



New Forest National
Park Authority

Value for Money report

Year ended 31 March 2023

March 2024

8 March 2024



New Forest National Park Authority
Lymington Town Hall
Avenue Road
Lymington
SO41 9ZG

Dear Authority Members

2022/23 Value for Money Report

We are pleased to attach our interim Value for Money report for New Forest National Park Authority. The report summarises the findings from our 2022/23 value for money work. The report sets out the risks identified and the findings from our detailed assessment including a commentary on the three reporting criteria and a summary of the arrangements in place.

This report is intended solely for the information and use of the Authority Members and management. It is not intended to be and should not be used by anyone other than these specified parties.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of this report with you at the Authority meeting on 21st March 2024.

Yours faithfully

Janet Dawson

Partner

For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

Encl

Contents

01 Executive Summary



02 Value for Money Commentary



03 Appendices



Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) issued the “Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies”. It is available from the PSAA website (<https://www.psa.co.uk/audit-quality/statement-of-responsibilities/>). The Statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas.

The “Terms of Appointment and further guidance (updated July 2021)” issued by the PSAA sets out additional requirements that auditors must comply with, over and above those set out in the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and in legislation, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.

This report is made solely to the Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority in accordance with the statement of responsibilities. Our work has been undertaken so that we might state to Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority those matters we are required to state to them in this report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority for this report or for the opinions we have formed. It should not be provided to any third-party without our prior written consent.



01 Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Purpose


The purpose of the report is to set out the Value for Money (VFM) work undertaken up to and including the 2022/23 financial year. The report aims to draw to the attention of the Authority, or the wider public, relevant issues, recommendations arising from the audit and follow-up of recommendations issued previously, along with the auditor's view as to whether they have been implemented satisfactorily.

We are required to report on whether the Authority has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We have complied with the guidance issued to auditors in respect of their work on value for money arrangements (VFM) in the 2020 Code of Audit Practice (2020 Code) and Auditor Guidance Note 3 (AGN 03).

The report sets out the following areas which have been assessed up to the point of issuing this interim report to the Authority Members:

- Risks of significant weakness and procedures planned to mitigate these
- Findings of our work against the three value for money reporting criteria and the sub-criteria
- Summary of arrangements in place over the period covered by this report.

We will summarise our final view of the value for money arrangements as part of the Auditor's Annual Report once the audit report has been issued for 2022/23.



Executive Summary (continued)

Risks of Significant Weakness

Our value for money procedures are based on the judgements reached from a combination of:

- our cumulative audit knowledge and experience
- our review of Authority committee reports,
- meetings with the Head of Resources (CFO),
- and evaluation of associated documentation through our regular engagement with Authority management and the finance team.

We completed our risk assessment procedures and did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Authority's VFM arrangements. We have also not identified any significant risks during the course of our audit. As a result, we have no matters to report by exception in this report.

Executive Summary (continued)


Reporting

Our commentary for 2022/23 is set out over pages 10 to 12. The commentary on these pages summarises our conclusions over the arrangements at the Authority in relation to our reporting criteria (see table below) throughout 2022/23.

Appendix A includes the detailed arrangements and processes underpinning the reporting criteria. These were reported in our 2021/22 Annual Auditors Report and have been updated for 2022/23.

In accordance with the NAO's 2020 Code, we are required to report a commentary against three specified reporting criteria:

Reporting Criteria	Risks of significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?	Actual significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?
Financial sustainability: How the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services	No significant risks identified	No significant weakness identified
Governance: How the Authority ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks	No significant risks identified	No significant weakness identified
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: How the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services	No significant risks identified	No significant weakness identified



Executive Summary (continued)

Independence

The FRC Ethical Standard requires that we provide details of all relationships between Ernst & Young (EY) and the Authority, and its members and senior management and its affiliates, including all services provided by us and our network to the Authority, its members and senior management and its affiliates, and other services provided to other known connected parties that we consider may reasonably be thought to bear on the our integrity or objectivity, including those that could compromise independence and the related safeguards that are in place and why they address the threats.

There are no relationships from 1st April 2022 to the date of this report, which we consider may reasonably be thought to bear on our independence and objectivity.



02 Value for Money Commentary

Value for Money Commentary

Financial Sustainability: How the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services

No significant weakness identified

We identified no risks for the Authority's financial sustainability arrangements in our VFM planning.

In 2022/23 New Forest National Park Authority performed consistently, achieving an overall surplus although this includes a small deficit on provision of services. In March 2022 the Authority had set a balanced budget for the year, to achieve this however, a forecast use of £136k was included. By the year end, the Authority transferred £165k to reserves which included £21k being transferred to the Revenue Support Reserve and £440k to the Financial Stability Reserve which is offset by a transfer from Other Earmarked Reserves of £296k.

From 2022/23 and onwards, a key financial pressure remains the uncertainty surrounding the Authority's main source of income being the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs grant allocation. For 2023/24 onwards, this has been assumed to be a flat roll forward for the grant given in 2022/23 which has not reflected the recent increase in inflation. We can see that this has been considered by the Authority and it has been included in the March 2023 Risk Register. This reflects that the uncertainty are seen as a high risk to the Authority as they have been assigned a risk rating of 20. This has remained consistent post 2022/23, remaining at a score of 20 in the November 2023 Risk Register. The Authority Risk Register also details the mitigations that New Forest National Park Authority have put in place to offset this risk.

The 2023/24 includes the impact of inflation rate rises where the impact could be quantified. The budget remains balanced for 2023/24 and 2024/25, however, a shortfall is predicted for 2025/26 and 2026/27. The Authority has a good record of successful financial planning and living within its means, and therefore, has a good base to identify the solutions to these current proposed budget gaps.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Authority had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to enable it to plan and manage its resources to ensure that it can continue to deliver its services.

Value for Money Commentary (continued)

Governance: How the Authority ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks

No significant weakness identified

We identified no risks for the Authority's governance arrangements in our VFM planning.

The New Forest National Park Authority has oversight of decision making and risk management, and they provide regular updates to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee. The Authority's risk management includes updating and maintaining the risk register, as well as identifying mitigations and countermeasures for each risk. When this is reported to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee they will challenge the risks and countermeasures included which provides assurance that all risks are included with appropriate mitigations.

In 2022/23, the Head of Internal Audit opinion contained a reasonable conclusion. This included reports on the following areas:

- Main Accounting and Reconciliations: Substantial Assurance
- Information Governance - Records Management and Information Requests: Reasonable Assurance
- IT Policies and Procedures: Limited Assurance

The existence of the above arrangements demonstrates that there are sufficient controls in place.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Authority had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to make informed decisions and properly manage its risks.

Value for Money Commentary (continued)

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: How the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

No significant weakness identified

We identified no risks for the Authority's improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness arrangements in our VFM planning.

The Chief Executive reports quarterly on performance to the Authority meeting structures around the themes from the Business Plan. During 2022/23, this was structured around the 2018-21 Business Plan which has been rolled forward for 2021/22, where the themes were 'Protect, Enjoy, Prosper and Achieving Excellence'. In July 2023, the updated Business Plan was agreed for 2023-27.

One of the reports produced and presented by the Authority is the year end outturn and treasury report which documents the key variances in income and expenditure compared to budget and the overall performance for the year. This shows how the Authority reports on both qualitative and quantitative measures to assess performance. The qualitative indications are used to report performance and contain those agreed across all National Parks (known as 'Family Indicators') and local specific indicators to the New Forest National Park Authority. We have obtained the 2022/23 year end report and can see that most of the indicators have met or exceeded the set target.

The 2022/23 outturn report shows that the key variances in expenditure were favourable variances in employee costs and adverse variances in planning costs and central costs. The key variances in income were favourable variances due to the additional £440k grant income from DEFRA and other income generation as well as adverse variances in planning fees.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Authority had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to enable it to plan and manage its resources to ensure that it can continue to deliver its services.



10 Appendices

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Financial Sustainability

We set out below the arrangements for the financial sustainability criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body ensures that it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them	<p>The Authority has various methods in place to ensure it can identify financial pressures, including keeping updated budget and performance reports, to ensure that Authority is on plan to meet budget requirements. These are reported to the Resources, Audit and Performances Committee on a quarterly basis and include information on the budgetary review process and an analysis of all income and expenditure against budget throughout the year. At Q2, the performance was in line with budget with approximately 50% of budgeted expenditure spent and 50% of budgeted income received. Furthermore, the initial budget included a use of £136k of reserves to achieve a balanced budget, however £165k was transferred to reserves by the year end. It is worth noting that this is largely due to the additional DEFRA grant of £440k awarded as a one-off payment in year, as detailed in the Narrative Statement. The Narrative Statements shows the annual comparison between budgeted and actual income and expenditure, which assists in showing whether there are any financial pressures.</p> <p>A going concern note is also prepared within the accounts, and management provide a cash flow forecast demonstrating their ability to carry on as a going concern.</p> <p>Regular Authority and Committee meetings are held, and minutes are available on the Authority's website showing this, and any financial issues would be discussed here.</p> <p>A Risk Register is maintained documenting corporate risks, including financial pressures. During 2022/23, there is one red rated risk. This relates to the fact that the Authority is heavily reliant on the DEFRA grant and therefore, a potential reduction in this grant is recorded as a risk in the register. Whilst the Authority has identified mitigations which can be put in place, the 2023/24 budget report notes that the grant has been 'frozen' since 2018/19 and if the 2010 grant settlement had increased in line with CPI inflation, the grant would equate to £5.6m per annum compared to the £3.25m currently received.</p> <p>We can see that the Risk Register has been reviewed in year and that the Authority has included more detail for each risk since 2021/22, in order to pinpoint specific risks and actions. The red rated risk relating to the DEFRA grant reflects a change in year, where it was not identified as significant in 2021/22.</p>
How the body plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings	<p>The Authority base their expenditure on the DEFRA grant, which makes up the vast majority of their financing. The amount is confirmed by Government, and the Authority can adjust their spending around this, taking into account other locally generated income. The Authority has adequate resources to cover negative variances against budget and to continue to take forward the Authority's work programme and priorities.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Financial Sustainability (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the financial sustainability criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings (Continued)	<p>As noted above, a key area of risk is around the uncertainty related to the receipt of the DEFRA grant which is forecast to remain at £3.251m in 2023/24 and onwards. The budget includes an allowance for inflation where the impact is known and a provision for the projected £1,925 pay award for 2023/24, equating to an additional £100,000. With these costs included, New Forest National Park Authority have projected a balanced budget for 2023/24 and 2024/25, although a shortfall is projected for 2025/26 and 2026/27 of approximately £100k and £150k. The Authority does not have a formal savings programme, however, the quarterly reports show where savings have been made.</p> <p>To reduce budget gaps, and mitigate against the uncertainty concerning the DEFRA grant, the Authority regularly reviews the sources of income to identify possible additional income generation, either internally through the Fundraising Group or externally through the work of the National Parks Partnership.</p> <p>A minimum General Fund Reserve of £350k has been set for 2022/23 and beyond, an increase from £300k as set in 2021/22. In addition to this reserve, the Authority has further reserves set aside with the following balances at 31st March 2023:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning Appeal / Misc Risks = £103k• ICT Replacements = £27k• Investment in Capital / Major Projects = £500k <p>This shows that the Authority has sufficient reserves set aside to cover budget shortfalls.</p>
How the body plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities	<p>As noted above, the vast majority of the Authority's funding comes from the DEFRA grant, which is currently notified to the Authority on an annual basis in advance of the commencement of the year being funded. The Authority plan their expenditure around this, i.e. if there is a lower grant, then that would result in fewer projects being funded. Additionally, the Authority will incur specific spend where funding streams are received from partners. The income and expenditure are matched through the budgeting process, to ensure that the expenditure should not significantly exceed the funding and create ongoing pressures for the Authority at the end of the partnership funding period.</p> <p>In order to further support a sustainable delivery of services, and fund long term projects, the Authority would require a longer-term National Park grant settlement from DEFRA.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Financial Sustainability (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the financial sustainability criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body ensures that its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment, and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system	<p>As a National Park, there are certain goals that should be achieved by the Authority, which are set out by the Government. These are reflected within the Park's Business Plan. During 2022/23, the applicable Business Plan was the 2018-21 Plan, rolled forward for 2022/23. In July 2023, a new plan was created covering the period to 2027.</p> <p>The budget is prepared with reference to the Business Plan, as well as the Partnership Plan, and the Work Programme for the year. The 2023/24 budget shows the planned spend under the new Business Plan, with projects funded for each of the following themes, showing how the priorities are specifically tied to the Authority's budget:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Net Zero• Nature Recovery• Thriving• Inclusive• Team New Forest• Other <p>New Forest National Park Authority plan projects which meet the National Park goals based on the funding levels of the DEGRA grant, and these projects are discussed within Authority meetings. These projects also take into account the wider ambitions of the National Parks Partnership Plan.</p>
How the body identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans	<p>As discussed above, the vast majority of the Authority's funding comes from the DEFRA grant, which currently the Government confirm to New Forest National Park Authority every year. The majority of the expenditure is based upon this grant and therefore, any reduction will just be countered by a reduction in planned projects. As set out above, there is a financial risk included in the Risk Register in relation to this DEFRA grant, with controls being identified to mitigate the risk, such as obtaining additional funding, including through the partnership arrangements.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Governance

We set out below the arrangements for the governance criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body monitors and assesses risk and how the body gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud	<p>New Forest National Park Authority regularly monitor risks, as demonstrated by the updates to the Risk Register and it's consideration at the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee.</p> <p>There is also an Internal Audit function, which provides an interim and final Intern Audit Report, which includes controls and fraud assessments. We have obtained the Head of Internal Audit Opinion for 2022/23 and this function tests whether the internal controls are effective. The Internal Audit Opinion has a reasonable assurance conclusion for 2022/23 and has reported on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main Accounting and Reconciliations: Substantial Assurance• Information Governance - Records Management and Information Requests: Reasonable Assurance• IT Policies and Procedures: Limited Assurance <p>The existence of the above arrangements demonstrates that there are sufficient controls in place.</p> <p>EY has also obtained confirmations from management and those charged with governance to confirm whether any fraud / suspected fraud has taken place and what processes are in place to detect and prevent fraud.</p>
How the body approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process	<p>As discussed above, the vast majority of the Authority's funding comes from the DEFRA grant, which the Government confirm annually with New Forest National Park Authority, and the majority of the expenditure is based upon this grant. Therefore, any reduction will just be countered by a reduction in planned projects.</p> <p>The annual budget is prepared with reference to the DEFRA funding, which influences the projects that can be achieved. These derive from the framework set by the Authority's Business Plan. In addition to this, the Authority works with partnerships for other key projects funded, for example, from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Once funding is secured, the associated spend is built into the annual budget relevant to the period of the partnership projects.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Governance (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the governance criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information where appropriate); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed	<p>A budget report is presented by the Chief finance Officer each quarter, which is discussed and approved at the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee, to ensure the financial side of the Authority is supported by those charged with governance. The quarterly reporting also includes the performance progress reports. These reports include the performance against key performance indicators (KPIs) and whether they are being achieved. The 2022/23 final report shows that the indicators were green rated, showing they were achieved or exceeded.</p> <p>Regular meetings are held by the Authority, and the minutes of these meetings are made available online to the public.</p> <p>There is also an Internal Audit function which provides an interim report and a year end report to confirm that controls are in place properly.</p> <p>Statutory financial reporting is prepared at year-end based on the CIPFA requirements. The Annual Governance Statement and the Narrative Statement confirm that the accounts are prepared in accordance with the relevant CIPFA Code.</p>
How the body ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency. This includes arrangements for effective challenge from those charged with governance/audit committee	<p>Regular meetings are held by the Authority and its committees, of which the meetings, agendas and minutes are open to the public. This gives New Forest National Park Authority an opportunity to discuss key issues, including with those charged with governance, based on decision making papers prepared by officers. The members can then debate and challenge the issues in their discussions.</p> <p>For their specific role as those charged with governance, the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee are informed by the Internal Audit function which provides an objective opinion on the Authority's performance. In year Internal Audit performed reviews during the year that resulted in an overall reasonable assurance opinion being issued.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Governance (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the governance criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of officer or member behaviour (such as gifts and hospitality or declarations/conflicts of interests)	The overarching framework for standards is the Authority's Code of Corporate Governance. Employees are made aware of the laws in relation to regulatory requirements. The Monitoring Officer provides information and advice to officers and members of the Authority. There is a Code of Conduct covering behaviours, and arrangements are in place to capture gifts, hospitality and interests that should be declared, including at public meetings.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

We set out below the arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How financial and performance information has been used to assess performance to identify areas for improvement	<p>The Authority produces quarterly budget reports, which are discussed at the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee meetings. These reports show whether the Authority is on track for a balanced budget, or need to make up for deficits.</p> <p>The Q2 budgetary report showed that the Authority was on course for a balanced budget and at year end achieved an overall surplus although this includes a small deficit on provision of services.</p> <p>The Resources, Performance and Audit Committee also contains within its terms of reference the remit to monitor and review the performance of the Authority. It receives and reviews progress reports against the annual objectives for the year that are contained within the Business Plan.</p> <p>The Authority produces a year end outturn and treasury report which documents the key variances in income and expenditure compared to budget and the overall performance for the year. This report confirms that the Authority received 101% of the budgeted income and spent 101% of budgeted expenditure.</p> <p>The key variances in expenditure were favourable variances in employee costs and adverse variances in planning costs and central costs. The key variances in income were favourable variances due to the additional £440k grant income from DEFRA and other income generation as well as adverse variances in planning fees.</p>
How the body evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement	<p>The Authority maintains a Risk Register which allows it to address any risks that they are facing, which includes potential risks which could affect the park's services. The Risk Register includes mitigating factors to address these risks.</p> <p>The budget reports presented by the Chief Finance Officer also show that the Authority are ensuring they are able to finance the services they expect to provide.</p> <p>Performance reports are produced against the objectives of the Business Plans. The reports contain analysis of the current performance, and when actions are needed, these are identified and enacted.</p> <p>The indicators used to report performance contain those agreed across all National Parks – the 'Family Indicators' and local specific indicators to the New Forest National Park Authority. At year end, this is summarised in an annual year end report. We have obtained the 2022/23 year end report and can see that all indicators have been met or exceeded the set target</p> <p>Annual business planning takes into account the current position against the objectives and incorporates relevant changes.</p>

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting Sub-Criteria	Findings
How the body ensures it delivers its role within significant partnerships, engages with stakeholders it has identified, monitors performance against expectations, and ensures action is taken where necessary to improve	<p>The Authority participates in regular committee meetings which are available to the public to review. The public are also allowed to engage directly with the Authority during their meetings.</p> <p>The Park continues to adhere to the National Parks Partnership targets / standards, and we can see which of these that New Forest National Park Authority have aligned themselves with as the Partnership Plan is disclosed on the website within the meeting agendas.</p> <p>The Authority produces certain documents throughout the year which give the stakeholders, i.e. the public, employees etc an understanding of how the Authority is reporting, such as through the budget reports.</p> <p>The annual financial statements are also available to the public during the inspection period, and also once published as the audited document. The Narrative Statement and Governance Statement provide transparent detail of in year performance for the public to view. There is also a 'Transparency' section on the Authority website, which gives the public the ability to review and scrutinise the Authority expenditure.</p> <p>There is also a reasonable governance structure in place to ensure performance expectations are met.</p>
How the body ensures that commissioning and procuring services is done in accordance with relevant legislation, professional standards and internal policies, and how the body assesses whether it is realising the expected benefits	<p>There are internal controls in place to ensure correct procurement, i.e. budget levels are set for certain employees; there are budget levels in capital purchases, if an item is above a set amount, a budget control officer must sign this off. Contracting and procurement processes are set out in the Contract Standing Orders, which are published on the Authority website.</p> <p>The 'Transparency' section of the website also publishes opportunities to provide goods and services and links to the Procurement Strategy.</p> <p>There is an Internal Audit function that tests whether the controls in place are effective.</p> <p>There are regular committee meetings to discuss the Authority performance, and any issues can be raised here. The Authority confirms within its Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Statement, that it has performed in accordance with relevant legislation.</p>

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