

**Date: 24 November 2009**

**Report: PARISH MEMBER 'ELECTION' PROCESS**

**Purpose of the report**

1. To put forward options to 'invigorate' the Parish member election process.

**Strategic Planning Framework**

2. The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and its approved strategic planning framework.

**Background**

3. Prior to the Authority becoming independent in 1997, there was a conscious decision taken for the Authority not to get involved in the administration or management of the Parish Member election / selection / nomination process.

4. From the outset, the process within the North Yorkshire part of the Park has been managed by the Yorkshire Local Councils Association (YLCA). For a number of years the process was not particularly 'tight', either from the YLCA end or, even more so, from Defra's end (when Ministerial approval is obtained for nominated members). At its worst a Parish member appointment was not made until October, following parish council elections in early May. For the South Lakeland parish member, the three parishes involved (Sedbergh, Garsdale and Dent) have, amongst themselves, managed the selection process and arranged the submission of the nomination for Ministerial approval.

5. There have also been a number of other issues in the past, some of which have been flagged up by members, including uncertainty amongst some parishes as to whether there was an election; a possible lack of understanding as to the role of a Parish member on the Authority; and uncertainty about the process.

6. First elections were held in 1996 to establish the 'shadow' authority which consisted of 26 members, five of which were parish members. Those five members were 'split' as follows:

- two from the national park parishes within Craven
- two from the national park parishes within Richmondshire – one from Swaledale/Arkengarthdale and one from Wensleydale
- one from the three national park parishes within South Lakeland.

7. When the size of the Authority was reduced to 22 in 2007, one of the five parish places was 'lost' (along with a member from each of the other three 'groups' on the Authority). It was decided, through discussions led by YLCA with the parishes, that it would be one of the Richmondshire 'seats' that would go, and at the same time YLCA discussed with the Craven parishes the way in which their two nominees were chosen. This latter discussion resulted in an

agreed east/west split of the Craven national park parishes so that each of the Craven parish members would be nominated from one of those two groups of parishes.

### **Current process**

8. In recent years, the process has greatly improved (from that referred to in para 4 above), in particular with YLCA now getting parishes to work to a fairly tight timetable for nominating candidates and, if necessary, undergoing an election process. Ministerial appointments are also now being turned round within days of nominations being submitted.

9. In March/April of an election year, YLCA writes to all parishes involved in elections, with a clear timetable (the dates included below related to a Parish Council election held on 3 May):

- date of election (3 May)
- date by which a nomination for membership of the Authority should be submitted to YLCA (22 May)
- date by which ballot papers, if needed, would be sent out by YLCA (25 May)
- date by which ballot papers must be returned to YLCA - close of poll (11 June)
- date of submission by YLCA of name of successful candidate to Minister (asap after 11 June).

10. This has worked very well, with a nomination being turned round by the Minister's office within a week of submission.

11. The term of office of a parish member on the Authority runs from their appointment until their four year term as a councillor ends. However, not all parish councils have their elections at the same time, so parish member appointments do not all start and finish at the same time.

12. In Richmondshire, for example, all parish council elections are held at the same time as the District Council elections (next ones in 2011 and every four years). This cycle of elections alternates with the County Council elections which are also every four years (next ones being in 2013). In Craven and South Lakeland, the District Councils elects one third of their members at a time (i.e. they hold elections three years out of four – the fourth year being the year when County Council elections are held) and the parishes within those districts follow that three years out of four cycle.

13. The effect of these arrangements for the current four parish members is that Wilf Fenten and Graham Dalton are appointed until May 2010, Harold Brown until May 2011 and Andrew Colley until May 2012.

### **What happens in other National Park Authorities?**

14. Having consulted other English National Park Authorities (NPAs), it appears that the majority take a similar 'hands off' approach, with most elections run by relevant Local Councils Associations. There are, however, two Authorities that do take a more active role – the Peak District and the North York Moors NPAs.

#### **Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA)**

15. The actual election process is handled by Electoral Ballot Reform Services, but PDNPA -

- writes to all Parishes Clerks in early April alerting them to the appointment process and procedures and the action that they will need to take following the May elections in respect of nominations and voting;
- receives copies of the nomination forms and candidates' statements to check and verify that the nominations are valid (checked against parish council election results) and that the

- statements are of the correct length and do not contain any factual inaccuracies or libellous material, any amendments being agreed following consultation with the candidates;
- checks the proof of the ballot papers and election statements prepared by ERS;
  - is consulted by ERS on any requests from parishes for duplicate nomination forms or ballot papers;
  - receives notification of the vote from ERS on the day of the count, with Defra being informed of the names and addresses of the successful candidates;
  - informs the successful candidates that they are eligible for appointment. If any decide not to take up the position then or following the appointment letter, it will be offered to the next runner-up;
  - informs all parishes and all candidates of the results by post the following day, with full details of the votes cast for each candidate in all the constituencies.

#### North York Moors National Park Authority (NYMNPA)

16. The NYMNPA parish members are nominated by each of their four Parish Forums (the Park is split into four roughly equal areas. If elections are needed for one of those members, the Authority organizes 'hustings' for the candidates. The voting process, however, is organised by YLCA, with voting papers issued by them to all parishes in the Parish Forum area.

#### **Role of Government**

17. One issue which would have impacted on the election process was the Government's consideration of direct elections for national park members. In July, however, the Minister (for Marine and Natural Environment) announced that he had decided not to make any changes to the current membership arrangements of National Park Authorities (direct elections) and, therefore, the current selection process will remain.

18. As mentioned earlier, the timetable for the selection of nominees and Ministerial approval has been significantly improved over the last few years – hopefully this will be unaffected even if there is a change in Government in 2010.

#### **Options for future involvement of YDNPA**

19. Set out below are some options, which the Authority could consider for its involvement in the future selection of parish nominees:

	<i>Option</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	No change	Would retain the Authority's independence from the process, but would not address members' concerns about a need to 'invigorate' the process
2	Issue Press releases prior to the commencement of YLCA process. These could identify the parishes and signpost for advice.	This would provide wider publicity on the parish member election process and could clarify the parishes involved. It may also encourage candidates to stand for their parish councils if they are aware that through that they could become members of the Authority.
3	Publish an article in "Dales" highlighting when and in which parishes elections are to be held and how to get involved.	As 2 above.
4	"Dales" article by existing parish member(s) – not one seeking re-election.	Would provide an insight for the public and potential parish members of what to expect.

	<i>Option</i>	<i>Comments</i>
5	Organize hustings for candidates in the event that nominations exceed vacancies.	Should assist the selection process – allow Parishes to hear from candidates in person. Additional work for YDNPA in arranging. Could interrupt the current YLCA timetable and delay the process of obtaining final nomination(s) for submission to the Minister.
6	Candidates to provide a “Statement” in support of their nomination.	Should assist the selection process.
7	Involve the parishes themselves in publicity about the process – eg give them flyers to put on parish notice boards in the winter prior to a spring election.	Additional work for YDNPA staff.  This would provide wider publicity on the parish member election process and clarify the parishes involved. It may also encourage candidates to stand for their parish councils if they are aware that through that they could become members of the Authority.
8	Publicise the system through YDNPA website, and ask the parish councils to publish it through their websites.	Additional work for YDNPA staff.  This would provide wider publicity on the parish member election process and clarify the parishes involved. It may also encourage candidates to stand for their parish councils if they are aware that through that they could become members of the Authority.
9	YDNPA to undertake the entire parish member selection process in-house.	This would involve a considerable amount of additional work for YDNPA staff. Unnecessary when YLCA has refined the process to its current timetable.

## **Conclusions**

20. In 1996/97 there may well have been some merit in the Authority standing back from the parish member selection process in order for it to be seen as being totally independent of the Authority. However, it seems clear from members’ comments on a number of occasions that there is a need for some ‘invigoration’ of the process.

21. YLCA and parishes now operate to a timescale that is as short as is reasonably practicable, so it may be more appropriate for the Authority to direct its efforts towards increasing awareness and publicity of the process for both the general public and parishes.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

22. That a further report be produced for the Authority, expanding on Options 2 to 8 above, to provide more detailed suggestions on how the Authority can ‘invigorate’ the Parish Member selection process.

**David Butterworth**  
**Chief Executive**

20 October 2009

Background documents: None