require either additional resources or improved partnership working so that this could be delivered. A number of those interviewed, both at a previous meeting and in face-to-face interviews, felt that the Pembrokeshire Coast NPA's planning staff currently lacked the time and expertise to address economic development issues, particularly with regard to large scale projects.

Another Member suggested that this also underlined the problem that the Authorities were reactive in this respect, rather than proactive, and this needed to be looked at. Officers responded that this was inevitable with a policy led approach and that until the Authorities had a proper economic development remit, the LDPs could only go so far – people could not be forced to submit planning applications. In the meantime there was potential to work more closely with County Councils and possibly for planning officers also to link more closely with specialist officers within the Authority in e.g. tourism or agriculture.

It was noted that one of the conclusions of the exercise was likely to be that more statistical evidence of the economic activity in National Parks was needed.

The conflicting experiences of the Hean Castle Estate and Real Seed Catalogue had suggested to the Committee that those businesses that were more familiar with the planning system or who had access to professional advice seemed to have a better experience. Therefore it seemed that education and the provision of guidance for microbusinesses had a role to play. Officers agreed that perhaps more training in preparing planning applications was needed as individuals or smaller architectural firms would not have the in-house support to address the complexities of the planning system that larger consultancies would have. Both NPAs had worked with Community Councils and planning agents with varying degrees of success, however there was scope for greater communication with these groups as well as the public and wider business community. However it was acknowledged that staff time to

provide greater levels of advice on an individual basis was limited. It was suggested that greater information could be provided on the Authorities' websites.

b) Meeting held 25 March 2015 (Snowdonia NPA)

It was noted that again those individuals who had a better understanding of the work of the Authority were more supportive. Attention was drawn to the importance of the Authorities' work in providing small scale infrastructure such as rural car parks, maintenance of the paths, etc and the value of the National Park brand. It was important to promote this good work and raise awareness of what was being done to promote economic growth through environmental work. An example was the Rhododendron eradication programme in Snowdonia.

Unfortunately some of the participants at the meeting had criticised the National Park Authority for an economic decline which was being felt across the country and for things, such as the lack of jobs for young people, over which the Authority had little or no control. It was, however, felt that the participants left better informed regarding the role of the Authority.

The second session had focused on the outdoor recreation sector, and the contribution of the centres to the local economy was noted as being significant, both in terms of their direct employment and in benefits to the wider community. Pembrokeshire had fewer large scale providers and the sector consisted of many small scale operations. Their message was generally positive as the National Park brand helped them to attract visitors. The centres in Snowdonia also enhanced the language and cultural aspects of the economy.

c) Scrutiny Process

It was agreed that the process had taken too long, partly because of the wide scope of the exercise undertaken, and it was noted that future scrutiny exercises should be more focused. However the fact that the review was being undertaken by two Authorities had made the logistics more complicated. Members also agreed that stricter deadlines should have been adhered to. It was also suggested that more statistical information should have been gathered at the outset in order to provide a baseline and this could have led to a more targeted subject area.

5. Consideration of whether any further information/evidence was required

It was agreed that the Committee had a reasonable body of evidence on which to base its recommendations and that it was important that all recommendations were evidence based. These could include recommendations that further work was necessary. However for future scrutiny studies one Member felt that there should be more independent research and that as a result care had to be taken in how the report that

this Committee produced was used; this was not accepted by all Members. The point was also made that the views of politicians were being sought as they were key decision makers and their support would be needed in addressing some of the issues identified.

6. Structure of the Final Report

Based on the evidence received as part of this process, it was felt that the report should be positive and should underline that those who lived and worked in the National Parks generally appreciated it and felt pride in it. The collaborative nature of the project should also be underlined. It was felt that the context should stress the role of the National Park as one of the organisations within their areas which worked to sustain local communities and the importance of working in partnership with others to do this. It was hoped that there would be opportunities to nurture those partnerships.

In terms of the key points and recommendations, the importance of the current economic duty becoming a National Park purpose had been universally supported, however the proposed wording as currently drafted by the Panel involved in the Review of Designated Landscapes needed to be strengthened. The need to review the Local Development Plan in the light of any change in the Authorities' purposes was agreed. There also needed to be greater partnership working, principally with the County Councils, and also greater engagement and a closer relationship with other bodies such as Community Councils, tourism bodies and business organisations possibly through a business forum. Officers also needed to be more business aware in their day-to-day work. In addition, Members needed to undertake a greater ambassadorial role and greater training and encouragement would be needed to achieve this.

The importance of the National Parks and their surrounding areas delivering a good visitor experience was also brought out, together with the evidence that the industry could deliver a good career for young people with the right skills. Marketing of the National Park brand was felt to be good, however improvements could be made in promoting their achievements.

Thanking everyone for their contribution, the Chairman said that she would try to assemble the information into a report and circulate this electronically for comment. It was hoped that the report would be finalised at the next meeting of the Committee which would take place by video conference on the afternoon of 6th May. Once the report had been agreed by the Authorities, it was hoped to engage with politicians to ensure progress was made.