**SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK**

**SCRUTINY**

**25 March 2015**

Present:

**Snowdonia National Park Authority representatives:**

**Members:** Dr. Iolo ap Gwynn (Chair)

Councillor Alwyn Gruffydd

Councillor Sion W. Jones

**Officers:** Mr. G. Iwan Jones, Director of Corporate Services

Mr. Jonathan Cawley, Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage

Mrs. Anwen Gaffey, Member Services Officer

**Apologies:** Councillor E. Caerwyn Roberts, Councillor John MacLennan,

Councillor Elizabeth Roberts.

**1. Questioning Arrangements**

The Chairman advised that a suggested list of questions had been circulated to Members and also to those who had been invited to give evidence to assist them in their preparation. Members discussed who would ask each question and the order in which they would be asked.

**2. Presentations and Evidence**

a) **Land Use Sector**

Dafydd Tomos, George & Tomos, Architects

Gwynedd Watkin, O.G. Thomas and Elwyn Roberts, Farmers Union of Wales

Rhys Evans, The National Trust

The Chairman welcomed the participants from the Land Use Sector to the meeting and asked each representative to introduce themselves to the group.

i) Dafydd Tomos, George & Tomos Architects, advised that as a practicing architect he has worked on a variety of projects in the National Park for over 10 years.

ii) Gwynedd Watkin, County Executive Officer, Farmers Union of Wales, Arfon Area reported that he has always had a good working relationship with officers from the Snowdonia National Park Authority which has been beneficial to the farming community in the form of 5b Programmes, Rhaglen Tir Eryri, CAE etc.

iii) O.G. Thomas, Chairman of Meirionnydd County Farmers Union of Wales and Elwyn Roberts, who farms in Llanfrothen, were Members of the Farmers Union of Wales and feel some negativity towards the National Park.

iv) Rhys Evans, Eryri Manager for the National Trust would answer questions as they arose, as he had stepped in at the last minute to replace Mr. Richard John, the Architectural Consultant who was unable to attend.

The Chairman advised that the Committee, in the light of the current Welsh Government review of Designated Landscapes in Wales, was seeking to establish the effectiveness of National Park policies in supporting businesses and job creation in small and medium sized enterprises within the Park. Any suggestions for improvement and comments on fundamental advantages and/or problems as a result of operating within a National Park would be welcomed.

Points raised in the session were as follows:

* OGT felt that the National Park did nothing to help local people stay in their communities with more people from outside the area moving to the countryside. This change was unacceptable as local people have protected the language and the landscape over the years. He felt that the Welsh language will be lost, and there was no work for our young people which results in their moving out of their communities as they see no future for themselves. An example of this was the loss of employment opportunities as a result of the delays in the National Park planning process for the Llanbedr Airfield project. The quarries have also closed and the deterioration in employment opportunities in the area was very serious.

Arising thereon, Officers felt the criticism was unjustified as the National Park had initially approved the certificate prior to approving the planning application. The Authority’s Members had supported the proposal and officers had done everything to assist the developers with their planning application at Llanbedr.

* RE considered that if the National Park Authority answers the requirements of the two statutory purposes this was acceptable, if not, there was possibly a need to amend the purposes.
* GW would like to see “the duty to seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of communities living within the Park” being upgraded to a third statutory purpose.
* GW noted that pockets of some areas were not Welsh speaking, but overall this was very small and the use of the language in many areas was very positive.
* GW stated that to include AONB’s as part of the National Park’s remit should be dependent on whether the budget was increased for this purpose. If there was no additional funding for the National Parks, then it would not be acceptable to take on the role.
* RE felt it made sense not to duplicate the work of National Parks and AONB’s.
* OGT stated that whilst some jobs were created directly by the National Park and new skills were being developed to manage rhododendron etc, overall this type of work was not very well paid. To attain a mortgage these jobs need to be permanent and in general the feeling towards the Park was negative after their failure to attract the developers to Llanbedr. He welcomed the statement which made clear and promoted the fact that “The National Park was open for Business”.
* DT’s experience of the National Park’s planning officers had been very helpful and positive. Planning Legislation in England was now very different following the relaxation of the rules to allow agricultural buildings to be re-used without the need for planning permission.
* GW felt that it was much easier to contact officers from the Snowdonia National Park Authority to discuss planning issues compared to contacting officers from Gwynedd Council, which at times can be very difficult.
* GW saw great value in the Snowdonia National Park “brand”. The Snowdonia National Park Authority should remain as it is in order to protect this area of land and sea and the AONB’s should only be included if additional funding is provided.
* OGT raised concerns that the areas within the National Park border should be more beautiful and well maintained. This was not the case with many footpaths closed due to poor upkeep. A Member suggested that this may be something the Community Councils could undertake in their own areas, working with the National Parks.
* Officers advised that the Snowdonia Society was a lobby group and was a separate body from the Authority.
* RE felt the Authority should communicate better and perhaps lead a business forum to promote opportunities available for businesses in the National Park. Examples of successful businesses were Tree Tops, Antur Stiniog, Zip Wire, Yr Urdd.
* DT stated that as there were no opportunities to establish new caravan parks in the National Park, there should be some flexibility for existing businesses to grow and noted the difference between static and touring caravan sites.
* the Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage agreed that it was difficult to form policies which protect and were also more flexible. He advised that the Development Plan review this year would allow further consideration of existing policies and if they need changing this will be considered during the course of the review. Monitoring Reports have identified an increase in the number of applications for more specialised non serviced accommodation such as yurts and pods on new fairly small scale sites. Some larger scale proposals in woodland locations to take advantage of nearby cycle tracks have also been discussed and highlight the need to amend the policy or introduce a new policy to deal with alternative accommodation types which are not caravans.
* RE agreed that it was difficult to get the balance right.
* OGT felt that in the past caravan sites were granted planning permission for shops and services on their sites and now visitors to the area rarely visit nearby towns and villages and provide no wealth for the local economy.
* RE noted that the infrastructure in Meirionnydd was poor as was the availability of Broadband. This was outside the National Park’s remit but stands in the way of developers moving in to invest in new businesses.
* GW suggested that the National Park should consider allowing business opportunities for farmers in the form of small scale car parking for 5 to 20 vehicles. These could be landscaped and would provide opportunities for farmers to earn additional income.
* GW recommended that the Authority should seek other income sources, such as the new RDP fund. GW felt that businesses were not aware of the available schemes and officers from the Authority could offer this as a service to secure small grants and take advantage of opportunities like the Leader programme.
* The Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage advised that he sits on the RDP Groups with Conwy County Borough Council and Gwynedd Council.
* GW noted his disappointment that the FUW had expressed such negative views on the National Parks, which did not reflect in any way his experience of the Snowdonia National Park and its officers. DT also agreed that dealing with the Authority’s officers was always a positive experience.
* RE asked that the National Park should use its status to influence Manweb, which in his opinion, exploits the farmers and landowners when services are sold. Their fees are extortionate and the National Park may be able to help with this problem.
* The Director of Planning and Cultural heritage confirmed that he has quarterly meetings with the energy providers and the very high charges make any future benefits unaffordable.
* GW would also like to see a “one stop shop” between the National Parks, Natural Resources Wales and other statutory bodies to make communication easier.

The Chairman thanked the representatives from the Land Use Sector for their input and for their willingness to be contacted again to assist the Authority from time to time.

b) **Outdoor Recreation Sector**

Martin Doyle, Chief Executive, Plas y Brenin Mountain Sports Centre

Huw Antur Edwards, Yr Urdd, Glan-Llyn

Tracey Evans, Chief Executive, The Outdoor Partnership

The Chairman welcomed the participants from the Outdoor Recreation Sector to provide evidence to the Scrutiny Committee. He advised that the Committee, in the light of the current Welsh Government review of Designated Landscapes in Wales, was seeking to establish the effectiveness of National Park policies in supporting businesses and job creation in small and medium sized enterprises within the Park.

Each representative introduced themselves to the group and the participants gave a brief presentation of their role with suggestions for improvement and comments on fundamental advantages and/or problems as a result of operating within a National Park.

i) Martin Doyle, Chief Executive of Plas y Brenin, provided details of his background and interests. He advised that he had been a mountain guide since 1988 and involved in education in the mountains since the mid 1980’s. Mr. Doyle moved to Snowdonia in 1992, was part of the Senior Management team for Plas y Brenin since 1994, and has been the Chief Executive for the last 10 years. Since moving to Snowdonia, Mr. Doyle has witnessed many changes in outdoor recreation, not least in the variety of activities now available. Outdoor recreation should be recognised as an important driver in the economy.

Plas y Brenin is a training centre for mountain sports, mainly for adults, but does work with children and young adults. It provides residential courses and is a large organisation with 90 employees. Plas y Brenin has 80 beds in the building, twin occupancy rooms, all en suite and 36 beds in 2 bunkhouses. Plas y Brenin provides 35,000 instructed days a year for both locals and visitors for disciplines such as climbing, mountaineering, kayaking, road cycling etc. Plas y Brenin teaches the people who teach novices and provides best practice for coaches, leaders and instructors. They work closely with the British Mountaineering Council, British Cycling, British Canoeing, British Orienteering and their Welsh equivalents. Plas y Brenin operates in North West Wales and relies on co-operation with landowners / managers. Plas y Brenin also helps to support local communities and supports the Outdoor Partnership as well as working with the YHA. The Centre’s aim is to help people to develop self sufficiency in quiet recreation and provide training in these skills for them to carry on activities themselves.

The National Park has played a positive role with regard to access to open countryside which is a prime interest for this sector. National Park Officers, the Access Forums and the Warden Service provide good support. Although enshrined in law, access to the countryside still has to be delivered and the summit building on Snowdon and the visitor centre in Cwm Idwal shows how the National Park has transformed iconic spots. Mr. Doyle would welcome improvements at Pen y Pass, which lacks capacity to meet the demand. A significant improvement in car parking provision was needed, possibly creating smaller car parks nearby without disrupting the area. He had no problems with charges being raised and was of the opinion that the work undertaken at Pen y Gwryd had resulted in lost capacity.

The National Park had worked hard to resolve issues such as canoeing in upper Conwy and Ysbyty Ifan. The Authority could act as an “honest broker” getting agreements in place and improving relationships. There was also a need for the National Park to provide a visible presence for visitors and the recent warden volunteer programme had been very constructive.

Mr. Doyle outlined some negatives, such as access to water, which needs the recognition to match access to the land, although it was noted that the CROW Act helped in this. The National Parks should play a lead role in this area and, as there has been a great increase in mountain biking currently taking place in forest areas, the National Parks could assist in opening old tracks which would make wonderful routes. There needs to be a commitment to extend and improve biking access as is permitted on trails in Scotland

There was a need to create small car parks at road heads, for example at Gerlan, to provide access to the Northern Carneddau which causes frustration for all. There is no resistance in paying for car parking as this is now a fact of life.

Experience of the National Park Planning Department was that good informal advice was always available from officers but the process itself was slow and difficult, which then paralyses progress for the applicant. There needs to be some scope to speed up the process. The Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage confirmed that Wales Government was currently consulting on the planning process.

ii) Huw Antur Edwards, Director of Gwersyll Glan-llyn, a residential centre for Yr Urdd Gobaith Cymru. Glan-llyn has been an outdoor education centre for 65 years with the focus on giving the young people of Wales the chance to take part in outdoor activities through the medium of Welsh, with the focus on the language. A high percentage of Wales’ children have attended Glan-llyn at some time in their lives. The centre has worked with children aged from 8 years to adults in their 80’s although the customer base has changed, with schools now very much the focus. There have been 13,000 residents at Glan-llyn over the last 12 months making a total of 28,000 nights. The courses usually last for 3 days and at certain times, such as changeover days, there can be some 400 people in the centre. There have been changes in the method of delivering outdoor education and in recent times more use has been made of facilities outside the centre, e.g. visits to Llanuwchllyn and Llangywair, doing environmental research work, taking groups up Snowdon, running water based activities on Llyn Tegid.

Glan-llyn has up to 60 employees over busy periods as well as 75 who work centrally and are based at Glan-llyn. This makes the centre one of the largest employers in the area with all the staff being welsh speakers. Glan-llyn provides a trainee programme for 18 to 20 year olds who work at the centre for 12 months, and at the end of the year attain a qualification. Some of the trainees are offered employment at Glan-llyn and this year 6 young people are attending the trainee course. Many Welsh speaking instructors have been trained at Glan-llyn. The centre also employs 15 full time instructors with teams of 3 going out into the local community to deliver activities. The centre in Cardiff also has an outdoor licence and the hope for the future is to have a network of centers throughout Wales.

Glan-llyn has a good relationship with its neighbours and the local community and works closely with accommodation providers in the area as well as with Coleg y Bala. All the centres work together and contribute to the local economy. Glan-llyn has a good relationship with the National Park as lake owners, and with the Warden Service, who at times have been assisted on the lake by staff from Glan-llyn. The Lake Wardens also give regular presentations to students on the work of the National Park and on the wildlife and nature of the area. Glan-llyn has received funds from the National Park to develop a centre of excellence; also the centre was working in partnership to develop a footpath to connect Glan-llyn to the village.

Overall, the experience of working with the National Park has been positive although dealing with their planning department seems to be long drawn out and could be faster. It now feels there are more partners involved than there was in the past.

iii) Tracy Evans, Chief Executive, The Outdoor Partnership. Has worked with the Partnership over 10 years and is one of the original officers. The Partnership was established on the back of the foot and mouth disease. Research by Bangor University showed that only 4% of the full time outdoor activity providers were Welsh speaking and from the local area. This figure has now risen to 25% and The Outdoor Partnership has recently been registered as a Charity with 6 trustees, one of whom is Ifer Gwyn who works for the National Park Authority and is a benefit to the Partnership. The Partnership has worked with over 30,000 people, who include community groups and over 1,500 have attained a qualification, providing them with career options and transferable skills. 80% of outdoor activity providers now speak Welsh which shows a great shift over the last 10 years.

The Partnership Development Officers work with local schools to arrange competitions such as kayaking etc. Access to water on the Afon Dwyryd, although a complicated process, has now been achieved. The Partnership is a small charity which depends on grant funds. Developing volunteer projects with the Warden Service, possibly through a young ranger scheme and other training schemes with the National Park would be of mutual benefit. The Gwyrfai footpath in Beddgelert is of great benefit to the Partnership as would be developing a mountain biking infrastructure. As well as the financial support from the National Park towards the Outdoor Activity Festival, joint working on apprenticeship schemes for outdoor activities and training plans would also be welcome. The Outdoor Partnership was a readymade partner for the National Park Authority.

Further points raised in the session were as follows:

* the group felt that the National Park Authority’s role was clear, but access issues were a concern and the role should be strengthened with the National Park acting as a partner, encourager and helper. Promoting access was a key role which should not be diluted.
* the group felt the third purpose should include improving local skills as part of the duty. Also a stronger role to support employment etc., as an economic driver to build a better infrastructure.
* the group were critical of access to water, planning delays and not enough car parking facilities.
* HAE noted that the Development Plan review this year would allow further consideration of existing policies, in particular the policy on camping. Glan-llyn had been disadvantaged by the existing policy and welcomed the opportunity to amend it.
* the group felt the Snowdonia National Park “brand” was very important to their sector.
* MD felt that the inclusion of AONB’s as part of the National Park’s remit made sense as there were obvious links. Also, the long mountain range running down the centre of Wales was an AONB and was a draw for people whilst the Cambrian Mountains were currently unclassified. As recreation becomes more popular there will be a need to spread people further and wider.
* the group agreed that the National Park Planning Officers were very helpful and positive whilst the delays in the planning process were noted.
* MD asked whether planning officers had delegated powers as the process was so drawn out. The Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage advised that only a very small number of applications are presented to the Planning and Access Committee with the majority being dealt with through the officer delegation scheme.
* TE would like to see more partnership work with the Warden Service in the form of a Young Ranger Scheme and similar projects. Officers advised that the Authority’s newly adopted Improvement Objectives would allow the Authority to contribute to and support such schemes.
* TE would like to see the 3 National Parks in Wales as partners in the Outdoor Partnership’s Outdoor Awards.
* the group were in overall agreement that developing partnership working with the National Park would be beneficial to all, especially educational courses, volunteering, the work of the Warden Service etc.

The Chairman thanked the representatives from the Outdoor Recreation Sector for their input and for their willingness to work with the Authority. An outcome report on the scrutiny findings would be published in due course and all contributors would be provided with a copy.

The meeting ended at 12.55