BRECON BEACONS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

EVALUATION OF SCRUTINY PROCESS 2012
FOREWORD

Scrutiny is currently high on the Welsh and Local Government agenda, with two key reports having been published in the last six months:

- **Welsh Government’s Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery (Williams Report)**

  The report highlighted the fact that ‘the fundamental importance of scrutiny in driving improvement was not recognised’, and recommended that ‘organisations must regard scrutiny as an investment to deliver improvements and future savings. They must resource and support scrutiny accordingly.’

  It also recommended that ‘formal scrutiny bodies must engage more effectively with the public and partners. That should include the co-optation of individuals from advocacy and other groups onto scrutiny committees to increase such committees’ capacity and capability to provide constructive and informed scrutiny.’

  The report refers to the ‘less well developed’ concept of scrutiny outside local authorities, but sadly makes no reference to the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority model despite the Commission having requested an additional report on this.

- **Wales Audit Office: ‘Good Scrutiny? Good Question!’ (Auditor General for Wales Improvement Study: Scrutiny in Local Government)**

  While confining its research to principal authorities, this study reflected outcomes from the national conference held on 28 November 2013 ‘Scrutiny in the Spotlight: Investing to maximise its impact’ as well as extensive research and peer review with authorities. The Authority had member and officer presence at this event.

  The report’s findings in terms of identifying good and improving practice, and in giving assurance that the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority has evolved an effective scrutiny model, are extremely helpful and are recommended to members.  

  The recommendations highlight the importance of:

  - clarifying scrutiny roles and providing training and support to members;
  - drawing effectively on the work of audit and regulation which complements external review
  - ensuring that external review takes account of scrutiny outputs to plan and deliver their work;

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ensuring that the impact of scrutiny is properly evaluated and acted upon to improve its effectiveness, including monitoring actions and outcomes;

- adopting Participation Cymru’s 10 Principles for Public Engagement³ in improving engagement with the public and stakeholders.

### The Designated Person Order

The Welsh Government is currently consulting on this, which would empower local authorities to scrutinize other bodies, including National Park Authorities. There has been some concern expressed about the capacity of local authorities to carry out this additional function as well as improving their own scrutiny work.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

National Park Authorities (NPAs) are special purpose local authorities and are not required to have a formal scrutiny process in place. There is no executive or board to scrutinise as all members sit as the decision making body - the ‘Authority’ and therefore a different model of scrutiny is required in order to provide objectivity and transparency.

In 2007/8 and 2008/9 the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA) received a series of critical audit reports on its compliance and performance. Changes in senior management and strong leadership from members provided opportunities to address this, recognising the potential of scrutiny to mitigate future poor performance, as highlighted in Beyond Boundaries (Citizen Centred Local Services for Wales):

> “All public service organisations should welcome scrutiny as a means to improve and learn.”
> (Paragraph 3.23)

In 2010/11 the Authority successfully applied for a grant from WG’s Scrutiny Development Fund to develop a scrutiny model for NPAs which could be disseminated across UK National Parks. Pembrokeshire Coast NPA partnered us in this bid and the subsequent 18 month project. This has encouraged Snowdonia NPA subsequently to undertake a joint scrutiny review with PCNPA.

The Scrutiny Project comprised members, officers, training expertise (Frances Taylor, Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Associate), with overview and support from Tim Buckle (WLGA) and Ed Hammond (CfPS). Methodology was developed through member officer workshops but also through two pilot scrutiny reviews, which, while designed to test the process, were valid studies in their own right. The topics (the effectiveness of the Sustainable Development Fund in encouraging low carbon communities, and our statutory role in maintaining the rights of way network) used a range of evidence gathering methods, including a focus group with external contributors as part of a training session in order to observe and refine process. Learning points from the first study informed the second, and this approach has continued through all subsequent scrutiny reviews.

Members were clear from the outset that the key element of the scrutiny should be non-confrontational challenge with the aim of improving services:

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³ Given at Appendix 2 of the above report
‘A fact finding, objective process, led by Members, addressing issues and concerns as to the effectiveness of delivery of the Park’s objectives and the needs of the public, producing actionable recommendations that add value to the Park’s accountability and impact.’ - PCNPA member

Outcomes from the Scrutiny Project included:

- Scrutiny Policy\(^4\), processes and toolkit developed based on citizen focused service improvement
- Scrutiny reviews of two improvement objectives (selected through public online vote) per annum to provide evidence to the Wales Audit Office and the public,
- Reviews carried out by panels of members, the public (including town and community councillors and experts), and an officer from an unrelated directorate who scope the review and agree a communication strategy
- Recommendations for service improvements approved by the Authority and action plans monitored to ensure these are implemented
- Members with new or enhanced skills in scrutiny become more effective in challenging performance internally and in their external roles
- Opportunities for peer learning and review, sharing good practice between authorities
- Strengthened Member Officer understanding and working relationships
- A body of evidence for decision making and objective setting
- Dissemination to UK NPAs as a scrutiny model through officer networks
- Opportunities for future joint scrutiny reviews, with NPAs and local authorities
- A process valued by members, officers, the public and welcomed by the WAO and Welsh Government (the recent Williams Commission in Wales requested an additional report on our scrutiny process as they were interested in the ‘model’).
- Total of four scrutiny reviews undertaken and action plans developed since February 2012\(^5\)

The subsequent involvement of the public, not only in giving evidence but also sitting on scrutiny panels and ‘voting’ for areas of work to be scrutinised, has become the core strength of our process and a means of addressing any potential lack of objectivity in the NPA model.

2.0 PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The process agreed for BBNPA at the end of the project was as follows:

\(^4\) [http://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/the-authority/who-we-are/scrutiny](http://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/the-authority/who-we-are/scrutiny)

\(^5\) [http://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/the-authority/who-we-are/scrutiny](http://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/the-authority/who-we-are/scrutiny)
Since 2012 the process has been refined as follows:

- The six National Park Management Plan themes now comprise the Authority’s Corporate Goals, out of which improvement objectives are selected (these are audited by WAO)
- The Authority takes account of a public online vote before deciding which improvement objectives to scrutinise
- Of the two improvement objectives to be scrutinised, one is taken from the previous year and one from the current year;
- The Audit and Scrutiny Committee receives progress reports on those improvement objectives which are not subject to full scrutiny.

However, both Members and Officers have commented that linking scrutiny reviews to improvement objectives may limit the ability to target scrutiny where there are real or perceived problems in service delivery, and it is recognised that scrutiny reviews can cause capacity issues if targeted within the same directorate.

The scrutiny process is made up of the following components:

### 2.1 Summary of Topics and Selection Process

The process for choosing these has been refined over the last few years, starting with the two pilot reviews undertaken during the Scrutiny Project.

a) Sustainable Development Fund – Pilot Study

The Sustainable Development Fund was the first topic selected for a pilot study during the Scrutiny Project as outlined above. It was selected by the joint group of Members at a
scrutiny workshop on 9th May 2011 at PCNPA’s offices in Pembroke Dock. Prof Alan Lovell volunteered to lead this study and the panel, consisting of Members from both Authorities, set out to research the effectiveness of the SDF in promoting low carbon communities of their respective National Parks. Methodology used for this study included telephone interviews, a hearing and site visits. Indeed, the hearing was conducted at a scrutiny workshop for Members to learn together from the process.

b) Rights of Way – Pilot Study

Rights of Way was the topic selected for a second pilot study to be carried out by the two Authorities. The topic was selected at a joint scrutiny workshop at BBNPA’s offices in Brecon on 25th July. Mrs Margaret Underwood led the panel of Members from both Authorities and researched issues such as Authority management of the Public Rights of Way, value for money and establishing similar criteria to assess the rights of way management to enable the two Authorities to compare like with like for this study and into the future.

The study highlighted the discrepancy in funding available to PCNPA and BBNPA relative to the extent of Rights of Way each were responsible for maintaining and recommendations to address this and other issues were agreed. It also highlighted a fundamental difference in how the respective Parks defined paths as open and accessible, which resulted in the Authority being able to show a higher percentage of paths open.

Further Topic Selection

Following the programme of scrutiny workshops and training sessions and at the final joint workshop on the 11th November 2011 Members discussed the way forward for scrutiny in their respective Authorities. Following a report to Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 9th March 2012 and then to NPA on 30 March 2012 Members agreed that the topic selection of scrutiny studies should be drawn from the Authority’s Improvement Objectives. It was concluded that the Authority would carry out two scrutiny studies per financial year with topics chosen from the list of Improvement Objectives - one forward looking from the current year’s list of objectives and one reviewing a topic taken from the previous year’s list of objectives. The Panel for each study should be made up of no more than six members to include one member as chair of the panel.

While the desirability of including a public online vote on the topic choice was highlighted, it was felt that for the first year the process should be left to ‘bed in’. The point was also made that the Authority should have the final say in the topic in order to avoid repetition, address capacity issues and apply any other political and external factors to the choice.

c) Minimise Harm to the Environment

The first of the Authority’s official scrutiny studies, the topic was recommended by the Audit and Scrutiny Committee and approved by the NPA on the 3rd February 2012. Prof Alan Lovell led the panel of Members and Richard Mears, HR Manager, joined the panel as an independent Authority officer, together with the Deputy Chairman of the Brecon Beacons Park Society – the first external member. The study employed methodology such
as telephone interviews of other UK National Park Authorities and Authority staff interviews

d) Communities: Inspiration and Benefit

The Improvement Objective for communities was recommended to and approved by the NPA on the 30th March 2012 following discussions at Audit & Scrutiny Committee on 9th March 2012. Mrs Margaret Underwood led the panel for this study and for the first time Authority Members of the panel were joined by various representatives of local organisations including One Voice Wales, The Green Valleys, Brecon Beacons Tourism and Powys Youth Forum.

e) Pre Application Planning Advice

To improve the Authority’s engagement with the public a list of possible scrutiny topics was posted on the website for people to vote for the improvement objective they felt should be subject to scrutiny. The results of the vote – 17 votes received – were reported to NPA on the 22nd March 2013. On consideration of the voting figures the members selected the Planning improvement objective for scrutiny. At a subsequent scoping meeting and in recognition that a single review could not address the whole content of this objective, the topic was narrowed to the pre application advice provided by the Authority in view of the fact that the process had been in place for two years and a review was very timely. Cllr Geraint Hopkins chaired this study and the panel was made up of Authority members, town and community councilors and a Farmers’ Union Wales representative.

f) Archaeology

The Authority’s effectiveness in conserving and enhancing the Park’s archaeological heritage was the topic selected at NPA by Members on 3rd May 2013 on consideration of a public vote. Social media was used to promote the voting and incentivised with a prize draw - as a result 104 votes were received. Ian Rowat chaired the panel of members and Matt Scanlon, the Authority’s Management Plan Officer, joined the panel.

g) Communities: Social Resilience

The Communities improvement objective was selected for a second time by Members at NPA on the 7th February 2013 on consideration of a public vote. 17 votes were received. To narrow the area of the study and to avoid duplication of resources it was decided to focus this study on the social resilience of communities to adapt to or withstand change. This reflected some current consideration of National Park Authorities’ ability to support communities’ economic regeneration. Mrs Margaret Underwood is leading this study and the panel comprises Authority Members, Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations (PAVO), Powys County Council, One Voice Wales representatives and members of the public.

This current topic selection is an example of how the Authority is considering the bigger picture. In October 2014 the Authority will be hosting the National Parks Wales Seminar with the theme of how NPAs deliver Welsh Government objectives through their statutory purposes and duty. The information and evidence gathered during this scrutiny review will both inform the seminar
workshops and provide the basis for site visits for delegates. With no additional capacity the Authority is using its limited resources judiciously.

### 2.2 Evidence Gathering

A wide range of methods (see table below) was tested from the outset and this has developed with each review as lessons were learned on the effectiveness of each method, but also which methods suited the topic. For example the community benefit scrutiny was an extremely wide ranging topic which required the panel to reach not only a higher number of consultees, but also people with whom the Authority had not necessarily worked previously. Because of the esoteric nature of the topic, where measures were harder to establish, a staff focus group provided invaluable evidence of work being done to support objectives but not always recorded as such or effectively cross referenced to work in other directorates. This gave a more realistic and positive picture of performance and was a major recommendation as an aid to future performance monitoring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology Employed for each Scrutiny Study</th>
<th>Questionnaires</th>
<th>Online survey</th>
<th>Hearing/face to face interview</th>
<th>Site Visit</th>
<th>Secondary Evidence</th>
<th>Telephone Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Workshop as part of existing meeting</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Email request for info (external)</th>
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<td>Rights of Way</td>
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<td>Communities - Inspiration &amp; Benefit</td>
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### 2.3 Toolkit

The toolkit comprises a wide range of guidance notes, templates and checklists and has been routinely used by the lead members of each scrutiny review (see table below). The most regularly used and arguably the most helpful have been the scoping template (which provides a checklist to help the panel avoid duplicating previous work or overlapping with internal or external audit) and the report format, although some lead members have also found mindmapping techniques useful as preparation for writing the final report.

<table>
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<th>Have we used?</th>
<th>Toolkit</th>
<th>Have we used?</th>
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<td>Scrutiny report format</td>
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<td>How to request a review</td>
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<td>Scrutiny policy</td>
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<td>Planning a Review (scoping)</td>
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<td>Questioning skills</td>
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<td>Guidance notes for</td>
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6 This was drafted before the process of linking scrutiny to Improvement Objectives was agreed
7 Witnesses were given verbal advice and may also have been given a hard copy of the advice note
8 While each review included a ‘lessons learned’ section, this form was not routinely completed
2.4 Timescale for Reviews

The scrutiny process has several distinct phases:

a) Topic selection (public vote, Authority decision, appointment of NPA members to the panel)
b) Scoping the topic (sometimes run as a two stage process with lead member and key officers, then with wider panel including external members – this has the advantage of ensuring that the scope is realistic in terms of data available and staff resources but also gives opportunity for objective input from the public members on the panel)
c) Evidence gathering (the longest phase where several workstreams might run concurrently)
d) Collation of evidence (by lead member, Democratic Services Manager and Scrutiny Officer)
e) Report drafted and circulated to the panel for comments – done via a meeting or email
f) Draft report to Corporate Management Team and Audit and Scrutiny Committee for comments
g) Final report to NPA with instructions to officers to produce an action plan (reported to Audit and Scrutiny Committee)
h) Action plan developed, approved, implemented and then monitored.

The Authority agreed to carry out two scrutiny reviews per annum. Given the number of people involved and the fact that this is on top of the ‘day job’ the final reports have been produced within an acceptable timescale, particularly considering that there is an overlap between the first review final phase and the second review first phase each year. While this overlap is undoubtedly a ‘pinch point’ for officers, it has been manageable with care.

The timings of each review are given below. The different lengths of the studies was influenced by factors such as the availability of members (particularly the lead member), the number of external people co-opted onto the panel, the breadth of evidence required, and capacity in the corporate diary (financial year end, holiday periods).
3.0 MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

The Authority comprises 24 members, 16 of whom are appointed from constituent authorities and eight from the Welsh Government. Local Authority members have ward duties and often many roles and responsibilities in their appointing authorities and many of the Welsh Government members work part or full time as well as holding down a range of other public or private roles. Since 2009 scrutiny has been used by the Authority as a valuable tool for seeking assurance of performance but has also been seen as a learning opportunity both in terms of scrutiny skills (chairing and questioning skills) and also working with officers to understand key areas of the Authority’s work. This in turn has led to improved confidence in challenging performance in committee and in contributing to policy formation.

Member capacity has been an issue since the outset of the Scrutiny Project, compounded by more than 50% change in local authority membership in 2012, where the Authority lost some of the members who had developed the scrutiny process. Members joining in 2012 inherited a process that was starting to embed into the Authority’s governance but many of them, particularly those who were new councillors, could not commit time to scrutiny reviews as well as committee and working group roles. Many of them also have scrutiny roles within their own authorities. This was acknowledged but the then Chairman was keen that all members should take part in at least one scrutiny review during their membership. As can be seen from the table below this has not yet been achieved but we are currently halfway through the local government cycle and it is hoped that more members will be able to commit a small amount of time to add value to the process. In spite of that, 75% of all current members have participated in at least one scrutiny review (see table and graph below). Participation in studies can vary hugely, from involvement by light touch review via email, to leading the review. The ratio of local authority appointed members and Welsh Government appointed members does not always reflect the two thirds/one third composition of the Authority and it is worth noting that six out of the seven studies to date have been led by the latter.

Because of the limited capacity of members, the drive to encourage more public engagement has become urgent, but this has had significant benefits as will be seen in Section 5 below.

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### BBNPA Member Involvement in Scrutiny Studies (Current Members)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Powys</th>
<th>Cllr Evan Morgan</th>
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<td>Cllr Michael Jones</td>
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<td>Cllr Paul Ashton</td>
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<td>Cllr Mrs Rosemarie Harris</td>
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<td>Cllr Chris Davies</td>
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<td>Cllr Jeff Holmes</td>
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<td>Cllr Geraint Hopkins</td>
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<td>Cllr David Meredith</td>
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<td>Monmouth</td>
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<td>Cllr Mrs Ann Webb</td>
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<td>Carmarthens</td>
<td>Cllr Glynog Davies</td>
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<td>Cllr Andrew James</td>
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<td>Merthyr</td>
<td>Cllr Ray Thomas</td>
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<td>Torfaen</td>
<td>Cllr Alun Furzer</td>
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<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>Cllr Mike Bartlett</td>
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<td>Cllr Mrs Jane Ward</td>
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<td>Welsh Gov</td>
<td>Mrs Carys Howell</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prof Alan Lovell</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ms Melanie Doel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mr Martin Buckle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mrs Margaret Underwood</td>
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<td>Mr Edward Evans</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mrs Julie James</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mr Ian Rowat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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- **Panel Member**
- **Lead Member**
4.0 OFFICER ENGAGEMENT

Capacity has been an issue for officers as well as members. As the Authority, unlike the principal authorities, is not required to carry out scrutiny it does not have a dedicated scrutiny team. The Scrutiny Project was led by the Democratic Services Manager with support from the Chief Executive and senior officers, who participated in the skills training sessions and contributed their views to the emerging scrutiny model. The Project funding enabled a part time administrative officer to be employed who has subsequently been engaged on a permanent basis funded by savings effected in the Democratic Services budget. While not having a scrutiny background the officer has acquired a high level of skill in supporting the scrutiny reviews and is a vital resource if the Authority is to continue its scrutiny function. The officer also covers a range of democratic and office tasks and is currently providing some assistance with a maternity cover in the Education section, which has enabled considerable savings to be made. With wide ranging responsibilities the Democratic Services Manager is not able to commit as much time as she would like to support the scrutiny process but oversees the process, supports the lead member and the officers and provides a strategic role.

In the same way that members have been able to use the scrutiny process as a learning experience, the suggestion that an officer from a different directorate from the subject under scrutiny should be a panel member has led to skills acquisition, experience of working with members and the public, and increased awareness of what is achieved in other parts of the organisation. It has also encouraged officers to look more critically at the services we provide and make suggestions for improvement.

“The buy-in of officers is vital to the scrutiny process and by making it very clear from the outset that this process is non confrontational has certainly helped. I think the option of being able to have officers from other activity areas together with co-opting external people will further strengthen this approach.” BBNPA Member, Scrutiny Project Final Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officer Involvement for each review</th>
<th>Principal Officer for Review</th>
<th>Additional Officers involved in evidence gathering</th>
<th>Independent Officer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lead Officer for Scrutiny</strong> (Julia Gruffydd, Democratic Services Manager) and Scrutiny Administrator (Lora Davies) involved in all reviews</td>
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<td><strong>1. Sustainable Development Fund</strong></td>
<td>Sustainable Communities Manager - Clare Parsons</td>
<td>SDF Officers - Ceri Bevan/Helen Roderick</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Rights of Way</strong></td>
<td>Rights of Way Officer - Eifion Jones</td>
<td>Wardens Manager - Judith Harvey, Warden - Helen Pye, Geopark Development Officer - Alan Bowring, NP Management Plan Officer - Brad Welch</td>
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5.0 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

During the Scrutiny Project Members and Officers were keen to find a way of involving the public in the scrutiny process, with encouragement from the CfPS who arguably saw the emerging National Park Authority model as providing more informal but effective ways of engaging with local communities as opposed to the more formal local authority scrutiny function.

The levels of public engagement are given below for each of the scrutiny reviews:
### Public Engagement Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures for each scrutiny study</th>
<th>Panel Membership</th>
<th>Questionnaires</th>
<th>Online survey</th>
<th>Hearing/Face to face interview</th>
<th>Site Visit</th>
<th>Schools Visits</th>
<th>Telephone interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Workshop as part of existing meeting</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Total Public Engagement</th>
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<td>1. Sustainable Development Fund*</td>
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*Pilot study prior to scrutiny being formally adopted by BBNPA

**This study is in its early stages and is still engaging with the public as part of the evidence gathering

### Figures for engagement via the topic selection vote

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<th>Figures for engagement via the topic selection vote</th>
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<td>Total votes</td>
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<td>Total figure for Public Engagement via the scrutiny process</td>
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### 6.0 PERCEPTIONS OF THE SCRUTINY PROCESS

#### 6.1 Members and Officers

A recent survey of external contributors, Authority members and officers provided the following feedback:

85% agree that the scrutiny process is objective and transparent
65% agree that it leads to service improvements and 90% felt it added value to service users
90% agree that it encourages constructive criticism internally and externally
85% agreed that contributions from external partners and the public are valued
55% agree that the process has given them a better understanding of what the Authority does and how it operates
68% would be happy to contribute to future scrutiny reviews
73% would watch the Authority’s webcasts on other topics in future

Anecdotal feedback from officers involved in scrutiny reviews has been positive and most have welcomed the interest shown in their area of work. There is, however, an emerging issue with the scrutiny topic selection being linked to improvement objectives. Because the improvement objectives relate to key workstreams in the National Park Management Plan they tend to be focused primarily on the Countryside Directorate and secondly on the Planning Directorate. This has several implications:

- Officer capacity, particularly for those who manage a range of service areas and who may be asked to contribute to successive reviews
- Overlap of topics where improvement objectives have been carried forward or amended only slightly from the previous year
- The link to improvement objectives limits the ability of the Authority to focus on other areas of work about which members (or the public) may have concerns

6.2 The Public

The Authority recently submitted an application to the Centre for Public Scrutiny ‘Good Scrutiny Awards’ and as part of this submission, sought some feedback from external stakeholders who had been involved as panel members. The following quotations were used in the submission:

I have been involved with the Brecon Beacon National Park Authority as a consultee for many years as a Community Councillor and currently as a clerk to several Community Councils. For many years the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority did not appear to take on board the views or concerns of residents living in the National Park Area, but since the introduction of a clear scrutiny process this has improved greatly. Independent scrutiny panels have been set up consisting of individuals and other external interested parties, enabling the Authority to enhance the objectives of the Authority and improve public interaction.” (Adrian Edwards, Clerk to Llanelly, Llangattock and Raglan Community Councils, Panel Member for the Planning Review)

“I haven’t taken part in a similar process before so I didn’t have a comparator, and the topic under scrutiny was particularly difficult to evaluate on a quantitative basis. It was a brave choice and despite the rather bureaucratic parameters that are inevitable in the process, it was conducted in a way that enabled far greater and more meaningful participation by Park residents, community groups, businesses and other stakeholders.

I thought that the process made genuine and useful attempts at qualitative evaluation through inviting external stakeholders such as Arts Alive Wales to participate, through the meetings with groups outside the usual ‘park’ stakeholders, through the survey monkey work and by the very open nature of the conversations that took place at all the meetings I attended. I also thought that everyone that took part came with an open mind, and approached the questions with seriousness, openness and integrity.” (Justine Wheatley, Director, Arts Alive Wales, Crickhowell, Panel Member on the Community Inspiration Review)
The scrutiny process has also been beneficial in altering external perceptions of the Authority. Indeed, some of the external panel members have openly expressed quite negative views at the outset of reviews but subsequently become enthusiastic contributors and appeared to enjoy the experience of working with members and officers in an informal and open way. The increasing number of people who have engaged with the scrutiny process, and who inevitably will discuss their involvement with third parties, bodes well for continued reputational improvement amongst the Park’s communities. While it is likely that some negative perceptions will continue based on historical or perceived performance, there is evidence that scrutiny is one process through which the Authority’s reputation is improving.

6.3 Wales Audit Office

The Wales Audit Office has kept a watching brief on the Authority’s development of scrutiny and its effectiveness. The extracts from audits carried out in 2010 onwards showed that in their opinion, the Authority has made effective use of scrutiny to drive performance improvement and accountability, as well as improving public perception and accessibility to governance.

WAO Preliminary Assessment Report – July 2010

This report highlighted the difficulty for the Authority in establishing an effective scrutiny model but recognised its efforts to address this and welcomed the start of the Scrutiny Project:

“A key element of the Authority’s response to the problems referred to in paragraph 10 is a fundamental review of its governance arrangements. Members are actively involved in reviewing scrutiny methodology and, although the review is ongoing, it has already delivered significant changes to the way the Authority operates.”

WAO Corporate Assessment Report – July 2011

“The Authority’s active involvement in a Welsh Government Scrutiny Project is already delivering benefits with the likelihood of further improvements to come in its ability to oversee and manage performance.”

WAO Improvement Assessment Letter – September 2012

“During the year to 31 March 2012, supported by the Welsh Government Scrutiny Development Fund, the Authority carried out a joint project with Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority to develop a model for effective scrutiny within the governance structure of a National Park Authority. Subsequently, the Authority has adopted as scrutiny model and in 2012-13 will, for the first time, carry out scrutiny reviews of one improvement objective for the previous year and one for the current year.”

WAO Annual Improvement Report 2012-13

“.....This (scrutiny) is a relatively new, innovative approach that greatly strengthens the Authority’s approach to scrutinising its performance and to help identify areas for improvement.”

WAO Draft Annual Improvement Report 2013-14

1. We also found that the Authority’s approach to evaluating and reporting on its performance continues to improve, supported by its inclusive approach to governance.
2. The Authority has made significant progress in its aim of improving public confidence in, and accessibility to, the Authority’s conduct of business and governance. The range of initiatives and projects in this area are too numerous to describe in detail within this report but the main areas of progress are set out in the following paragraphs.

3. The Authority was the first national park authority in the UK and one of the first local authorities in Wales to introduce webcasting of its meetings. This practice allows interested parties to view the meetings live or to watch a recording of any meeting at a later date, as well as providing access to all relevant documents relating to the meeting. Indexing allows viewers to select those items on the agenda that they are most interested in. The process increases the Authority’s accountability and helps promote better understanding of the Authority’s activities and the way it makes decisions.

4. This commitment to engaging with stakeholders is further demonstrated by the Authority’s approach to delivering its scrutiny function. Examples of this include:
   - Sending questionnaires to ecologists and conservation officers from various organisations and incorporating the feedback into the Authority’s scrutiny study into biodiversity.
   - As part of scrutiny work into inspiration and benefit within communities, the Authority invited individuals and representatives from relevant organisations onto its scrutiny panel. Examples of further engagement with stakeholders in relation to this study include:
     - carrying out an online survey;
     - visiting schools to talk to pupils
     - meeting with representatives from an artists’ collective;
     - attending three community council meetings to consult with their members; and
     - running a session at a Powys Youth Forum conference.
   - The Authority used its website to successfully elicit public voting on which of the Authority’s improvement objectives should next be the subject of scrutiny.

5. Overall, the Authority estimates that over 300 people were involved in its scrutiny work by way of sitting on relevant panels, completing questionnaires, taking part in focus groups or being interviewed. The Williams Commission expressed interest in the Authority’s approach to scrutiny and requested a further report from the Authority, which was subsequently submitted in October 2013.

7.0 OUTCOMES

Each scrutiny review concludes with a series of prioritised recommendations and learning points being made to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee, which considers these, makes any amendments or challenges assumptions, and recommends them to the National Park Authority. Officers are then asked to draw up an action plan to demonstrate how they intend to implement the recommendations. These have identified a lead officer and attempted to prioritise the actions, but have not to date included resource implications, although there has been a presumption throughout all scrutiny reviews that there is no additional budget at the Authority’s disposal and that there will be a focus on ‘doing things differently’ and improving or increasing outcomes through partnership working. The last action plan, arising out of the Archaeology review, has included reference to resource implications.

To date scrutiny reviews have delivered a range of improvements in the following areas:

- Service delivery
- Better communication internally and externally
- Identified gaps in data held by the Authority
• Potential for future funding opportunities
• Promotion of services
• Sharing good practice
• Increasing income
• Partnership working
• Reputation of the Authority as an open and transparent organisation

Detailed action plans are available for all but the first pilot review but a summary of outcomes for each scrutiny review is given below:

7.1 Sustainable Development Fund

• The SDF Annual Report is now approved by the National Park Authority and provides an excellent document with which to promote and increase awareness of SDF.
• SDF Officers have been working with the Powys Food Alliance to help them expand and develop.
• Renewable Energy – SDF Officers have attended events hosted by Farming Connect. They also continue to support Talybont on Usk Energy and The Green Valleys, who carry out a large amount of mentoring of other potential groups. In addition Community Energy Wales and Sustainable Steps have provided access to experts for Community Groups.
• As a result of the scrutiny report, BBNPA SDF Officers have been in regular contact with the SDF Officer in Pembrokeshire Coast NPA and they continue to share best practice between the Park communities.
• The SDF members continually identify positive opportunities to publicise SDF to the Welsh Government
• The nature of SDF was recently adjusted and it is no longer a ring fenced fund within the National Park budget
• Competition – The idea of establishing a competition was discussed with officers, however they had concerns that SDF was not a large enough fund to be able to offer and sustain a programme of this nature. Additionally with forecasted budget cuts suggesting a potential reduction (which has since materialised) of the SDF amount available it was agreed that SDF should continue to pump prime projects through seed corn funding. To applicants this remains one of the most valuable elements of the fund as it is often the lynch pin to successful projects.

7.2 Rights of Way

• 21 recommendations made – all completed or ongoing
• Powys increased 2012/13 contribution by 41% (£14,100)
• Changes made to performance indicator methodology to facilitate comparisons with other authorities
• Changes to funding application process to include costs of maintaining rights of way network on relevant projects
• Improvements to stock control process
• Mechanism for recording volunteer hours on rights of way work
• Contributed to the health agenda by promoting Walking Prescriptions to Walkers are Welcome Towns (Crickhowell, Hay on Wye and Talgarth)
• Targeting resources to routes with greatest usage and including this in the Visitor Management Plan
Anomalies on rights of way system now categorized by priority according to usage level and impact on the network

7.3 Minimising Impact on the Environment

- 3 recommendations made
- Authority now uses the National Park Management Plan themes as its corporate goals with the actions prioritized each year as objectives
- Ongoing work to broaden the area of the Park which is the focus of improvement projects (improved working with key landowners). The Authority has identified focal areas for site management involving partnership working and has been very successful in assisting graziers to establish their Common Land Schemes on Mynydd Du SSSI, as well as closer partnership working with landowners and graziers on the Black Mountains SSSI.
- Strengthening baseline data. The Authority, with Cardiff University, entered a strategic partnership agreement and launched a research prospectus in March 2014 to undertake research that will provide better evidence on which to base decisions about the Park. The Authority is also developing a monitoring protocol and appropriate tools to gradually build up capacity for monitoring and surveillance.
- Useful data gathered on how other National Park Authorities minimize harm to the environment – a future study could usefully consider how public involvement could achieve more in this endeavour.
- Has helped to shift mindsets in that the Authority is increasingly seen as the facilitator/instigator/organizer of the Park’s stewardship, conservation and enhancement rather than the primary ‘doer’ of each of these. While this is an ongoing process of change and adaption, the study was helpful as part of this continuing transformation process.

7.4 Community Inspiration and Benefit

- 11 recommendations made – all completed or being progressed.
- Improved awareness and recording of how work across the Authority can contribute to delivery of objectives over and above key performance indicators
- Promoting awareness of planning process and its legislative context – more user friendly letters to applicants, Director of Planning with monthly newspaper column, liaising with Farming Connect to ensure planning consultants have up to date information and seminar held on rural planning
- Planning Services Guide produced
- Results Based Accountability methodology applied to all external surveys in future to assess reasons for surveys and the anticipated outcomes, also process for internal storage of survey results both to support data (on Ffynnon) and for staff to access
- Reinforcing ethos of customer service with mystery shopper exercise in 2013
- Who does what list
- Highlighting the important of evaluation – officer workshop led by NPA member
- Biannual community newsletter
- Central register of Authority-wide studies, questionnaires and analysis and research projects created.

7.5 Planning – Paid Pre-application Advice Service

- 7 recommendations made – all completed or progressing
• Increased promotion of paid planning service (guidance notes published on the website, service highlighted at town and community council training, article in the next community newsletter, specific section in the new Planning Services Guide)
• Service charges reviewed and increased to include specialist services
• Clearer letters to applicants to avoid misunderstandings
• Consistency assured through those providing the paid pre-application advice remaining with any ensuing planning application
• Good liaison established with Farming Connect to ensure up to date planning advice and workshops/meetings planned to deliver this
• Attending meetings to influence any increase in the planning fees in Wales

7.6 Archaeology

• 10 recommendations made (action plan just drawn up)
• Library of published material
• Memoranda of Understanding with Cadw and Archaeological Trusts to clarify roles and encourage further joint working
• Wider representation of service areas in grant applications
• Training day for members and officers
• Inclusion of archaeology in the Research Prospectus
• Train volunteers to monitor and record Scheduled Ancient Monuments

While some of these outcomes will take longer to achieve it is evident that the scrutiny reviews have resulted in a wide range of improvements, some of which might appear to be obvious, but focusing on a given area of work has helped members and officers look objectively at service delivery, internal processes and communication, and has also helped to break down internal silos by involving officers from different directorates and sections to provide evidence. The non-confrontational nature of the reviews has also encouraged officers to give their own views about their service area and their honesty and genuine desire to make a difference has been a major strength of the scrutiny process.

8.0 VALUE FOR MONEY

It is difficult to quantify the cost of the scrutiny process except through the cost of the Administrative Officer (c£10,000 pa) and the Authority member attendance and mileage (since mid 2013 members have been paid an annual allowance rather than an attendance allowance so the cost has been absorbed). In reality many of the meetings have been held when members are in the office for other meetings and much of the work is carried out electronically which has reduced the potential impact on office resources and member travel costs. The willingness of the external members of Scrutiny Panels to give their time and travel to one or two meetings per review has been much appreciated and has helped to sustain the scrutiny process.

It is suggested that the costs incurred and the member/officer time has been balanced by the outcomes from scrutiny reviews, more effective working and the resulting improvements outlined above in section 7.0, but this needs to be kept under careful review. Value for money can also be achieved by simply working more effectively and better allocation of officer time and effort. In summary, what can be confirmed is that scrutiny has led to:

• Increased income for rights of way and potentially through increases to the planning pre-application charges
- Improved reputation amongst the Park’s communities which in turn has facilitated joint working and potentially joint funding applications
- Provided evidence to allow a realistic charging scheme for the paid pre-application planning advice service
- Less hostility to the Authority’s actions (better communication explains why we do things)
- Improvements to service delivery – more effective outcomes
- Improved internal and external communication – avoids duplication and provides a more accurate record of performance and achievements
- A database of scrutiny reviews which can be accessed to provide evidence for funding applications or workstreams, as well as providing useful evidence for Internal and External Audit
- A positive effect on member/officer working relationships and a valuable learning opportunity for both which provides transferable skills

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This report was sent in draft to all members of the Scrutiny Working Group and their comments have been incorporated. Following a meeting with the Chairman of Audit and Scrutiny Committee, Prof Alan Lovell, and the Chairman of the Scrutiny Working Group, Mrs Margaret Underwood, the following recommendations are made for members to consider and recommend to the Authority how it should use its scrutiny process in future.

1. That the scrutiny policy and flow chart be updated to reflect changes agreed by the Authority since its inception;

2. That the public continue to be involved as an important part of our scrutiny process both through the public vote as part of our topic selection process and as part of subsequent scrutiny panels.

3. That the Authority continues to carry out one scrutiny review per annum on an improvement objective from the previous year as a tool for providing additional and in depth evidence for the Authority, the public and the Wales Audit Office – to commence in September each year (backward looking) and to include the public vote and involvement as at present;

4. That the Authority considers a process whereby a scrutiny review is carried out from April – September each year on an area of work taken from across the full range of the Authority's activities. The review should have the potential to inform future actions and identify any future opportunities for the Authority in delivering its purposes and duty (forward looking) and to include the public vote and involvement as at present (possibly with sponsorship to provide an incentive for voting). An example of how this might be selected is given below (Figure 1).
Audit & Scrutiny, Scrutiny WG (or group of interested members) to draft a list of potential areas of opportunity for Future Directions Forum to consider as part of budget discussions.

Outcomes used to inform priorities for the next financial year (at Future Directions Forum in October).

NPA considers public vote and agrees area, appoints panel to carry out a review from April – September and report back with recommendations.

Shortlist of three areas put on website for public vote (use of social media / sponsored prize to promote this).

Figure 1

Julia Gruffydd (Democratic Services Manager)
Lora Davies (Democratic and Scrutiny Officer)
July 2014