

Report 10: The Sill Quarterly Update

1. Purpose of Report

To update members on the performance of The Sill: National Landscape Discovery Centre, and the Authority's engagement programme.

2. Recommendations

The Authority is recommended to note the content of this report.

3. Implications

- a. **Financial:** The impact of The Sill on the Authority's finances is discussed in further detail in Report 3 (Third Quarter: Financial Performance and Budget Update).
- b. **Equalities:** The core aim of The Sill is to engage more people from a wide range of backgrounds within the National Park.
- c. **Link to Business Plan:** The Sill Project and accompanying education and activity programme delivers across all aims of the business plan, with particular focus on 'A Welcoming Park', 'Thriving Communities' and 'Valued Asset'.

4. Background

- a. Following a slow start to the year in terms of visitor numbers and income generation, we have made excellent progress in catching up with, and in some cases surpassing, our targets. This is despite the challenge presented in December by increased restrictions and a dip in visitor confidence caused by the Omicron variant. The education, engagement, and exhibition programme has continued to benefit a wide range of visitors, including many people most affected by the pandemic. In addition, it has particularly assisted young people, in the promotion of health and wellbeing benefits of the National Park.

5. Year to Date July 2021 Update

Visitor Numbers

- a. There was a noticeable dip in visitor numbers after the introduction of Covid "Plan-B" in December 2021 and numbers have not at the time of writing yet returned to their pre-pandemic levels. Year to date visitor figure is currently at 93% of our target.



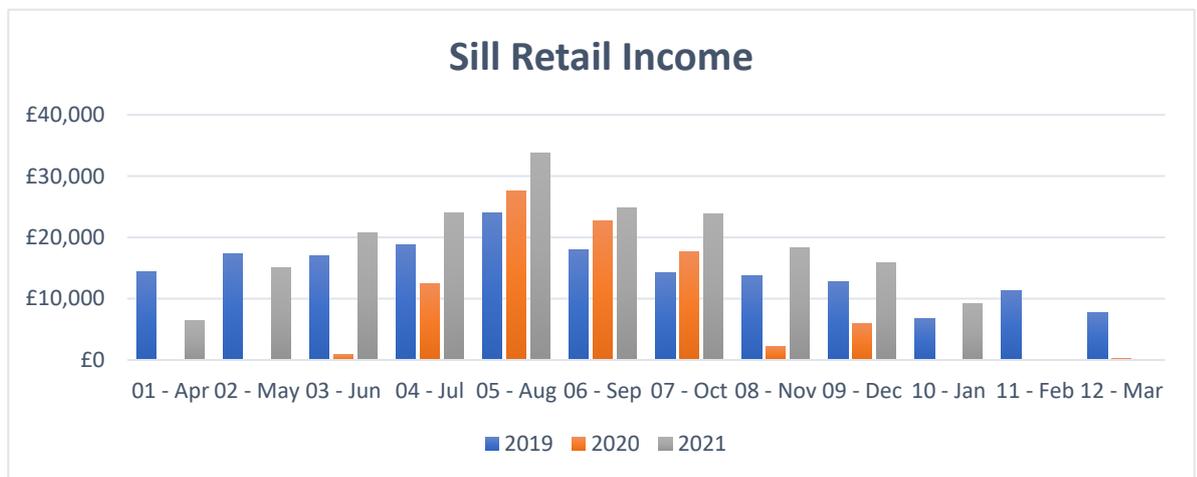
Figure 1. Annual visitor trends by month

YHA Stays

- b. The YHA forecast for the year is around 10,000 stays. To January they have had 8,069 overnight stays, this representing 92% of target.

Retail Performance

- c. For the year to January 2022, we are achieving 143% of our income target for the year, 22% above our sales performance in 2019/20. The ‘Inspired by Our Land’ exhibition (in partnership with local business Unison Colour) which showcased original artwork and prints by two local artists, was very successful.



i.

Figure 2. Sill Retail Annual Income by Month

Café

- d. The café has continued to perform well with a very busy Christmas period and a successful Christmas Fair held in November. A loyalty card has recently been introduced to benefit the growing number of regular customers who live in the local area.

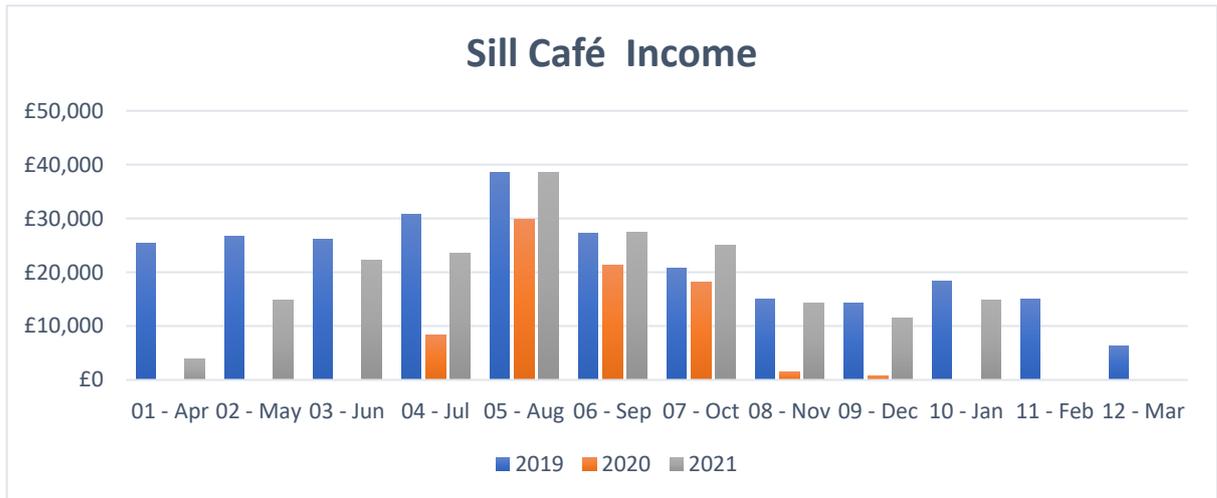


Figure 3. Sill Cafe Annual Income by Month

Car Parking

e. Car Parking is also performing well, income for the year to January is currently 118% of target.

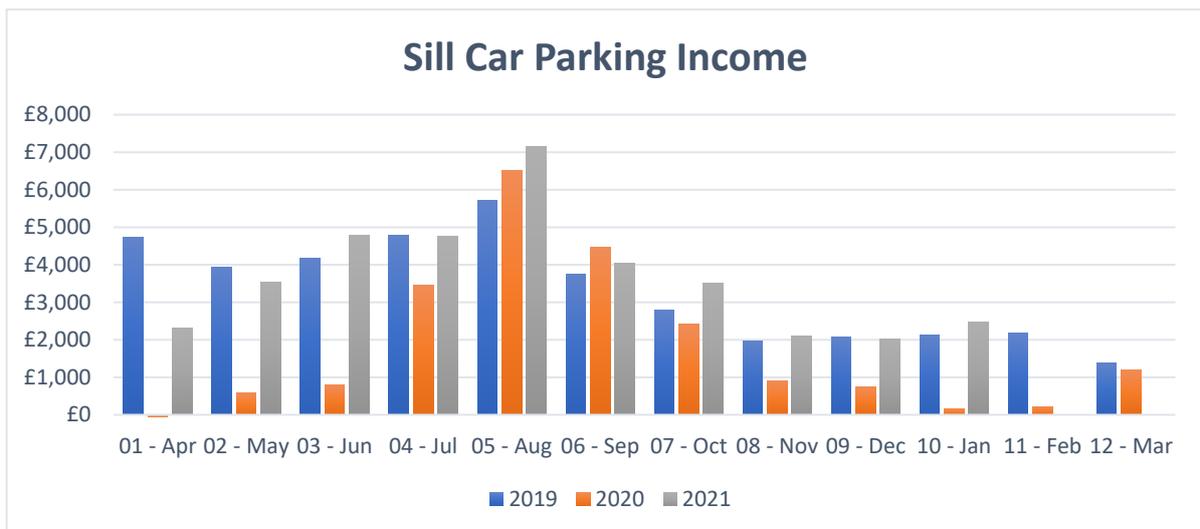


Figure 4. Sill Car Parking Annual Income by Month

Hires

f. Corporate hires have returned to near normal for the time of year, with some new clients and repeat bookings driving strong income for this budget line as well as for the café.

Formal Learning

g. The new academic year started with a degree of uncertainty as Covid levels were high and restrictions in schools were tight. These difficult operating circumstances increased throughout the Winter with the threat of Omicron. The learning team continued to adapt and update best practice quickly in response to changing guidance.

- h. In the period October – January 48 education sessions were delivered in schools, in The Sill and on sites in the Park, reaching 1,494 young people between the ages of 5 and 16, 71 teaching staff and generating £1,195 in income. The schools engaged are from a mixture of local, regional, and urban settings.
- i. Winter at Walltown was a huge success with all sessions booked within 24 hours of going on sale. It's aim was to provide an alternative Christmas activity for schools, showcasing how nature changes as the weather gets colder and celebrating local Christmas traditions and stories. A quote from Julia, Henshaw Primary, West Tyne Fed of Church Schools; "Thank you for organising the workshop ...the children had a lovely time!"

Generation Green

- j. Q3 has been a busy delivery time for Generation Green. 17 Young Green Leaders (YGLs), aged 16-25, have been recruited and trained as part of the project and have completed a total of 400 volunteer hours (57 days).
- k. 5 of the YGLs have completed ITC Level 3 Award in Emergency First Aid at Work training, 8 YGLs are working towards their John Muir Discovery Award and 9 YGLs are working towards their John Muir Explorer Award
- l. The total project targets have been reached and surpassed this quarter. 251 activity days for young people have been delivered so far (against a target of 150) and 309 young people engaged through the activity programme (against a target of 250)
- m. Two one-night residentials have been delivered to school groups in partnership with YHA for St Joseph's Primary, Birtle and Wardley Primary, Gateshead.

Public Engagement

- n. Quarter 3 - end of January has proven to be a challenging time, with Covid restrictions impacting on plans, particularly the impact of the Omicron variant on the general public's behaviour and reticence to commit and pre-book activities/tickets. This trend can be seen when comparing previous pre-Covid ticket sales on similar activities. The uncertainty has been further compounded by continued bad weather, in particular, the impact of Storm Arwen which led to the cancellation of several events and activities, both during the storm but also for a continued period afterwards as clean-up efforts continued throughout the Park. This has stalled our growing momentum which has been very disheartening for all staff involved.
- o. Nevertheless, throughout Q3 - end Jan we have delivered a total of 47 events and activities, engaged with 533 participants and generated £3,603 income which is still on track as forecasted.
- p. Programme highlights include: The Future Landscapes Festival, which explored how our finest landscapes deliver for nature, people, climate and place and included Sill Roof ecology tours, a talk by a sustainable small holding business, a series of workshops encouraging visitors to think global and act local, and Mission Imp-possible, an alternative, outdoor family festive experience at Walltown at Christmas.
- q. Work on our Recover in Nature programme has continued at a pace, with a month-long collaboration in January with Mind NE and Northumberland Recovery College called

‘Reconnect with your Resolution’ which encouraged visitors to kickstart 2022 with health and wellbeing in nature. Mindfulness sessions ran every Sunday in January at The Sill, including guided walks, photography, and dreamcatcher sessions. Little Larks, family forest school sessions at The Sill, have also proven to be a huge success; “Little larks forest school session provided my child with the opportunity to play and explore outdoors, building her play and social skills which she had sadly missed lots of due to covid lockdowns..... A lovely session to escape the crazy busy world and reconnect with nature”.

Volunteers

- r. We have achieved 372 Volunteer Sill Days (Oct - Jan), including Visitor Welcome, event delivery, school visits, grassland roof care and grounds maintenance tasks.

6. Conclusions

- a. Although impacted by both increased restrictions and the weather, our engagement and education programme have provided a valuable resource for people’s health and wellbeing at this vital time.
- b. We continue to support the economy of the local area through employment, increasing the supply chain and promotion through the shop, café, and events programme. This has been a benefit, not only for our suppliers, but the strength of offer is reflected in our strong performance against financial targets.
- c. We continued to promote green pathways through our volunteer and placement programme, Kickstart opportunities and the incredibly valuable Generation Green project.

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