

**NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
ANNUAL REPORT 2008/2009**

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Northumberland National Park and You

AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Listening to, and distilling your ideas into practical plans for the future, were two of our most important undertakings in the year to 31 March 2009.

National Park residents, together with our working partners and people with an interest in the landscape and access, the regional economy, wildlife, heritage and education were all brought into the discussion about how to look after the National Park now, and in the future.

Supporting the local economy and community life, welcoming visitors, adapting to climate change, and protecting our tranquillity, heritage and wildlife, were the topics identified as most important to you. This wide-ranging communications activity resulted in our being able to produce an approved *Local Development Framework* – the policy document which informs our planning decisions, a full three months ahead of schedule.

By a similar process, we were also able to get a draft *National Park Management Plan* onto the table for your agreement. The five strategic aims of the plan are a commitment and a guide for the work of the National Park Authority and its partners up to 2014. You can view the plan on our website, or at your nearest village hall or National Park Centre.

It is important to have our policies and plans in place because it ensures that the decisions we make are clear, consistent and fair, and above all help to maintain the National Park as a beautiful living and working landscape.

National Park Authority members play a vital role in advising us, and acting as ambassadors for the National Park in various places, and I am delighted to welcome the new members who joined us after the restructuring of local authorities.

In this annual report, I am pleased to be able to share with you a glimpse of our wide-ranging work on the ground and behind the scenes, making things better for the countryside and the communities in and around the National Park, and making a positive contribution to the wider region.

John Riddle
Chairman

The Authority works hard to keep everyone informed, but outside of specific periods of consultation we always welcome your views. You can write to your own National Park Authority member, or direct to Tony Gates, Chief Executive, at: Northumberland National Park Authority, Eastburn, South Park, Hexham, NE46 1BS. Or email us at: feedback@nnpa.org.uk

CORPORATE PERFORMANCE IN 2008/2009

GOVERNANCE

During 2008/09 the Authority met on 10 occasions. In addition to the four scheduled full authority meetings and two policy conferences there were an additional three special meetings and an additional policy conference held.

Membership of the Authority has changed significantly, with changes during the year and towards the end of the year as a result of the move to unitary local government in Northumberland.

Following a public consultation process, Government has changed the membership arrangements for the Authority. These changes were introduced on 1st April 2009 and have now been successfully implemented. A programme of enhanced induction and training for members is being implemented in order to help ensure effective transition during these changes in membership.

Job descriptions were issued for all Lead Members during the year in order to provide greater clarity for members in their individual roles. Following review by an Independent Remuneration Panel a revised Member Allowances Scheme was adopted by the Authority on 25th June 2008.

Whilst member attendance increased slightly from 65% (2007/08) to 66% in the past year this level of attendance is still below the Defra target of 75%. This can be partially explained by membership changes during the year and the need to call special meetings. It is anticipated that attendance levels will see an improvement in the coming year, which will also see the introduction of a scheme.

RESOURCES

2008/09 was the first year of the Authority's three year budget settlement from Defra. Whilst this is welcomed, our budget settlement still placed a requirement on the Authority to make on-going efficiency savings.

In March 2009 the Authority agreed a medium term budget plan which requires on-going efficiency savings of £120,000 per annum over the next three years. This builds on on-going savings in operating costs of £390,000 delivered by the Authority's Savings Action Plan set in 2006.

During the year the Authority has continued its strong performance in leveraging external funds, including £200,000 from Defra for the purchase of the National Park Centre in Rothbury.

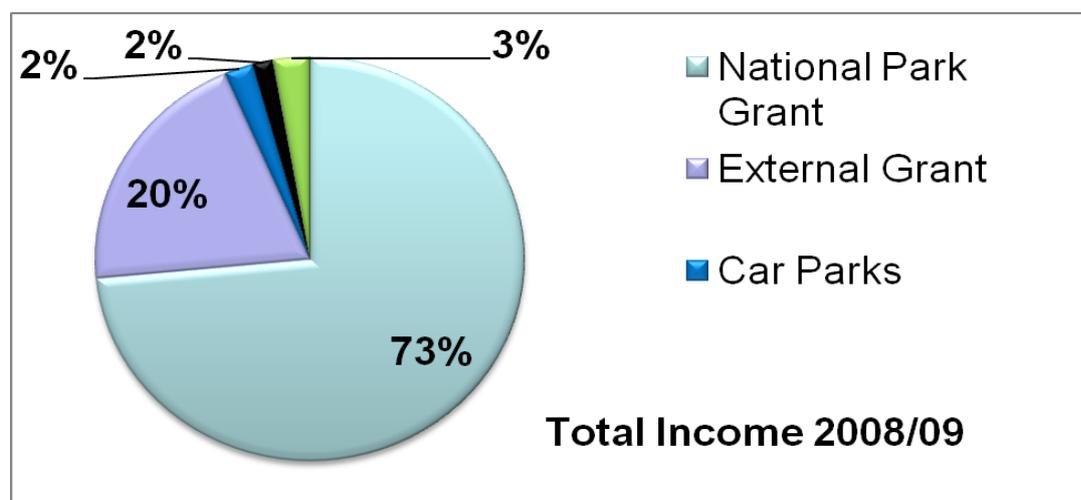
An interim evaluation which has resulted in an increase in the deficit of the staff pension funds to £2.1 million has had a negative impact on the Authority's overall financial reserves.

This is something which the Authority will continue to monitor closely, whilst acknowledging it is something which needs to be considered over the medium to longer term. During 2008/2009 the Authority continued to receive high levels of assurance through our audit reports.

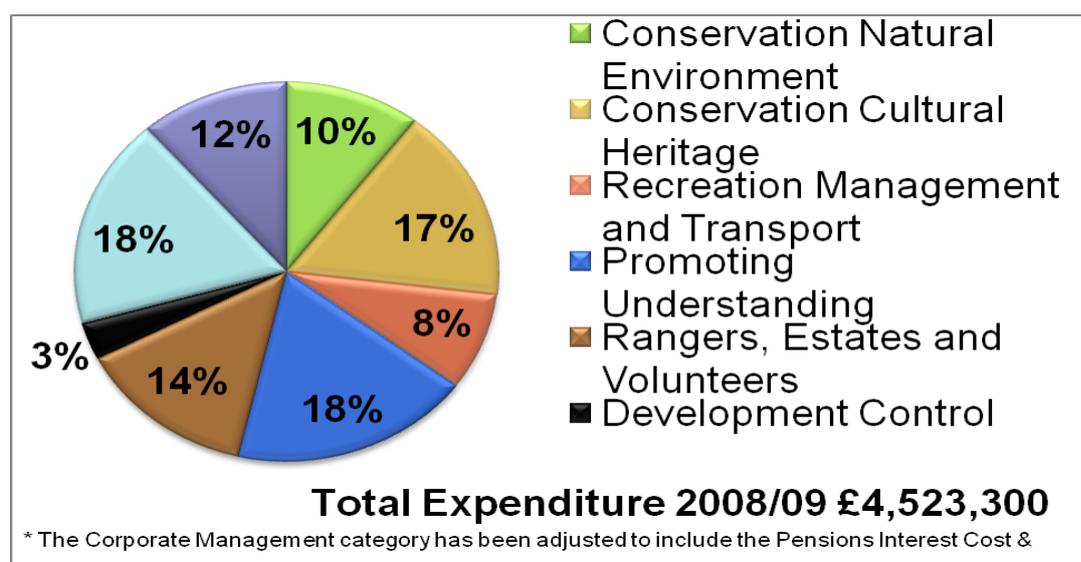
In the current economic climate, pressures on public sector resources and funds available to the Authority from external sources will continue to be a challenge.

Where does our money com from?

Income 2008/09 Budget Income = £4,241,200



How is the money spent?



CORPORATE PERFORMANCE IN 2008/09

In order to adapt to changes at a national level with the introduction of a new set of national performance indicators, during 2008 the National Park Authority developed a new set of indicators and targets to enable us to measure progress towards achieving our priorities.

In total 43 key indicators of performance are now being used. Of the 24 measures where performance against the previous year is available 10 (42%) improved, 8 (33%) recorded no change and 6 (25%) recorded a decline. 3 of the indicators that recorded no change and 2 that recorded a decline still reported performance above the 3-year average and are therefore not considered to reflect a poor result.

More detail on all areas of performance is reported in the Corporate Plan which is published in June each year and are available on the Authority's website. Taken together the measures for the past year record another year of positive performance.

THE REGIONAL PICTURE

During the year the Authority has faced challenges with changes in Governance at both the regional and county level.

The Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration has resulted in the winding up of the North East Assembly and establishment of a joint responsibility for regional planning between a new Local Authority Leaders Board and the Regional Development

Agency (ONE North East). The Authority has lobbied hard to retain its position with the regional planning body securing membership of the Leaders Board and the joint body which will sign off a new Integrated Regional Strategy.

The move to a new unitary authority in Northumberland has brought a number of implications. As noted above, changes in membership have been carefully managed, as have a number of service level agreements with Northumberland County Council.

The Authority has also secured strong involvement and representation on the revised Northumberland Strategic Partnership (NSP) and the new Area Partnerships. Work continues to try to align the work on our 'Action Areas' with emerging community engagement structures of the new council.

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA)

ENPAA continues to develop as a very effective networking body for the English Parks. From September 2008 our Chief Executive, Tony Gates took the role as Lead National Park Officer with ENPAA, helping to support and guide its executive functions.

ENPAA has achieved notable successes this year securing amendments to the Planning Bill and the Sub-National Review and has employed a Climate Change Officer, jointly funded with Defra to explore with Government the role of National Parks in taking action on Climate Change.

ENPAA continues to build strong links with Defra, Natural England and a number of key Government Departments.

Association of National Park Authorities (ANPA)

John Riddle, the Northumberland National Park Authority Chairman, has continued to Chair ANPA and steered a successful review of the Association during the year. This has confirmed key on-going roles for ANPA in the promotion of our National Parks, the training of members and the sharing of best practice across National Parks.

2009 is the 60th Anniversary of the 1949 Act which introduced the enabling legislation for National Parks. The ANPA communicators group have been working to develop a year of celebratory events.

A successful members workshop on Education and Engagement was held in Crickhowell in April 2008, together with the Annual Conference in the Lake District in September 2008.

OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR

The section sets out achievements against each of the Authority's strategic objectives. A detailed report on achievements is set out in Section 4 of the Corporate Plan which is available on the Authority's website. This report highlights some key activities and operational developments.

Safeguarding and Enhancing the Natural and Cultural Qualities

Local Development Framework: The Authority successfully adopted its Core Strategy in March 2009, three months ahead of schedule. Following a successful public consultation exercise, the Authority has delivered a planning framework tailored to the needs of the National Park and its dispersed communities. This has provided a sound basis for further development and integration of the Authority's Planning Service with other areas of the Authority's work.

National Park Management Plan: The fourth review of the National Park Management Plan was progressed to public consultation stage by March 2009. The review, which will result in a new Management Plan, was led by a group of key partners and involved a large degree of input from communities and other key stakeholders and is scheduled for publication in June 2009.

Land Management: The Authority has continued to work closely with landowners and land managers in the National Park to secure environmental and economic benefits. The Authority has further developed its work with Natural England on delivering environmental stewardship schemes in the National Park. This has resulted in close joint working and a focus on key landholdings. This approach is viewed as a national exemplar of best practice in working with Natural England. The farmed area of the Park in Higher Level Stewardship, the most environmentally beneficial scheme, has increased from 12% to 22% this year.

Hay Meadow Restoration: The Seeding Change project ended in December 2008. The project resulted in the restoration of 60 hay meadows, and involved 35 schools and 22 businesses in education and volunteering activities. We are now aiming to embed this successful approach across the work of the Authority and its partners.

Traditional Boundaries/Traditional Skills: This heritage skills project continues to achieve significant results. On the completion of the third year of the project in December 2008, 28 of a possible 30 apprentices have completed the course with 25 of the apprentices establishing dry stone walling businesses or moving into related employment.

The Authority has now begun to explore options for expanding the training activities in the National Park to other skills such as upland farming and foresting through the concept of a "College in the Park".

Sustainable Communities grounded in the Natural and Cultural Qualities

'Action Area' Delivery: The Authority's 'Action Area' approach has begun to realise the real potential of this way of working during 2008/2009. There is now evidence of a high level of engagement with communities and business across the National Park. During the year, 87 projects were funded using Action Area funds, attracting £445,500 of match funding. Funded projects are, however, only one element of the work undertaken and the 'Action Area' approach is closely engaged with communities across a wide range of activities.

Whilst work with a number of specific groups has grown, the Authority's 'Action Area' Working Groups have been less active as forums. It is accepted that these groups can work more effectively in fostering local dialogue and determining local priorities. This will be an area of specific focus in the coming year.

Sustainable Development Fund: The Sustainable Development Fund has made great strides forward in the past year with almost £300,000 of grant disbursed, leveraging an additional £2.6 million. This has made a significant contribution to reducing previous under-spend in this Fund, and has delivered some excellent examples of sustainable development in and around the National Park. Further detail on the delivery of the Sustainable Development Fund and projects supported to date is available from the Authority's website.

A Welcoming and Accessible Park

Sustainable Tourism: The Authority has continued to roll out the Green Tourism Business Scheme in the National Park with 20 businesses now accredited. The Authority continues to work closely with Northumberland Tourism Limited in marketing and promoting the National Park as part of the wider Northumberland destination. The new Regional Marketing Strategy for North East England has, during the year, identified the National Park (as part of a countryside and coast brand) as one of the three key tourism destinations in the region. This offers significant opportunities to enhance awareness of the National Park, its position in and value to the region.

The National Park Authority as a Reliable Partner

Regional Challenges: The Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration has led to a new framework for regional governance and for planning in the English regions. The Authority has successfully engaged with partners in the region to secure an important position of influence in regional planning. Through its representation on the Local Authority Leaders Board, the Authority is well placed to demonstrate the role of the National Park as an asset for the region and establish the Authority as a reliable partner at regional level.

A Proactive, Innovative and Forward Looking Authority, achieving through partnerships

Strategic Partnership Review: During the year the Authority undertook a review of its work with key partner organisations. This review has resulted in a clear and prioritised approach to working with our partners and sets out clearly what the Authority aims to achieve through partnership.

There are already some examples of best practice in partnership working, for example, the joint action plans agreed with Natural England and English Heritage. The National Park Management Plan review has been a positive example of working with partners and one which is now set up to take forward activity delivery of the Plan.

Other partnerships need re-invigoration and the partnership review has provided a framework within which to take this forward. The Authority will review our progress in implementing the outcome of the partnership review in the coming year.

An Efficient, Effective and Inclusive Authority

Equality: From a position of having fallen behind in the implementation of its equality duties in 2007, the Authority has over the past year made significant progress. A focus by staff and members has ensured the Authority has progressed through Level 1 of the Equality Standard, to Level 2 and with a commitment to achieve Level 3 by March 2010.

Ongoing Organisational Development: The Authority has set itself the ambitious target of becoming an 'Excellent Authority' by the end of 2011 (the date of its next Performance Assessment). Since 2005 when the Authority was assessed as the equivalent of a "good" Authority, the Authority has had a constant focus on improvement.

The staff restructuring and strategic priority setting processes of 2006 have resulted in clear and focussed improvements in how the Authority is delivering its business. Opportunities to improve further on this through leadership and management training and changes to the management structures are helping contribute to further improvement and development.

Increasing Understanding Of and Demonstrating Responses to Climate Change

Climate Change Action Plan: The Authority adopted its first Climate Change Action Plan in September 2008. A number of actions have since been initiated to take forward the Plan. The Authority has determined its carbon footprint at 308 tonnes for 2008/09, made up almost equally from estate (buildings) and transport (journeys). In the 2009/10 Budget Plan members authorised borrowings to help reduce CO₂ emissions from our estate. This will now be taken forward where a sound business case can be made for investment.

The Authority has become a partner in a landscape scale adaptation project – 'Cheviot Futures' – during the year and have well advanced plans to enhance understanding through delivering messages and demonstrating good practice through our National Park Centres.

Looking Ahead – Priorities for 2009 - 2010

2008/09 has been a year of some changes in senior staff and significant changes to the Authority's membership, with the loss of some long serving and very experienced members.

The former has led to a number of staff having to take on new roles and work differently. It is testimony to the staff team that this has been achieved with little impact on performance.

In looking forward to 2009/2010 there are more significant milestones to be achieved.

The successful adoption of a new National Park Management Plan 'Inspiring Landscapes, Thriving Communities' to guide the Park until 2014 is a top priority. We will aim to build on the engagement achieved through this process by further developing joint work of the Management Plan Partnership in delivering a Year 1 Action Plan.

2009/2010 will be the first full year of operation of the new Northumberland County Council. We will build strong partnership working arrangements with the new Council and aim to join up our efforts in serving local communities in and around the National Park and in caring for our natural and cultural heritage.

The National Park Authority will afford a high priority to the implementation of its Climate Change Action Plan. In 2009/2010 we will reduce the carbon footprint of the Authority's operations by a minimum of 5%, and we will continue to work to implement projects which raise awareness and contribute to positive actions by others.

The Authority has recognised it is not always currently succeeding in communicating the good work and positive outcomes that it delivers. This view is one shared by both members and staff and is reflected in the level of recognition of the work of the Authority among partners and stakeholders. We are committed to making a significant effort to change this in the coming year through the delivery of the Communication Framework which was adopted by the Authority during the year.

In the past two years the Authority has made significant progress in shaping 'how' we work. Our aim is to further embed our core '**culture and values**' which will see us become an increasingly inclusive organisation. To this end the Authority will aim to achieve Level 3 of the Equality Standard by March 2010.

You can read more about our objectives and priorities for 2009/2010 in our Corporate Plan which is available on our website or in hard copy from all of our offices.

Tony Gates
Chief Executive (National Park Officer)