

INAUGURAL LAKE DISTRICT NATIONAL PARK BUSINESS TASK FORCE

MEETING HELD AT STORRS HALL HOTEL, WINDERMERE

FRIDAY, 1 DECEMBER 2006

In Attendance:

Steve Ratcliffe	Lake District National Park Authority, Director of Planning & Partnerships
Bob Cartwright	Lake District National Park Authority, Director of Park Services
Robbie Bridson	Lake District National Park Authority, Deputy Chairman
Iona Frost-Pennington	Muncaster Castle
Graham Booth	Booths Supermarkets
Charles Graves	Armathwaite Hall, Bassenthwaite
Nigel Wilkinson	Windermere Lake Cruises
Michael Robinson	Burnhow Hotel, Windermere
Stephen Broughton	Lindeth Howe Hotel, Windermere
Ian Stephens	Cumbria Tourism
Paul Gaynor	Gaynor Sports
Peter Jackson	Heart of the Lakes Holiday Cottages
Sue Jackson	Heart of the Lakes Holiday Cottages
Philip Johnson	Coppermines Cottages, Coniston
Joe Relph	Yew Tree Farm, Borrowdale
Hazel Relph	Yew Tree Farm, Borrowdale
Dr Jane Barker	Barker & Bland, Farmers, Helton
Peter Hensman	Chair, Cumbria Community Foundation/NWDA Board Member

The meeting was informal and the Lake District National Park Authority clarified it was there to listen and gather initial views. A summary of comments is as follows:

Top of the list is vibrant communities. Without young people there is no future, no staff and no business.

The key problem is that there are not enough people to work in the National Park. We are employing Lithuanian staff. Accommodation is the key. If the business grows this becomes a critical factor. Yet many local residents do not need a job.

There is a problem with holiday homes, which makes accommodation unavailable.

50% of my 400 staff is foreign; I have taken several bed and breakfasts establishments to house staff. They expect good quality including en suite bathrooms.

My company has 150 staff but only two of them are Eastern European and they responded to adverts in the Westmorland Gazette. The problem for the company is of staff living in the hinterland of the Lake District and they risk not holding on to skilled staff even in relatively well paid posts because of the high cost of housing.

The issue goes beyond simply that of housing. Even with local occupancy conditions, houses are still on sale at unaffordable prices. We need to find a way to create accommodation. Self-catering businesses create a lot of wealth and jobs in the National Park so this is a good thing, but we do need to find ways of protecting the interests of local people. Concern is that the revenue from Business Rates goes out of the County. This should be retained locally and used for protecting the National Park.

We need young life. There is a problem of resistance from well heeled people who do not welcome change. It would be better if we could find ways to enable housing to be developed where there is a ceiling of 50% ownership.

We should look at the Channel Islands and their approach to identifying use classes and how they provide beneficial loans to local people. We should be working with local building societies. There is no way of stopping holiday letting because it is currently a shelter from Capital Gains Tax and Inheritance Tax. We need a change in legislation. The fact of the matter is that many owners are not interested in quality, just the use of property as a tax haven. We should also seek tax relief if people commit to selling homes for local occupancy.

The problem is that there is not much land to build on. Also the cost of buildings and construction through the cost of buildings and construction is very high. Many employable people in the Lake District are on minimum wage and the price of properties needs to be suppressed to enable people to get on the housing ladder and stay there.

The problem is a lack of Council housing, for example, at Chapel Stile. Also a problem and an apparent scarcity of housing associations and National Park Authority strictness in not allowing Greenfield development.

Can we somehow encourage self-catering properties to revert to the long term rented sector?

The problem is that most self-catering accommodation is now very high quality and may not therefore be affordable for long term rent. At the bottom end of the market, some are more likely to be sold rather than rented, following a lack of reinvestment. Perhaps there ought to be a mechanism to return or encourage owners to return properties to the rented sector. That said some owners do do shorthold lets in the winter. There is also a market for the 900 students in Ambleside, which could grow.

I reject several approaches a week to take on properties that could be let for long term lets.

Some planning permissions seem to restrict letting for holiday use only. Is that common?

How clear are we of the scale of the problem? We need to be. There are issues to do with lack of information and controls. We need to understand trends and pinch points. Some good practice should then be adopted, but we do need to understand the issues.

Farming is not good now or for the foreseeable future, yet 90% of visitors come because this is a farmed landscape. Farmers only form 3% of the population, yet the character of the National Park will change radically without them.

The problem with farming is one of large scale and incremental change. Farms are increasingly lotted when sold and opportunities for new entrants are lost. The National Park Authority should work with large owners to address the problem and work out ways of using ESA payments. Some farmers are still waiting for their Hill Farming Allowance and Single Farm Payments. This puts further pressure on cash flow. The National Park Authority should put its weight behind measures to lobby Government on the unique needs of the Lake District farming community.

The problem is all to do with the youth of farmers. The average age is 67. By extension the whole of the rural community is at risk.

We have diversified into environmental contracting and composting but farming still has to be the core - even in diversification.

The National Park Authority needs to be supportive of different types of diversification.

There are thirteen highly skilled farmers in Borrowdale. They produce high quality products, yet farmers are increasingly moving out.

We need to persuade Government to subsidise, yet urban folk do not seem interested in the plight of rural communities.

We run four businesses in order to make the farm viable. Some external financial incentives are useful in setting up new businesses.

But there is a limit to how many new similar businesses can survive without over supplying the market.

The keys to successful rural life are transport, housing (most important) and young people.

In Italy, villages have more diverse businesses and sustainable communities. They don't use the supermarkets. Also, families tend to stick and live together.

The National Park Authority should continue to support initiatives like Hill Farming Traineeships and initiatives that retain skills for young people. We should promote local purchasing as do Booths Supermarkets and promote local produce through holiday lets, for example.

There are several farmers in Coniston who have diversified but need housing on the farm. But this has been refused. People these days demand comparable standards of housing and facilities.

What can the National Park Authority do to help?

The problems lie with lack of people and problems with planning, particularly with delays and nonsensical planning restraints. There is a need for a change of attitude to the extent that business people feel the National Park Authority is likely to say yes. It needs positive thinking, "Have you tried it this way?". We need pre-application advice.

Consultation has significantly improved in the last eighteen months as far as the National Park Authority is concerned.

Pre-application advice has now been reintroduced, subject to prior written notification of the specific proposals.

Planning Officers now seem less reluctant to put forward formal proposals and more courageous proposals. This needs to be encouraged.

The National Park Authority seems petty in its requirements. For example, the requirement to place a timber frame around a corporate Booth sign for the supermarket in Keswick. He would like to engage in the National Park Authority on car and coach parking and needs to feel that this would be in the spirit of genuine partnership to achieve mutually beneficial objectives.

There would be benefits for the National Park if decisions could be made more quickly.

Really? There is an impression that it is better for staff to stay busy. They do not work on internal rates of return. Their priorities are different from those of commercial business.

We need to take account of other current issues including climate change, diversity, health and safety and employee welfare. There needs to be a two way dialogue to convey the range of issues affecting business, in order that we appreciate how we can both evolve. This needs to be both for National Park Authority staff and Members.

The core issues surround farming, to sustain the landscape. Yet Europe will not help farming for the benefit of tourism. Can businesses be encouraged to bring wealth into the National Park, as a means of supporting farming?

It is important to allow businesses to expand to create wealth.

We also need to support education and training in order to hold and create jobs in the National Park.

Halls of Residence are required in Ambleside; iconic/modern symbols of our time would be helpful. The National Park Authority needs to be pro-active and actively approach the University about this rather than wait to be approached.

The University needs to skill local people and create enterprising businesses. It needs to help secure local opportunities for employment. This needs to embrace land based training, not just focus on the nuclear industry.

Food and drink industries are core too.

Culinary skills/food technology. There are good examples in the United States where the Catering Industry Association has a high profile.

Cumbria is becoming renowned for its food but needs facilities for chefs. This means affordable housing. Might there be scope for semi-permanent constructions, e.g. cabins that might be less obtrusive and more affordable?

If Housing Associations provided housing for key workers, e.g. farmers, joiners, electricians etc, this could encourage skills acquisition to qualify for housing. This in turn would provide incentives to train in these key worker skills.

There are no apprenticeships any more. This is regrettable because we need more electricians and plumbers.

Farming can definitely add value to products. For example, the dairy industry is thriving. If support is provided for any sector, it should be adding value to farming, abattoirs, processing plants and housing. Centres of excellence for chefs would support hotels. It is important that we invest in the "green shoots" areas where we are starting to see some growth.

The National Park Authority is still seen as negative so a different approach is required. In our hotel, we employ foreign nationals when there are unemployed people living less than three quarters of an hour away. It is acknowledged that there is not much capacity in the Lake District towns so we need sensitive expansion of the development envelope. There are also problems with the public transport infrastructure, which is deteriorating and characterised by short term initiatives rather than long term solutions. We need to provide parking.

From this meeting we need to confirm that something will be done; it must not be just a talking shop.

It is a great step forward that the business community is being talked to but I agree, we do need some positive commitments especially on parking.

We should look at European models, e.g. underground car parking. Why can't we be more radical; e.g. two storey underground car parks. We should look at other examples in other countries.

We are very pleased with the National Park Authority and glad that there are restrictions on development.

We certainly do not want to despoil the National Park. The tourism industry, contrary to its image, does not want to wreck the National Park.

Regrettably there are no public transport options. We are encouraged by the twenty five year vision and it seems that there are some green shoots in terms of the new approach by the National Park Authority. I would encourage you to develop ideas and actions. Move from fine words into delivery. Then people will begin to pull together. We no longer need parallel strategies. We will act as ambassadors of the National Park, and the National Park Authority, if the National Park Authority itself is convincing – through delivery.

I am reluctant to be drawn into validating the National Park Authority's existence. It is therefore important for you to prove us wrong in our doubts about your intentions.

It is important to note that the capacity of the National Park Authority to right all wrongs is limited. Our budget is similar to that of a Kendal secondary school. But we can lobby, for example, and what is your view on the World Heritage Site Status? The business community should be fighting for it. In other words, we should challenge each other in order to achieve our aspirations.

We are already at capacity. We cannot do more.

Businesses see World Heritage Site Status as a barrier.

The devil is in the detail.

The World Heritage Site Status inscription procedure will be:

- agree a Management Plan.
- Consult.
- Decide - but only on the basis of community engagement.

I feel this group should meet every six months, particularly with businesses and not just with those organisations from which the National Park Authority normally hears.

Conclusion

The consensus was that the meeting had been extremely productive. It was good to share views and dispel myths and establish a dialogue which would eventually translate into action. The venue and the refreshments were praised but it was agreed that future meetings should be held on mid-week evenings. Friday evenings were unsuitable.