

Policy Group – 19 July 2017

Proposed Dorset National Park

1. Purpose of report

To report back the findings from the meetings of the Policy Development Panel which was set up to consider the impacts of a proposed Dorset National Park designation on Purbeck.

2. Key issues

- 2.1 In June 2016 the Council received a presentation by the Dorset and East Devon National Park Team about the proposal to secure National Park designation for the internationally important landscapes within Dorset. A month later, members agreed to set up a Policy Development Panel to evaluate the impact of the proposed National Park and report back to Policy Group with its findings.
- 2.2 The Panel met four times. The papers discussed at the meetings are available as background papers. Officers provided evidence from conversations with staff in existing national parks as well as Natural England – the body responsible for designations. The Panel also received a presentation from the Dorset National Park team.
- 2.3 The Panel considered a large amount of material in detail before forming the recommendation set out below. The key points informing the recommendation are:
 - 2.3.1 Some Panel members felt that a National Park designation would be beneficial in ensuring that appropriate resources would be allocated to managing the impacts of recreation in the area.
 - 2.3.2 National parks are entirely funded by central government and the resources are ring-fenced for the duties of a National Park – conserving, enhancing and promoting recreation. Potential impacts of a national park on the finances of Purbeck District Council would depend on whether the planning function was delivered by the National Park Authority or subcontracted to the District Council.
 - 2.3.3 When considering development in a National Park, the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty must be taken into account. This is generally effective in discouraging inappropriate development. National Parks also focus on local need for housing. This could mean that areas directly adjacent to the National Park but not in it, might need to accommodate more housing.

3. Recommendation

A report be submitted to Council recommending that:

- 1) Council notes with interest the Dorset National Park proposal and the opportunities this could offer to keep Purbeck special;
- 2) keeps the proposals under review; and

3) looks forward to Natural England undertaking the next stage of its evaluation in 2018.

4. Policy issues

4.1 How will this affect the environment, social issues and the local economy?

This work has been looking at the potential impact of a National Park designation. The duties and purposes of a National Park require it to conserve and enhance the natural wildlife and cultural heritage, and promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of those special qualities. A National Park also has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within it.

4.2 Implications

4.2.1 Resources

There are no resource implications.

4.2.2 Equalities

There are no impacts in terms of equalities.

5. Further information

5.1 The Policy Development Panel agreed scope was to better understand the issues that would result from a National Park being designated. The panel considered a range of topics. The key discussion points are summarised below.

Purposes and duties

5.2 The key purposes and duty of National Parks are set out in Section 61 of the Environment Act 1995, which states that “the provisions of this part of the act shall have effect for the purpose of:

5.2.1 conserving and enhancing the natural wildlife and cultural heritage of the areas...;
and

5.2.2 promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public”

5.3 Section 62 of the Environment Act 1995 states that “A National Park authority...shall seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Park.” If it appears that there is a conflict between those purposes, (the National Park) shall attach greater weight to the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area comprised in the National Park (this is known as the Sandford principle).

5.4 These purposes and duties set the framework for all that a National Park does, and the budget of the National Park Authority is ring-fenced to be spent on the delivery of its purposes and duties.

Recreation

- 5.5 As outlined above under purposes and duties, one of the purposes of a National Park is to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities. This is in contrast to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) which have no such purpose. The Panel noted the levels of recreation currently experienced by the Dorset AONB and in particular Purbeck, and the fact that a National Park would have a budget to manage the impacts resulting from it, often delivering this via a countryside ranger service.

Finance

- 5.6 National Parks are funded directly by central government through an annual grant with no requirement for a contribution by local authorities. This is in contrast to the existing Dorset AONB, where local authority contributions make up a quarter of the core budget. National Park funding is worked out using a complex formula, and it is difficult to accurately predict what this funding might be. "The Economic Opportunities, Benefits and Wider Impacts of a Dorset and East Devon National Park" document commissioned by the Dorset National Park Team has suggested a figure of £10 million per annum, but this was questioned by staff at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as being too high. Whatever the figure might be, the Panel was interested to note that it would be safeguarded for the purposes and duties of the National Park – conservation and enhancement, and opportunities for understanding and enjoyment. Although National Park budgets have been subject to cuts in recent years, the funding they receive is ring fenced for their specific purposes and duties, unlike the local government part of AONB budgets.
- 5.7 As well as the direct resources from central government, National Parks are able to lever in considerable sources of external funding through grants, to enable them to invest in areas such as sustainable transport. As an example, the National Park team cited the South Downs as having secured £10 million to develop cycle lanes between Chichester and Midhurst from Highways budgets.
- 5.8 One of the key issues discussed at considerable length by the panel was the potential impact of a National Park designation on this Council's finances if Purbeck was to remain a District Council. Much would depend on how the National Park was managed (see section on Planning below). If a National Park was established which took direct responsibility for planning, the loss of District Council functions would have a significant impact on the cost effectiveness of the remaining elements of Council services (frontline and support services). However if planning was largely sub-contracted to local authorities, the impact on Purbeck District Council would likely be minimal. If a unitary authority was in place, the financial impact of a National Park on the Unitary Authority would be considerably less, as the Unitary Authority would cover a larger area.

Planning

- 5.9 National Parks deliver planning in a number of different ways. For the longer established Parks and the New Forest, the National Park is the planning authority and makes decisions accordingly. However in the South Downs National Park, the role of planning for the majority of planning applications are sub-contracted to the local authorities, with the National Park focussing on major or significant applications.

- 5.10 If a National Park was designated in Dorset, it is not possible to predict how it would deliver its planning function, as each National Park is tailored to the needs of the area. The financial impact on Purbeck as a District Council would be significant if its current planning function was transferred to a National Park, but if a similar model to the South Downs was adopted, the impact is likely to be minimal.

Housing numbers

- 5.11 In exactly the same way as any other planning authority, National Parks undertake work to estimate objectively assessed need for housing and work out an appropriate housing target. In the South Downs, consultants prepared a strategic housing market assessment (SHMA) which took into account the outcomes of Joint Core Strategies from constituent districts.
- 5.12 In policy terms, the emphasis on seeking to meet full objectively assessed housing need, as set out in Paragraph 14 in the NPPF, does not apply in national parks where it can be shown that this conflicts with the statutory purpose of conserving and enhancing. The policy framework for national parks focuses primarily on seeking to deliver affordable housing to meet local needs. South Downs National Park does not yet have an adopted local plan but the draft it is working on is looking to deliver less than the objectively assessed need for these reasons. Its plan is due to be submitted in the autumn. In Exmoor, the unmet need is being met through the duty to co-operate in other neighbouring areas that are not within the National Park.

5.13 Local democracy

- 5.14 Members of National Park Authorities include members of constituent local authorities, parish councils, and Secretary of State appointees who are appointed for their skills, knowledge and experience. Each local authority with land within the park boundary would have at least one representative. The key differences between a National Park and the existing AONB Partnership Board are that parish councils have much stronger representation on a National Park Authority, but many of the organisations currently represented on the Dorset AONB Partnership Board might not be appointed members of a National Park Authority.

Views of other Councils / AONBs

- 5.15 Other local authorities and AONBs within the proposed National Park boundary have been consulted. Four Councils have taken no formal view (Devon County Council, Weymouth and Portland Borough Council, West Dorset District Council and North Dorset District Council). Dorset County Council has agreed to keep the matter under review and East Devon District Council has requested further information before coming to a view.
- 5.16 The Dorset AONB Partnership has not provided a position on the proposals as it was not possible to establish a single opinion among a diverse membership. East Devon AONB concluded that it would be happy to get involved in debates on the matter should this become a way forward. Both AONB Managers considered that, in principle, National Parks receive considerably more resources to go into designation, and that this led to a number of benefits.

Next steps

- 5.17 The Senior Specialist for Landscape Designations with Natural England has confirmed that the proposal for the Dorset National Park is one of around a dozen that have been put forward for consideration. It will be assessed by Natural England around or after August 2018, through a desktop exercise and field study. If the proposal meets the statutory criteria, it would be prioritised alongside others to go through a formal designation process. An expression of support by local authorities and other organisations would give the proposal more weight – if there were two equally attractive proposals, priority would be likely to be given to progressing the one with more widespread support. Natural England would seek to avoid the high costs of a public inquiry such as the one undertaken in the South Downs. If a genuine consensus is possible, this would save both time and money. It will therefore be important to get a clear steer as to the extent to which there is local support for this proposal.
- 5.18 A request was made to the Dorset National Park Team to try and gauge the level of support for the proposal. The team was asked for a list of organisations they had approached and their response, broken down into: organisations supportive; not supportive; wish to keep a watching brief; unable to respond because they represent different organisations; and no response. The team was unable to provide this information as they do not have a complete list of all organisations that have been contacted. However there is a list of organisations supportive of the proposal for a Dorset National Park on the website.
- 5.19 In terms of timescales, the only indication has been given by a Defra officer, who said designation could take 5-10 years. However, if a public inquiry was not required, the time taken could be significantly shorter than this. The designation process would not start until after the Natural England's initial assessment, so would not influence the current local plan process.

Background papers:

- Policy Development Panel papers 26 September and 1 November 2016, 16 February and 22 May 2017

For further information contact:-

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