

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 20 November 2002

Time: 9.00 am to 12:00 pm

Venue: Committee Room 3/4, National Assembly Building

PROPOSED REVIEW OF NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITIES IN WALES

Purpose

1. This paper aims to inform the Committee about the Welsh Assembly Government's plans for an independent review of the National Park Authorities in Wales and to seek its views on the associated draft terms of reference.

Recommendation

2. That the Committee consider the attached draft terms of reference (Annex A).

Timing

3. Given the importance of the National Parks to Wales and the cross party interest in them, the Minister for the Environment wishes to make a statement to plenary about the review before the work formally begins. This statement is currently planned for 3 December. Before taking this step the Minister wishes to consult the Committee on her plans.

Background/context for review

4. The National Park Authorities were established in their current form in 1995. Since that time they have made very good progress on a number of fronts. However the challenges they are facing are increasing; and at the same time the context in which they are operating is also changing, not least following the inception of the National Assembly itself. There has not been an independent review of the Park Authorities for a number of years- and the Minister for the

Environment considers that a review now would be timely.

Focus for review

5. The intention is that the review should focus on how the Park Authorities might be assisted to respond effectively to the challenges currently before them and those which lie ahead. Taking account of current policy priorities and of operational experience to date, it is proposed that the review should concentrate on the following four main issues :

a.the role of the Park Authorities, including in relation to rural development – how can this be developed/strengthened further?

b.promotion of sustainable development – how can the Parks’ potential contribution be maximised?

c.rural/urban links – how can the Park Authorities successfully reach out to communities beyond their boundaries?

d.support for local communities – how can the Park Authorities become more responsive to, and accountable to, their local communities?

6. The aim would be for the review to take account of relevant outcomes of the DEFRA review of the National Parks in England which was completed in the summer (summary at Annex B). It would also examine the potential implications of having directly elected members on Park Authorities – as well as other possible approaches to strengthen engagement with local communities.

Handling of the review

7.The Minister for the Environment intends to commission external consultants to undertake the main review work. Their work would be overseen by a small steering group of key stakeholders, including an expert in protected landscape/conservation matters.

Next steps

8. Preparatory work is under way to invite competitive tenders for this work. The intention is for the review to commence in the New Year : it is expected to take about six months to complete. EPT Committee would be fully consulted on the outcome of the review.

Financial implications

9.The costs of review will be met from within TPE Group's consultancy programme budget for 2003/4.

Compliance

10.Section 40 of the Government of Wales Act 1998, in conjunction with Section 33, permits the Assembly to do anything that will facilitate the execution of its functions – and this review falls into that category. This paper raises no issues of propriety or regularity.

November 2002 Countryside Division

NATIONAL PARKS REVIEW – DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Background

1.The National Park Authorities in Wales were established some 50 years ago, originally as committees of the constituent local authorities. They were set up in their current form – as special purpose local authorities – under the Environment Act 1995. Since 1995 there have been a number of significant developments affecting their policy and operational framework : the establishment of the National Assembly itself with its statutory duty to promote sustainable development; the introduction of the Best Value regime; and more recently initiatives such as Farming for the Future and the Assembly Government's proposals for changes to the planning system. The context within which the Park Authorities are operating has therefore changed a lot in recent years and is continuing to change.

Challenges for the Park Authorities

2.The Park Authorities today face a number of competing pressures and priorities. Agriculture, a major determinant of the landscape the Parks are expected to conserve and enhance, is changing rapidly in response to policy shifts and market forces. How can the Parks sensibly influence this for the benefit of their areas? The public are also much more mobile and have increased leisure time nowadays and the Parks are therefore more accessible to larger numbers of people : this situation needs to be effectively managed, utilising more sustainable transport solutions where possible. As part of this the Parks also need to take positive action to engage with a wider public inside and outside their boundaries, including ethnic minorities and those living in Community First areas. Some useful work is already under way on this, but more could be done. Again, the Assembly Government is keen for the Parks to become test beds for sustainable development and is directly supporting community –level activity via the Environment Development Fund which the Parks administer. Adopting a full sustainable development approach across Park Authorities functions remains an important objective for the future however.

3.The example of sustainable development also serves to highlight another challenge facing the Park Authorities – that of responding both to national as well as local priorities. In effect the Park Authorities have dual agendas – managing important national assets as well as needing to support their local communities. One key issue here is the part that the Park Authorities can play in the social and economic development of rural areas (particularly important in the wake of foot and mouth last year) - and how that role can be sensibly developed further (without duplicating or cutting across the role of other key players). Related to this is the fact that while the level of planning approvals within the Parks is generally in line with that of other local planning authorities, a common perception is that the Park Authorities act as a brake on development. A further challenge therefore involves the Park Authorities in engaging more closely with their local communities so that they are viewed as a positive influence, attuned to

and responsive to, local needs.

4.The proposed review aims to examine these issues more closely to help the Park Authorities respond to the key challenges they are facing now and in the future.

Key issues for the review to address

5.It is therefore proposed that the review should focus on the following four key issues :

a. Role of the Parks

How might the role and influence of the Parks be usefully strengthened for the benefit of all key stakeholders, including the communities within their boundaries?

How far is the existing legislation acting as a constraint to the Parks in fully achieving their objectives/potential? Would any changes to the underlying legislation assist here?

Could the Parks usefully play a stronger role in rural development and in the sustainable management of the countryside? How could this be achieved and what would be the resource implications?

b. Promoting sustainable development

How can the Park Authorities role as ‘test beds for sustainable development’ be usefully developed further, especially in supporting sustainable communities?

c. Crossing boundaries (rural/urban links)

How may the Parks play a stronger role in delivering the Assembly’s social inclusion objectives?

How far are the Park Authorities successfully reaching out to urban communities beyond their boundaries; and how might such links be strengthened further?

d. Supporting local communities

What practical steps might the Parks take to engage more effectively with their local communities?

What would be the potential advantages and implications of the possible introduction of a new category of directly elected members to Park Authorities in Wales? How far might this improve

local democracy and accountability of the Park Authorities to their local communities?

What other practical steps might be considered to improve the identity of communities within the Parks and their relationship with their Park Authority?

November 2002 Countryside and Coastal Policy Branch

Countryside Division

Annex B

REVIEW OF NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND

1.DEFRA Ministers initiated a review of the National Parks in England in the autumn of 2001. The objective of the review was to consider improvements that might usefully be made to the workings of the Park Authorities, to their operational framework, and in their relationships with key partners. The review focused on 4 key areas : policy issues, governance, sponsorship (relationship with DEFRA and Countryside Agency) and resources. The outcome of the review was published in July.

2.The report makes over 50 recommendations. Among the more significant are that :

a.the Park Authorities two primary purposes (or conservation and promotion of understanding and enjoyment of the Parks' special qualities) should be retained along with current planning and development control functions;

b.the spending constraint on the Parks' socio-economic duty should be removed (the current legislation says that they should not incur significant expenditure in this area) to allow them to play more of a role in rural revival;

c.the Parks should have more of a role as 'first stop shops' (acting as the initial point for enquiries from businesses and farmers on the issue of grants, etc);

d. the funding of Park Authorities should be wholly via DEFRA (rather than the current arrangement of 75% grant from DEFRA and a25% levy on constituent local authorities);

e. independent chairs should be appointed to each of the Park Authorities;

f. the number of members should be limited to 25 with a slight increase proposed in the

number of Secretary of State appointees;

g. the case for the Parks having statutory responsibility for rights of way should be considered further.

3. Following publication of the review report, DEFRA initiated a round of consultation on some of these main recommendations (including e. to g. above, all of which would require new legislation to implement). The responses are currently being considered.