

AUDIT AND CORPORATE SERVICES REVIEW COMMITTEE

15 July 2015

Present: Mr A Archer, Mr D Ellis, Councillors L Jenkins, R Owens and M Williams.

Mr Terry Lewis, Wales Audit Office was also in attendance.

(NPA Offices, Llanion Park, Pembroke Dock: 10.00am – 11.40am)

1. Appointment of Chair

It was **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that Councillor M Williams be appointed Chair for the ensuing year.

2. Appointment of Deputy Chair

It was **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that Mr A Archer be appointed Deputy Chair for the ensuing year.

3. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs G Hayward, Councillor M James, Councillor RM Lewis and Councillor DWM Rees; Councillor James was attending another meeting on behalf of the Authority.

4. Disclosures

There were no disclosures of interest.

6. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 20th May 2015 were presented for confirmation and signature.

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 20th May 2015 be confirmed and signed.

5. Health and Safety Group: report of meeting

Members considered the reports of the meetings of the Health and Safety Group held on 15 January and 16 April 2015.

One Member noted the reference in the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2015 (*Minute 10 refers*) to a Carew Masonry report and asked what this referred to. The Chief Executive replied that there was an occasional but ongoing problem of falling masonry at Carew Castle caused by growth on the walls dislodging stones. As a result a daily inspection regime had been instituted and discussions had also taken place with the Authority's insurers. He acknowledged that this was a risk, but one that was managed and supported by a significant paper trail.



It was **RESOLVED** that the report of the meetings of the Health and Safety Group held on 15 January and 16 April 2015 be received.

6. Performance Report for the Period Ending 31 May 2015

The Business and Performance Manager presented the performance for the Authority's Corporate Services for the financial year to date.

Appended to the report, and also presented at the meeting, were the key actions and measures within Corporate Services, and these showed that with only two months completed, many of the activities were in the early stages or had not yet commenced.

With reference to the sickness absence statistics reported, one Member asked whether there was any indication that there was an increase in sickness due to increased pressure on staff as a result of cutbacks. Officers replied that no trends had been identified to date but agreed that it was an important area to monitor and pointed out that the health and wellbeing agenda was an integral part of the internal work of the Authority. He agreed that when more detailed figures were available a report would be brought to the Committee.

Another Member asked whether there were any plans to publish a book containing the iconic images commissioned by the Authority. The Chief Executive replied that the purpose of the commission was twofold – for promotional purposes as well as providing a photographic record. The images had been made freely available and there were currently no plans to publish them, however it was an idea for the future. In other marketing news, the Chief Executive reported that both Carew Castle and Tidal Mill and Castell Henllys had been chosen as finalists for the Radio Pembrokeshire Business Awards in the Leisure and Tourism Industry Award category. Carew Castle had won the award which was decided by public vote. Also the 'Grav' film production which the Authority had sponsored would be shown at the Edinburgh Festival and the original branding was being retained at no cost to the Authority.

Finally the Business and Performance Manager provided an update on the planning figures. These were not quite so good for the first quarter of the year when compared to last year's, with 66% determined within eight weeks for June, which equated to 72% for the year to date. This was because several of the applications determined recently had been in the system for several months. Figures for the year to date for applications approved remained high at 98%. More applications were being submitted which meant that workload was increasing slightly and officers would continue to monitor the situation.

It was **RESOLVED** that the performance report be received.



7. Risk Register

The Business and Performance Manager presented the Risk Register to the Committee, as agreed at the meeting of the National Park Authority in June 2015. It was reported that there had been no changes to the levels of risk and no new risks added, however the Authority's Internal Auditors were currently looking at the risk management regime and might identify additional risks as part of that process. He noted that an additional 'comment' column had been added in which any relevant progress was provided.

One Member suggested that the lack of enforcement of planning conditions was a risk that should be flagged up in the Register as it was not possible for officers to monitor the thousands of conditions imposed on planning applications. Other Members added that some applications were only approved due to the imposition of conditions, and it was important that these were checked to ensure compliance.

The Business and Performance Manager replied that data was collected regarding the discharge of conditions and the Authority's figure for the first six months of the year could be reported to the next meeting of the Committee, however Welsh Government needed to standardise the terminology for other enforcement measures before these could be introduced. While not disagreeing with the importance of monitoring conditions, or the scale of the task, the Chief Executive added that he felt that the Authority performed better with regard to enforcement than many others, rather than it being a problem. The team had improved significantly in recent years, reducing its backlog, and the resources allocated reflected the importance of enforcement to the work of the Authority. He suggested that officers could give a presentation on the work of the team to a future meeting of the Committee.

NOTED.

8. Draft Statement of Accounts 2014/15

The Finance Manager began by explaining the process for agreement of the accounts. He had authorised release of the Draft Statement of Accounts to Audit on 30th June 2015. The Draft Statement of Accounts was made available for public inspection on the 1st July 2015 and would be further reported to Members for information at the National Park Authority meeting later in the month. The audited set of Statement of Accounts would then be presented to Members on the 23rd September by the Wales Audit Office and would be signed off by the Chairman and the Chief Executive.

It was reported that the summarised accounts showed that both revenue funding and the capital budget were down on the previous year, due



mainly to a reduction in the National Park Grant and therefore the Levy. However locally generated income was up in most streams. He pointed out that the reduction in timber sales was due to a change in accounting treatment as internal sales had been included in the figures in previous years which was now contrary to best practice.

Noting that planning fees were down, Members asked whether it was possible to add a surcharge to applications submitted retrospectively as the Development Management Committee had dealt with a number of these in recent months. Officers replied that planning fees were set at a national level, however the idea would be suggested through the Planning Officers Society for Wales and if an opportunity arose as a result of proposals to change legislation.

Turning to expenditure, the main cost related to employees, and this figure was up slightly due to settlement costs of employees who had left the Authority. Salary costs were down by £105,000 in response to the current financial climate. The Chief Executive added that the policy on exit packages was to generate a payback in less than four years. However, in the majority of cases the payback period was significantly less.

Premises costs were down slightly due to the change in accounting practices relating to Cilrhedyn. Transport and travel also appeared to have increased but this was due to a distortion in the figures for 2013/14, with actual claims down. Finally the figures for supplies, services and grants had reduced due to loss of the Planning Improvement Fund Grant, a reduction in the Sustainable Development Fund allocation and a reduction in the amount spent on advertising planning applications through use of a different newspaper.

The Authority's revenue account showed that the net cost of services had been under budget and a summary of the main reasons for the variances for each service were provided. Deducting the National Park Grant and the Levy showed that the Authority had ended the year with a net operating surplus. There had also been a net transfer to earmarked reserves.

The Capital Programme was down when compared to 2013/14, with the main cost being on the Origins project, for which all grant monies had now been claimed and paid out. Smaller sums had been paid for the Sandy Haven river crossing (for which a Welsh Government Access Grant had been received), vehicles and for replacement windows at Llanion.

The condensed balance sheet showed no radical movement when compared to 2013/14. The fixed assets had reduced due to revaluations,



and the figure for debtors was up due to grants that were outstanding at the end of the financial year, however these had subsequently been paid. Conversely the money owed by the Authority had reduced, the figure for 2013/14 being higher due to ongoing bills relating to the Origins project. There had been an increase in the pension liability due to falling discount rates.

NOTED.

9. Planning: Customer Survey

The Chief Executive explained that the Planning Officers' Society for Wales had sought agreement from all Welsh Planning Authorities to standardise planning customer surveys across Welsh local planning authorities. The surveys were undertaken on an annual basis by the Data Unit which was funded by Welsh Government; in future it was hoped that the same survey could be introduced across the whole of England and Wales. However in the meantime two surveys had now been carried out among those who had received planning decisions across local planning authorities in Wales and the results of the latest survey were reported to Members for information. These showed that the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority had done well when compared to other local planning authorities, being above the Welsh average in all but one instance, which related to the question "The LPA enforces its planning rules fairly and consistently". There were several possible interpretations of this, one being that the Authority might do more enforcement than other Local Authorities, however officers did not feel that there was any reason for concern. Only 60 responses had been received, and therefore the overall picture could easily be swayed by a small number of aggrieved customers.

Members were interested to see the survey and asked whether the full set of information had been published. Officers believed that it was in the public domain and would let Members know if it was available on a public website.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Committee fully supported the provision of a planning customer survey which was generic to all Wales' planning authorities.

10. Welsh Language Standards: Consultation on Compliance Notice [Section 47 Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011]

It was reported that the above mentioned Measure established a framework for introducing duties on persons to comply with statutory standards relating to the Welsh language. The standards would replace the current system of Welsh language schemes established under the Welsh Language Act 1993. During the last 18 months, the Welsh Language Commissioner had provided several opportunities for



interested parties to provide evidence and to state their views on the standards.

The Welsh Language Standards Regulations (No 1) 2015 came into force on 31 March 2015 and authorised the Welsh Language Commissioner to issue a compliance notice requiring organisations to comply with one or more of the standards that were specifically applicable to them. The Authority had received a draft compliance notice on 26 June, and this was appended to the report. It now had the opportunity to comment as to whether the standards included within the notice were reasonable and proportionate and Members views were sought. It was reported that an extension to the consultation deadline had been granted to allow a report on the Standards to be made to the National Park Authority in July.

The Administration and Democratic Services Manager stated that the Authority already complied with many of the standards, while measures to comply with others could be introduced fairly easily, however some would prove more challenging in terms of timescale and resource implications. The Chief Executive added that the Authority was at a disadvantage in that due to its size, some services were delivered by one specialist officer rather than a team of people, and many of these were not Welsh speakers; however most standards could be met either through training, employment or outsourcing.

The Committee raised the issue of the cost of implementation, and agreed that any operational difficulties with the timescale for implementation of the standards should be raised with the Welsh Language Commissioner in the Authority's response to the consultation.

Members also considered that it was important that there was a Welsh speaker in the planning department who could converse with applicants and potential applicants in Welsh. Officers agreed, saying that the recently advertised post for a planning assistant had been designated as Welsh essential. Interviews for this had taken place, and it was hoped that an appointment would be made soon.

It was **RESOLVED** that the comments expressed by Members be incorporated into the Authority's response to the Welsh Language Commissioner's consultation on the draft compliance notice.

11. Budget Performance for the Period ending 31 May 2015

The Finance Manager circulated a table which set out the budget forecast which outlined additional savings that had been identified in order to balance the budget, however this had been negated by a notification from Welsh Government that the National Park Grant and Levy would be reduced by £24,000 from that advised in February. Also £8,000 was hypothecated for spending on the Member Mentoring programme.



Therefore the revised revenue forecast deficit was now £33,000, however it was anticipated that this could be recovered. He also circulated a table which set out the income for the first quarter of the year compared to previous years. This showed that most income streams were ahead of budget but overall were slightly behind the figures for last year if Solva Car Park was discounted for comparative purposes.

NOTED.

12. Document Management System

The Business and Performance Manager reminded the Committee that some years ago the Authority had changed the system on which planning applications were recorded to one by APAS Swift and an agreement entered into with Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) whereby data was entered by officers at Llanion but stored on PCC's system. Discussions had therefore taken place with PCC to ascertain if documents could also be stored on that system and the answer had been that they had insufficient space.

Following recent representations by Members, a further meeting had been held with PCC when officers had advised that space was no longer a problem. There were still some technical problems to overcome and officers in both Authorities were looking at ways of solving these, and a further update would be provided at the next meeting of the Committee. Discussions were also ongoing with APAS directly, who provided a cloud based system for document management, to ascertain its price and technical requirements.

13. Delegation of any issues for consideration by the Continuous Improvement Group

It was **RESOLVED** that there were no issues of concern that the Committee wished to delegate to the Continuous Improvement Group for consideration.