

Northumberland National Park Authority

Report by Andy Saunders – Parish Council Appointee

It is now 12 months since I was formally appointed by the Secretary of State as a parish council nominee onto the Northumberland National Park Authority.

I will not attempt to cover all the areas in which the NNPA is involved but will highlight the main projects.

- 1) Local plan. The NNPA is reviewing the local plan which sets the planning rules for properties in the National Park. It is well overdue and is meant to be reviewed every 5 years. This revised plan will come into force in 2020 some 11 years after the last plan. This has been my main area of interest.

The new plan is more relaxed than the last plan over conversion of existing buildings into residential use and does actually say we should be adding 6 new homes per annum in the Park. I think some of these changes are still a little grudging and may put off developers buying a farm steading for conversion into say 5 dwellings using the existing buildings. I personally believe in some cases it would be better to knock down and rebuild than convert as the subsequent building would be of higher quality and more sustainable. (Less damp and cheaper to heat). More consultation is taking place, with the next one in Tynedale being held at Bardon Mill Village Hall on the 11 September.

- 2) The Sill. The building opening in July last year against some local opposition. However, The Sill project is far more than just the building and is meant to encompass projects throughout the Park.

The building has attracted more visitors than anticipated but the car park income is substantially below than planned. Staffing costs are over budget. Less events have been held and there has been less community/volunteer involvement than had been planned. The café gets mixed reviews. The quality is good but service and pricing seem to be areas of concern. The first 12 months are always going to be difficult to forecast.

They have had staffing issues with the manager being on long term sick leave. However, they are now fully staffed and expect this year to be materially better than last year, with a better programme of events.

The loss of income from the car parks and increases in staffing costs mean that the Sill (building) did not cover its costs. However, changes this year should ensure that the deficit is no more than the historic costs of running the of visitor centre at Once Brewed.

This is certainly the biggest challenge for the management team at the NNPA.

3) Other Areas.

The NNPA is involved in all sort of issues and is consulted on many more. Below are a selected few.

Farm Support. The NNPA employs a number of staff who help farmers apply for mid and higher level stewardship grants. Given that the NNPA aims and the Stewardship farm payment system are trying to achieve the same thing this is seen as a really good use of the NNPA resources. Funding was increased to cover additional staff due to the number of agreements that need processing over the next two years.

The NNPA was consulted on the reintroduction of the Lynx. The NNPA only answered the questions it was asked and did not give or refuse permission as it was not part of the NNPA remit. The NNPA did say that the consultation was only held in Kielder and given the range of the animals the consultation should have included those farming on the Southern fringes of Kielder forest. We are awaiting the Secretary of State's decision.

The NNPA does have a small grant fund and will pay up to £2000 for small community based projects that can be in the surrounding locality not just located in the NNP. Some areas seem better than others in tapping into this fund. If there is a community based organisation that would like funding please ensure they ask the NNPA for help. The contact for this is Ruth Dickinson (ruth.dickinson@nnpa.org.uk).