

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE HELD ON MONDAY 7 JUNE 2021 AT 10:00 HOURS

Present:

Members:

Gordon Bailey
David Bence
David Harrison (Chairman)
Patrick Heneghan (Deputy Chairman)
Alexis McEvoy
Neville Penman
John Sanger
Ann Sevier

Officers:

Alison Barnes	Chief Executive
Steve Avery	Executive Director Strategy and Planning
Rosalind Alderman	Solicitor and Monitoring Officer
Nigel Stone	Head of Resources (CFO)
Nigel Matthews	Head of Recreation Management and Learning
Paul Walton	Head of Environment and Rural Economy
Hilary Makin	Communications Manager
David Stone	Corporate Services Manager
Frances Connolly	Executive Assistant

Also in attendance:

Antony Harvey	Deputy Head of Partnership (Southern Internal Audit Partnership) and Chief Internal Auditor to the Authority
---------------	---

50. Apologies for absence

50.1 Apologies for absence were received from Victoria Mander and Sue Bennison.

51. Declarations of Interest

51.1 There were no declarations of interest.

52. Chairman's announcements

52.1 There were no Chairman's announcements on this occasion.

53. Minutes

53.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 12 April 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

53.2 In approving the minutes of the last meeting, members noted that the actions under Minute 46.3 would be carried forward, to be covered within a future Members Bulletin.

54. Public Question Time

54.1 There were no questions or statements from the public.

55. Annual Internal Audit Report and Opinion 2020-21

55.1 Antony Harvey introduced the report on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Authority's framework of risk management, control and governance processes for the year ending 31 March 2021.

55.2 The Chief Internal Auditor was of the opinion that the New Forest National Park Authority's framework of governance, risk management and control was considered 'Reasonable', and where internal audit work had identified areas where management controls could be improved, they worked with the management team to agree appropriate actions.

55.3 Mr Harvey explained that although the overall audit opinion for 2019/20 for the Authority was 'Substantial', one level higher than this year, this was based on a mature financial system and controls that had been in place for many years. He was pleased to report that, despite the change in the financial system on 1 April 2020 and the Covid 19 pandemic, there was still nothing significant to report.

55.4 Antony Harvey advised that a review of the ICT strategy had been planned for 2020/21 but, due to the impact of the pandemic on the resources of the Authority's ICT team, it had not taken place and would instead be covered in 2021/22.

55.5 Mr Harvey was pleased to report that an external quality assessment had taken place of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership, and it had concluded that they were fully compliant. Members thanked all the officers for such a good audit report and for their help and support over the past year.

Resolved, that the Chief Internal Auditor's Annual Internal Audit and Opinion for 2020-21 be approved

Voting: Non-voting against

56. Year End Progress Report 2020-21

56.1 Referring to the key performance indicators on page 6 of the report, a member raised concern with regard to the accuracy of the indicators on areas of SSSI land in the New Forest National Park. Paul Walton advised that there was scope to consider an alternative assessment with the majority landowners in the National Park and he would be liaising with partners such as Forestry England and Natural England in this regard.

- 56.2 In response to a further concern regarding the quality of water courses in the New Forest, Paul Walton advised that the Environment Agency was reviewing the process by which water companies were allowed to discharge stormwater and that the outcome of this review would be published in due course.
- 56.3 Hilary Makin and Alison Barnes responded to a query regarding engaging wider audiences and communities (page 11 of the Work Programme). They mentioned the measures which were being put in place to broaden engagement with under-represented groups and building on the Mosaic project and, in addition, looking at diversity within the Authority's own structures and governance.
- 56.4 After discussing various other actions in the Work Programme, members expressed their collective appreciation for all the work done by officers over the last year under the most exceptional circumstances – they requested that this be conveyed to officers at the earliest opportunity.
- 56.5 Members asked for an explanation about the (national) indicators, and how the New Forest National Park compared to other English National Parks. Nigel Stone said that in September, when he had received data from the other National Parks for this financial year, he would report his findings in the Members Bulletin.

Members noted the report.

57. Financial Outturn and Treasury Report 2020-21

- 57.1 Nigel Stone introduced the report which set out a detailed projected outturn position for the Authority for the 2020/21 financial year. He clarified that Covid 19 had not had any significant impact on the Authority's finances.
- 57.2 In the budget set in March last year, the Authority planned to take £18,000 from the Revenue Support Reserve, but the final outturn position was a positive variance of approximately £16,000 - leaving only £2,000 required from the Revenue Support Reserve.
- 57.3 Mr Stone was happy to report that all items showing as significant variances in the paper were either one-off matters or had already been reflected in the current year's budget. The overall expenditure position at year end showed that the Authority had spent and received 98% of the total funding which was an excellent result and showed the strength of the finances of the organisation.
- 57.4 He said the employee costs were slightly over budget due to additional posts within the planning team to cover the Fawley work. The pandemic has had some positive financial impacts as savings were made on office-related costs and from reduced travel for both staff and members - in total this saved around £63,000.
- 57.5 Mr Stone informed members that planning fee income was below target, but that given the economic circumstances because of the pandemic it was a better outcome than initially thought. He advised that the Authority had received a large grant of £200,000 from Health Education England for Health and Wellbeing studies which was ringfenced for work in the Forest over the next five years and has been put into

an earmarked reserve. This single large addition had skewed the figures on reserve movements, all the other movements to and from reserves netted off to zero.

- 57.6 The various transfers to and from earmarked reserves were to be taken from - Transport, Capital/Major projects, Pedall, OPOF Landscape Partnership, Land Advice Service, and Access and Planning Grants.

The money being put in was for Health and Wellbeing, Nature Recovery, Sustainable Communities Fund, Affordable Housing, ICT replacement, Pay, Planning/Risk, Land Management, Communications, Climate Change, Vehicle Replacement and LEI Scheme. Mr Stone added that the minimum reserve would remain at £300,000.

- 57.7 Nigel Stone said he expected to bring the audited Statement of Accounts for 2020/21 to the August full Authority meeting. He explained that a significant net pension liability increase would have an impact on the Balance Sheet as it has increased from £7.3m to £10.9m, but that this is in fact paid off slowly over next thirty+ years. He informed members that he would explain more about this at the next full Authority meeting.
- 57.8 He said that the Treasury Management Stewardship interest rates remained very low and would likely remain so for some time.

Resolved, that:

1 the provisional outturn position be noted

2 the Treasury Management Stewardship Report and Prudential Indicators 2020/21 in Annex 6; and

3 the Indicative transfers to/(from) Reserves in 2020/21 as set out in section 6 and detailed in Annex 5 be approved.

Voting: None-voting against

58. Draft Annual Governance Statement 2020-21

- 58.1 Nigel Stone presented the report and advised that the purpose of the Annual Governance Statement was to provide assurance that the Authority's business was conducted in accordance with the law and that public money was safeguarded and accounted for. He mentioned two small errors in the report which would be corrected before the Statement was included with the Financial Report and referred to the Authority for approval.
- 58.2 Members referred to the Peer Review mentioned on page 12 of the report and requested that, as this was undertaken in 2012, it was no longer relevant and should be substituted by reference to more recent benchmarking work with other NPAs.
- 58.3 In response to a query from a member, Rosalind Alderman advised that all new members were taken through the Authority's Code of Conduct on their appointment, although some had advised that they were already comfortable with this having received training through their own Authority. All Planning Committee members had received training on the Authority's planning policies. All new members were required to attend the national training run by National Parks UK.

Resolved, that the Draft Annual Governance Statement for the financial year 2020/21 be approved, subject to the amendments mentioned above and that the draft be passed to the External Auditors.

Voting: None-voting against

59. Annual Health and Safety Update 2020/21

- 59.1 Steve Avery presented the report which set out how the Authority had carried out its Health and Safety duties over the last financial year, particularly in the light of the pandemic and how the Authority had mitigated the impact of the pandemic on staff's mental and physical health.
- 59.2 He drew members' attention to the informal Health and Safety audit which had been commissioned by the Authority to identify any gaps or areas for improvement. A detailed action plan and timeline to address the recommendations from the audit had been drafted for implementation.
- 59.3 He referred to the sickness statistics for the last year and mentioned that back and neck injuries had formed more than half of the days lost during the year. In reply to a query he advised that this type of injury was also the most common cause for sickness absence in previous years. Staff had completed DSE assessments at the beginning of the lockdown and again in December 2020 to address any desk, chair or other issues arising from working from home during the pandemic.

Members noted the report.

60. Strategic Planning report

- 60.1 Nigel Stone said the purpose of the report was to update members on the progress of four overarching pieces of work. These were:
- Partnership Plan
 - Business Plan
 - People Plan
 - New Forest Voices – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- 60.2 He noted that, as members were aware, the draft Partnership Plan was due to go out for public consultation very shortly and that drafting the Authority's own Business Plan would follow this process later in the year. In particular, Nigel Stone wanted to highlight the work deriving from the People Plan and New Forest Voices which was the Authority's programme for improved equality, diversity and inclusion for all.
- 60.3 He said staff focus groups had been set up at the start of the current financial year to see what they understood by equality, diversity and inclusion, and to consider the current experiences of the under-represented groups in the forest. Nigel Stone said that continued flexible working for staff would also be looked into over the coming months, guided by the results of the biennial Staff Survey which was currently being undertaken and would close on 23 June.

Members noted the report.

Resolved, that the public be excluded from the meeting during the following item of business, as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during this item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information within Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, and further that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information, namely the need to avoid disclosing sensitive information relating to the Authority’s financial affairs.

61. Members received an oral update on an item on a forthcoming project. This is a summary of the minute which contains exempt information.

62. Date of next meeting

62.1 Members noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 6 September 2021.

The meeting closed at 12:25 hours

SignedDate.....
(Chairman)