

REPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE

SUBJECT:
COMMISSION FOR PUBLIC SERVICE GOVERNANCE AND DELIVERY

Background

In April 2013 the First Minister set up the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery under the leadership of Sir Paul Williams, with the following aims:

To:

- gather and provide an objective, authoritative assessment of the extent to which current arrangements for public service governance and delivery in Wales meet the needs and aspirations of people today and provide a sustainable basis for the future;
- propose an optimal model of public service governance and delivery for Wales, that will ensure that efficient, effective and accessible services are provided to the citizen; and support continuous improvement in those services against the background of financial and demand pressures; and
- as part of this, to engage with those who provide and use public services.

The Commission's report was published on Monday, 20th January 2014.

The Commission's recommendations

Three of the report's recommendations relate to National Park Authorities. They are:

- Recommendation 13 - National Park Authorities (NPAs) must develop clear and consistent ways of collaborating with each other, with local authorities, with Visit Wales and with Natural Resources Wales, on the ground, to avoid duplications and maximise the use of resources and scarce expertise (paragraph 2.60)
- Recommendation 14 - The Welsh Government and NPAs should secure national leadership and co-ordination and the most effective use of resources and expertise. The Government should consider doing so through a single authority, whilst retaining the distinctive identities of the three parks (paragraph 2.60)

- Recommendation 15 - Local accountability and decision making must be reinforced; local authority nominated NPA members must represent wards which fall wholly within the Park area or, if that is impossible, partly within the Park area. The Welsh Government should consider whether directly electing NPA members would strengthen such accountability (paragraph 2.60).

Recommendation 13 focuses on collaborative approaches which the Authority has followed for some time. The other two recommendations will be decisions for the Welsh Government to consider.

NPAs and Local Authorities

The Commission's report recommends against merging NPAs with Local Authorities. It states that: "The functions of National Park Authorities (NPAs) are similar to those of local authorities but with a distinctive focus on conserving and promoting sustainable access to National Parks. We believe this focus would be at risk if their functions were transferred to local authorities, as some argued in their evidence to us."

Shared public services across Wales

In addition to the recommendations specifically for National Park Authorities, there are other recommendations that may impact on our work. For example, there are recommendations to have a common set of performance management indicators across all public services in Wales and recommendations suggesting greater collaboration in support services across all public organisations. Currently there is little detail on these, or what impact, if any, they will have.

Further information

The full report and a summary version can be read from this link:

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/improvingservices/public-service-governance-and-delivery/report/?lang=en>

Annex A includes the relevant sections relating to National Park Authorities.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the report of the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery.

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F.23 National Parks Wales set out several ways in which the NPAs themselves were working well together. This included sharing both ‘back-office’ functions and service delivery capacity. We commend them for that, and urge them to go further. We also believe there is scope for greater alignment between the NPAs’ work and that of other organisations. All local authorities are also planning authorities; and there is a clear overlap between their role and NPAs, for instance in considering planning applications which adjoin or straddle Park boundaries. Both local authorities and, at the national level, Visit Wales promote tourism and provide facilities for visitors. While it is perfectly reasonable for NPAs to do so within the Parks, all such activity needs to be properly co-ordinated and integrated. Equally, NPAs’ role in conservation and warden services appears to overlap with that of Natural Resources Wales. We are concerned that these overlaps merely replicate the need for scarce resources and cause confusion for residents and visitors. **We therefore recommend that NPAs must to develop clear and consistent ways of collaborating with each other, with local authorities, with Visit Wales and with Natural Resources Wales on the ground to avoid duplications and maximise the use of resources and scarce expertise.**

F.24 As we and they noted, National Parks are national assets; and aspects of their management (such as the promotion of sustainable access and tourism) need to reflect that and will demand very scarce expertise which is unlikely to be available within one NPA alone. Addressing this could and should include formalising the current arrangements to create clear national leadership on such issues, and to ensure that expertise in Park management is consistently and effectively shared between the three Parks. This could include arrangements for formally combining the NPAs as decision- and policy-making bodies for national-level purposes, and/or creating a single administrative and operational structure to support all three Parks and NPAs. We note that some possibilities in this area were also included in the Welsh Government’s current consultation on a proposed Planning Bill²¹⁴. **We therefore recommend that the Welsh Government, and the NPAs should secure national leadership and co-ordination to yield the most effective use of resources and expertise. The Government should consider doing so through a single authority whilst retaining the distinctive identities of the three parks.**

Accountability

F.25 Finally, we are concerned about the accountability of NPAs. While the majority of their membership comprises councillors nominated by their constituent local authorities, there is no guarantee that residents of a Park are represented by a councillor who is also a member of the NPA. There is not even a requirement that

²¹⁴ Welsh Government December 2013. *Positive Planning: Proposals to reform the planning system in Wales*. Consultation document WG20088

local authority members of NPAs represent wards within the Park. In practice, while many NPA members do represent Park areas, all three NPAs currently contain some members who do not.

- F.26 These members have all been properly nominated by their local authorities and we do not doubt their competence or commitment. But none of their wards include any part of the Park area, and in some cases are a significant distance away. Such members are not democratically accountable for the decisions they make about the Park, because their electorate does not live in the Park. That in turn compromises the accountability of the NPAs as a whole.
- F.27 Equally, many councillors who do represent areas of each Park are not members of the NPA. This means that residents of the Parks who wish to influence or complain about NPA decisions – most obviously in relation to planning matters – have weaker and more indirect channels for doing so than those who live outside the Parks. They cannot just approach their councillor if s/he is not an NPA member. Nor can they express their views about such decisions at the ballot box.
- F.28 The rationale for having local authority nominees on NPAs is precisely to secure local representation and democratic accountability. While that is entirely right in principle, it is frustrated by nominating members who do not represent Park areas. In turn this means that NPAs' overall democratic accountability is unduly limited. We agree with National Parks Wales that change is needed in this area. The ultimate solution would be for the NPAs to be directly elected by Park residents, although we heard no conclusive evidence on this. **To reinforce local accountability and decision-making, we therefore recommend that local authority-nominated NPA members must represent wards which fall wholly within the Park area or, if that is impossible, partly within the Park area²¹⁵.** The overall aim should be to ensure that the nominated membership of each NPA should represent wards with the maximum possible coverage of the Park's population. **The Welsh Government should also consider whether direct elections would strengthen such accountability.**