

Governance Task and Finish Group 2022: Reviewing the number and make-up of the Members of the Northumberland National Park Authority

1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to inform members of the findings of the 2022 Members Task and Finish Group on Governance and to consider the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.

2. Recommendations

The Authority is recommended to consider and vote on the following recommendations, taken together:

- a. Using phased end of terms for Members from when Defra agreement and necessary legislative instruments are in place; i) reduce the current Membership from 18 to either 15 or 12, or ii) to leave the number of Members as is at 18.
- b. To embed Member recruitment, development, and progression opportunities within the Business Plan and integrated within overall cultural and organisational learning commitments and ambitions for a more diverse and inclusive Park.
- c. To agree the development of a skills matrix for the Authority Board based on the needs identified by the Business Plan, to keep this skills matrix updated as required and to undertake regular skills audits of members to identify the need for skills in new members or co-opted members.
- d. To have a specific focus between 2023 and 2025 of involving younger people under the age of 30 in Governance progression opportunities, including co-optation of younger people interested in gaining skills and knowledge of Governance processes.
- e. To develop opportunities within current Northumberland County Council and Authority processes to meet the necessary skills sets, knowledge and experience required by the Park in active recruitment of NCC Members.
- f. To encourage a better understanding of the Park and the role of the Authority for Parish Councils within its boundaries so that the Authority may gain the participation of Parish representatives with the necessary skills sets, knowledge and experience required of its Members.
- g. To agree the recommendations in respect of committee sizes and composition as set out in paragraph 8 of this report.
- h. To agree to the principle of providing for wider secondment/shadow member opportunities as set out in paragraph 10 in this report.
- i. Should members agree to changes that require amendments in legislation, that the findings of this review be communicated to Defra ministers.

3. Implications

- a. **Financial:** Any reduction in the number of members would bring a financial saving to the Park, although it would be relatively small. Members are currently paid £1,886

per annum plus on-costs and travelling expenses. At today's rates, a reduction to 15 Members would realise a saving to the Authority of £5,658pa and to 12 Members, £11,316pa. There would also be an additional small saving on member expenses.

- b. **Equalities:** Some of the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group aim to enhance opportunities for wider and more diverse involvement in the Governance of the Authority.
- c. **Links to the Business Plan:** The recommendations in this report aim to address Aim 6 of the Business Plan – An Organisation Fit for the Future.

4. **Background**

- a. At its meeting on 16 March 2022 the Authority appointed a Task and Finish Group to review the number and make up of membership of Northumberland National Park Authority. The aim was to seek a locally appropriate response to the findings set out in the Defra response to the Landscapes Review which was published on 15th January 2022. The Terms of reference of the Task and Finish group are set out at Appendix 1 to this report.
- b. The Governance Task and Finish (T&F) Group met as a Working Group six times between April and July 2022, following the appointment of the following Members to the T&F Group in March 2022; Liz Ellis SoS National, Mark Mather Northumberland County Council (NCC), Denis Mullan SoS Parish, John Riddle NCC, and Andy Saunders SoS Parish. Lead Officers Tony Gates and Rosie Thomas attended all the meetings, either jointly or individually.

5. **Future size and composition of the National Park Authority:**

- a. The T&F Group discussion was informed by the June 15 2021 informal Members meeting, where 12 Members was agreed in principle as a phased reduction from the existing 18 Members.
- b. In considering a future reduction to 12 Members, the T&F Group also considered that number in relation to the current total of Park staff as 60 Full Time Equivalent. It would be expected that with a reduced number of Members, there would be a better opportunity for familiarity between Members and staff, with a consequent sharing of knowledge and expertise.
- c. During the first six meetings of the T&F Group, to the end of July, this phased reduction was accepted by all members. However, in the final T&F Group meeting on 2 August two members expressed grave concerns over reducing the number from 18 to 12, and another member expressed misgivings. A compromise of 15 Members was briefly discussed but was not agreed upon.
- d. To resolve this impasse, the T&F Group agreed that it would present the case to all Members on Wednesday, 14 September 2022 to allow them to consider and vote on the future size and composition of the Authority.

- e. The current membership is 18, six Members each from SoS Parish, NCC and SoS National appointments. We recommend that any reduction should continue with these equal proportions.
- f. Therefore, we recommend that discussion centres over the potential reduction of the Authority to either 12 (four of each) or 15 (five of each), but also considers whether any reduction is necessary or achievable.

6. Local democracy

- a. The T&F Group Members were very concerned over the necessity of retaining the benefit of local democracy amongst Members and considered whether the current system of appointing Members representing NCC and parishes within the boundary of the Park was the most appropriate.
- b. We considered whether it might be feasible to hold elections amongst those living within the Park. However, this was readily discounted for very practical reasons; there are less than two thousand residents (fewer of voting age) in an area of nearly 400 sq miles, so organising such an event would be very difficult. More importantly, Dartmoor National Park Authority looked into the likely costs of holding such an election in their Park and considered that the cost of some £40,000 would be prohibitive relative to the advantages gained. With our small resident population spread over such a very large area, this is also likely to be the case for NNPA, and with the increasing pressure on the Park's finances would be very hard to justify.
- c. Finally, there is strength from the fact that Parish and NCC Members represent both those living in the Park and those outside it, where parishes straddle the Park's boundary and NCC Members may represent constituents living in the county beyond the Park. Therefore, we decided that we should stay with the status quo in terms of the methods of appointment of those Members.
- d. We wish to ensure not only that there is a strong democratically appointed majority amongst the Members, but also that we can ensure the following legal governance responsibilities are fully covered, currently Full Authority, Development Management Committee (DMC), Standards, and Planning.

7. Implications for operational governance of the Authority, including statutory planning functions

- a. Tony Gates, Chief Executive, reminded the T&F Group of the statutory purposes of the Park as a Special Purpose Local Authority, based on the 1995 Environment Act's prescribed governance, thus requiring sufficient numbers of Members to provide adequate Planning, Standards and Authority representation.
- b. Within this legal context, as a special-purpose Local Authority, Planning technical responsibilities are the responsibility of the Authority but in practice the vast majority are delegated to Park staff, with regular tabled updates and reports to Members.

- c. Where possible, it is beneficial for this committee to have a wider breadth of Member representation, being more knowledgeable of, and reflective of, local conditions and concerns, combined with some knowledge of property development.

8. Committee size and composition

- a. We recommend the following structure: 5 Members each for the Finance and Audit Group, and the Standards Committee; DMC needs a quorate number of 5 to meet, hence requires a larger number of members either 9 or, if a reduced number of Members is accepted, all Members to ensure greater certainty on being quorate.
- b. It is recommended that, as at present, the Finance and Audit Group should have at least one member with professional, or similar, financial experience. If not available, then such experience should be met by co-option.

9. Retaining links with constituent authorities, local communities and national interests

- a. The T&F Group was informed by the experiences of Yorkshire Dales and Dartmoor National Parks in the recommended reduction to 12 Members; these Park Authorities bring in land managers, tenant farmers and other co-opted expertise in addition to Members. Currently, South Downs co-opts four individuals, including two students and two independent individuals as part of building progression and diversity routes within governance. They do not have voting rights.
- b. Following discussion, and Parish experience of co-opting necessary legal, finance or planning skills, in the case of these skills being missing due to a reduction in Member numbers, the T&F Group recommends that in recruiting new Members; Park staff and Members define the specific skill sets, knowledge and experience needed during the recruitment of Parish, NCC and National Members. We recommend that, where possible, Parish representatives live or work in the park to enhance the perception of them “belonging” and their local knowledge, although we recognise that there are no legal powers to support this recommendation.
- c. In the case of NCC, it may be constructive for the Chair to meet with the heads of the individual parties of NCC periodically to discuss the skills that might be sought in NCC representative Members.
- d. With Parish Representatives, we should expect them to be willing to visit other parishes within their constituency to provide information about the Park, to explain the role and workings of the Authority, and what the Members and staff are hoping to achieve under the current five-year Management Plan. These meetings might also encourage Parish Councillors to develop their appropriate skills to be able to join the Authority in future. It may also be helpful for the Chair and CEO to meet periodically the groupings of the parishes within each constituency, or even individual parishes, and to attend any hustings.

10. Member skills, training and development

- a. The timing of the T&F Governance Review during April-August 2022 is opportune within the current preparation of the Management Plan, which will be followed by the development of a new five year Business Plan. We suggest that contingent on agreeing upon the number of Members, opportunities for developing the skills of Members include: Member development integrated within selected staff training; piloting a buddy scheme for Members; and a skills audit of current Members in order to maximise and share current expertise, knowledge and lived experience. We recommend that a skills audit of Members is regularly matched to the Business Plan and that all Members contribute to the development of a skills matrix to identify gaps and needs.
- b. We therefore recommend the introduction of a skills matrix and periodic audit of skills, to be regularly reviewed alongside the Business Plan.
- c. We recommend clarity over the necessary expertise, including community engagement and climate literacy to ensure overall Members' skill sets remain relevant and future focussed. In addition, we recommend that each individual Member on appointment is aware of the specific expertise they contribute to the delivery of the Park Management Plan priorities, taking personal responsibility to review this contribution in regular appraisal and professional development opportunities, together with other Members and staff.
- d. There is a need to develop a skills matrix, and to have occasional skills audits among the Members, so that we can identify needs, gaps and areas that may need strengthening to deliver the annual Business Plan and to push forward the priorities of the five-year Management Plan. With this information, the Authority can then look to use appropriate co-option to assist it in meeting its aims and responsibilities.
- e. Members are reminded that, as a Member, they are expected to participate actively in all Authority discussions, including those concerning matters beyond their specific expertise. Under the current Members Code of Conduct, Members are reminded that whether appointed via Parish, NCC or National recruitment, all Members share overall responsibilities towards the Park as a national resource for everyone. They have greater responsibility for overseeing the aims of the Plan for the Park than any specific geographic location or political context. In this regard, we consider that each Member should seek to familiarise themselves well with the Park, with the wider work of the Authority, as well as supporting the Authority beyond attendance at meetings and committees.
- f. In this regard, the recommendation that Members have access to aspects of the Park intranet is very welcome in overall best use of resources, learning opportunities and closer collaboration in the delivery of Park priorities

- g. The analysis of the 2022 Management Plan consultation and the implementation and communication of the approved Management Plan from late 2022 provides further opportunities for the intentional involvement of existing partners and local communities, thus contributing towards improved diversity in Park governance: more information below.

11. Delivering greater diversity in future membership

- a. Increased diversity in Governance is core to the overall well-being and sustainability of the Park, including wider involvement of people with protected characteristics, differing socio-economic status, knowledge, experience and skills. Tony Gates shared the experience of Loch Lomond National Park involving a young person shadowing Board Members and their responsibilities, in order to build knowledge and progression opportunities. We suggest consideration of additional secondments or shadowing opportunities to supplement Member expertise, without those persons having voting rights or carrying legal responsibilities.
- b. The ongoing sustainability and relevance of the natural environment and the landscape and nature sector is contingent on ensuring the national resource of the Park is relevant, engaging and offers meaningful progression opportunities wherever possible. This is demonstrated currently through the active, creative involvement of children and young people via Green Generation, Kickstarter scheme, high quality in-Park and school-based education opportunities across NE England, digital resources, targeted outreach and group work.
- c. Members briefly discussed individual definitions of diversity and what these definitions mean for the Park in “2 years: 2024” and “5 years: 2027”. Common themes identified the opportunity to use different learning styles and communication methods in conducting Park business, including increasing visual formats in reports and wider delivery methods beyond text documents.
- d. The opportunity to learn from Governance models outside Park Authorities, including lived experience-led voluntary sector organisations and charities, represent further opportunities to share knowledge and strengthen existing relationships with partners.

12. Conclusion

- a. The 2022 Governance Task and finish group has now concluded its work and the recommendations of the group are set out in this report.
- b. Members are asked to consider the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group and agree relevant changes to the governance of the Authority.

- c. Members are recommended, as necessary to communicate the recommendations of the Authority to Defra ministers for consideration of any necessary legislative changes.

Contact Officer: For further information contact: Tony Gates, Chief Executive (National Park Officer) on 01434 611514 or tony.gates@nnpa.org.uk

OR

Liz Ellis, Chair of the 2022 Governance Task and Finish Group lizellis@me.com

Background papers:

Landscapes Review aka Glover Review

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>

Terms of Reference Report 7 Annex 2

Members informal meeting note, virtual meeting 15 June 2021

Resources used in T&F meetings included **Getting on Board**

https://www.gettingonboard.org/files/ugd/5c57a6_4ea50e372eca40d59e1783df9d14f68e.pdf p.16-17, including 20 mins skills exercise, assessment