

Committee **AUDIT AND REVIEW**
Date: **15 February 2008**

Report: **LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK
AUTHORITY WEBSITE (www.yorkshiredales.org.uk) AND PLANNING
PORTAL PROJECT**

Purpose of report

1. To provide an assessment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) website and planning portal project and to identify lessons learnt from it, which should be taken into account in the development of future projects.

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:

- **Best Value Performance Plan 2007/8**
Carry out a review of the development of the Authority's website and related electronic services to identify lessons learned.

NB: This review concentrates predominantly on the lessons learnt from the development of the Authority's website and our involvement in the planning portal. Other issues relating to the wider delivery of electronic services were discussed in the review of the Wide Area Network contract and supported systems which was considered by the Audit and Review Committee in August 2007.

Background

3. As part of the NPA Performance Assessment in 2005, the Peer Review Team's report concluded that:

“Learning from projects and other experiences is not consistent in the organisation. There is no structure in place to ensure that the completion of activities and projects includes the identification of learning for the benefit of future work and performance improvement”.

4. As a result, the Authority's Improvement Plan identified the need to put in place systems for extracting learning and sharing it across the organisation. This included a specific action for reports on progress and lessons learnt from major projects to go to the appropriate Committee.

5. This is the fifth review carried out to date – earlier reviews focused on: the Out of Oblivion website project, Public Places - Private Spaces project, the Northern Office and the Implementation of the Wide Area Network.

Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website and planning portal project

6. A full report of the project is set out in the **Annex**. Members may also wish to review the website – www.yorkshiredales.org.uk prior to the meeting.

Conclusions

7. There is little doubt that the YDNPA website and planning portal project has been a considerable success. Despite some of the issues highlighted within this report, this very positive achievement should be recognised.

8. The website that we launched in December 2005 contained a great deal more information and functionality than our original website. Since then we have witnessed an increase in website traffic (we expect 330,000 unique users to visit the site in 2007/8) and in user satisfaction (71% of users rated the site as very good or excellent in a recent survey). We also continue to receive compliments from external bodies about the comprehensive nature of the information that it contains. The Joint National Parks Web Portal Project has been an excellent example of the benefits of joint working across national parks (in relation to efficiency savings in particular), whilst local YDNPA website developments were also a catalyst for joint working across departments within the YDNPA.

9. Our website is a fundamental part of our suite of communications tools and we have the facility in-house to update it quickly and at little additional cost.

10. As was the case with all major project reviews, this review has highlighted some areas of weakness within the Authority's approach to project development and management. Members will be aware that lessons have already been learnt from those project reviews and a customised Project Management Framework has been established. This website review emphasises that those areas of weakness were in existence across the organisation and reinforces even more clearly the need to adhere to this Framework.

RECOMMENDATION

11. That Members note the achievements of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website and planning portal project and endorse the recommendations for future projects.

Kath Taylor
Communications Manager

Background documents: None

3 January 2008

Lessons learnt from the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority website and planning portal project

1. THE INTENTION

1.1. Why was the project set up?

The Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) website project was a major part of the Authority's Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) programme.

The IEG programme commenced in 2001, when the Authority received £200,000 funding from the Department for Local Government, Transport and the Regions (DTLR) in order to achieve improvements in electronic service delivery (ESD). Over the next four years a total of £800,000 IEG funding was received. A condition of the funding was that one quarter of the funds should be allocated to joint working projects in order address common development requirements of all English NPAs and achieve efficiency.

In order to manage this joint working, the National Parks IEG Partnership was set up in 2002 involving all eight English NPAs¹. It was decided that the Partnership should focus on three major projects:

- Development of a Joint National Parks Web Portal Project
- A rural information network project – later known as LaMIS (Land Management Information System)
- Investigation of the development of a customer relationship management (CRM) system with back office integration.

The Joint National Parks Web Portal Project was the most successful outcome of the partnership, resulting as it did in the development of a joint national parks website www.nationalparks.gov.uk and associated technology. Through its involvement in this wider project, the YDNPA was able to re-develop and re-launch its own website www.yorkshiredales.org.uk in December 2005. This review focuses primarily on the development of our local website but it has also been necessary to provide background information about the Portal Project and about participation in the Planning Portal, as these projects developed hand-in-hand. The Planning Portal is a national system, government-designed and maintained, and in order for the Authority to sign up to this service, it was necessary to make a number of changes to the way in which planning data was handled, received and stored.

1.2 What was the project intended to achieve?

The Joint National Parks Web Portal Project aimed to provide a single point of internet access to information about Britain's national parks. It was developed by the National Parks IEG Partnership with the intention of providing users with a range of electronic services (for example e-payments, planning information, content management system, geographical information systems (GIS) mapping etc) through a consistent interface. It was also hoped that the web portal and associated local national park websites would help further the promotion of the national parks 'brand' (Britain's Breathing Spaces) which was being developed nationally².

¹ Note that the partnership was formed prior to the official designation of the New Forest National Park.

² The Britain's Breathing Spaces (BBS) brand was eventually applied to the Joint National Parks Web Portal – www.nationalparks.gov.uk – in 2006. This delay was a result of wider delays in the BBS project as there was long-term disagreement (now resolved) amongst NPAs across England about the brand values and subsequent design.

Locally this project provided YDNPA with the golden opportunity to redevelop and re-launch its own website. The main aims are outlined below.

- To meet a number of the IEG priority outcomes including:
 - online facilities for NPA-administered grants (for example the Sustainable Development Fund);
 - online inspection of Tree Preservation Order information;
 - access to online educational resources;
 - public access to NPA minutes, agendas, member information and a meetings diary;
 - online facilities for: ordering publications, consulting public transport timetables, viewing 'what's on' events type information;
 - implementation of a content management system to facilitate devolved web content creation and website management;
 - conformance with level AA of W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) standards on website accessibility, and
 - online publication of internet service standards.
- To provide users with more comprehensive information about the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the work of the YDNPA than was available on the 'old' website.
- To reduce the Authority's reliance on an external contractors in relation to the addition of new content to the website and to bring this facility in-house by implementing a web-based content management system, thus giving officers the flexibility to add new content as and when required.
- To meet the Pendleton criteria relating to electronic delivery of planning services and to develop a number of specialist Planning Service web-pages.
- To reduce our reliance on paper publications over time.
- To reduce the number of different websites being developed for the Authority by bringing as much content together as possible in one place.

1.3 Original timescale

It was decided that the revamped YDNPA website – with all associated IEG functionality – needed to be up and running by December 2005. Although the final deadline for delivering the IEG priority outcomes was not until March 2006, the Pendleton Review of planning services, which would determine the extent of the YDNPA's planning delivery grant was due to be carried out in December 2005/January 2006. The Authority therefore decided to work towards ensuring that the new website – featuring the electronic aspects of planning service functions - would be launched in time to meet this earlier deadline.

Although IEG ran from 2001 through to 2006, the main period covered by this review document is July 2004 to May 2007. Although much preliminary scoping work on the project had already been done during the period 2001-03 (by the former Communications Officer who left the Authority in late 2003) July 2004 has been chosen as the start point as this is when the YDNPA local website developments really began to get underway (this coincided with the appointment of the Communications Manager who would become the lead officer on the project). May 2007 has been chosen as the end point as this was the point at which the Authority appointed a dedicated part-time Web Administrator (0.6fte) to focus on both technical and editorial aspects of website development thus marking a new phase in the way the organisation manages its website.

1.4 Original funding/resourcing plan

There was no fixed budget for the redevelopment of the YDNPA website, although it was always intended that the funding would come via the IEG programme.

The way that the IEG draw-down of funds worked provided the opportunity to direct necessary funding towards our local website project as it evolved (there was some flexibility here which proved useful). In essence through our membership of the Joint National Parks Portal Project we gained access to the web software (Obtree) and hosting facilities being used to develop the website www.nationalparks.gov.uk (thus benefiting from joint purchasing) and on top of this the YDNPA was then able to direct additional funding specifically towards the development of our own local site – see paragraph 2.3 – *Final costs/resources* for further details.

1.5 Proposed means of delivery

There were two membership options for NPAs wanting to take part in the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project – ‘sub-sites’ and ‘umbrella sites’. Sub-site NPAs would use the same technology as the portal website to develop their own local website, which would be hosted on the same servers as the portal. Umbrella NPAs would use their own technology and storage solutions but would have the chance to link into some of the portal functionality – for example e-payments and e-shopping.

The YDNPA made the decision to join as a sub-site. Our existing website was by this stage somewhat out-of-date and rather limited. It was in need of a complete overhaul and required the addition of a significant amount of new content. Joining the portal as a sub-site would facilitate this process and it would also give us access to up-to-date content management software which would allow us to bring a great deal of the content management in-house. This approach, however, was to have significant resource implications.

Firstly we required someone to manage the project and to produce the website content (words and pictures), secondly we required technical expertise in order to build the website structure from scratch – this would require the services of a trained Obtree ‘engineer’ (or at least someone with significant web expertise who had undertaken Obtree system administrator training), and thirdly we would require graphic design input in order to ensure that our website looked attractive, was accessible to the public and fitted with corporate ID.

It was therefore decided that the project management and content development aspects of this project would be taken on by the Communications Manager (appointed July 2004) with support from the rest of the Communications Team, whilst technical aspects would be taken on by an IT Projects Officer (to be recruited in August 2004) whose other responsibilities would include IT project support for the Planning Department. Input into the wider Joint National Parks Web Portal Project would be shared between the Communications Manager and IT Projects Officer.

2. THE REALITY

2.1 What was actually achieved?

A great deal has been achieved since the start of this project in 2004. By its very nature web technology is ever-evolving and so many of the developments that took place during the project were unforeseen. The main achievements are briefly outlined below.

2.1.1 Joint National Parks Web Portal Project website

The joint website - www.nationalparks.gov.uk – to which the YDNPA contributed, was ‘soft’ launched in September 2004. As well as providing general information on national parks (within four main areas - ‘Looking after’, ‘Living in’, ‘Learning about’ and ‘Visiting’) and links to local national park websites, the portal also provided a powerful search engine (Ultraseek) which indexed local sites and picked up key service pages for each national park, a simple GIS mapping facility and an extranet facility. All of this functionality could also be used on local sites.

The joint website was subsequently re-launched with new content in 2006.

2.1.2 New YDNPA website

The new YDNPA website was launched on target in December 2005. The new website met the IEG priority outcomes detailed in paragraph 1.2 – *What was the project intended to achieve* in the following ways:

- Online facilities for NPA-administered grants (for example the Sustainable Development Fund) – application forms were made available on the website.
- Online inspection of Tree Preservation Order (TPO) information – locations of TPOs were provided via the GIS system. People were asked to contact the Trees and Woodlands Team for further information.
- Access to online educational resources – all materials were made available on the website.
- Public access to NPA minutes, agendas, member information and a meetings diary – all materials were made available on the website.
- Online facilities for: ordering publications, consulting public transport timetables, viewing ‘what’s on’ events type information – publications order form made available on the website (decision made not to develop an online shop), links installed to www.traveldales.org.uk and to events information on www.yorkshiredales.org
- Implementation of a content management system to facilitate devolved web content creation and website management – new website used the Obtrees/Livelink content management system to which we had access via the Portal Project.
- Conformance with level AA of W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) standards on website accessibility – website was tested to conform with this.
- Online publication of internet service standards – information made available on the website.

In addition we achieved the following stated aims (see also paragraph 1.2):

- Vast new areas of new or updated content provided users with comprehensive information about the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the work of the YDNPA.

- We met 23 out of 24 of the Pendleton criteria relating to electronic delivery of planning services by creating a new updated planning section offering users the chance to download details of current planning applications and appeals and provided ample links to the national Planning Portal. The Authority 'went live' for the electronic receipt of planning applications in 2005. This was a very positive result for the organisation in that it ensured the delivery of a substantial proportion of the 2006-7 planning delivery grant. The criterion that was not met at the time of assessment of the website was in relation to the facility to view plans, application forms and decision notices. This was rectified about a week after the deadline.
- We put the majority of our paper publications online (although hard copies are still required in many cases to reach certain audiences). The Education Service in particular has noticed a significant reduction in the need to send out hard copies of education materials.
- By providing the facility for large amounts of new information to be included in the Authority website, we set a precedent for not developing other new websites for the Authority.

Additionally our new website had the following features:

- new modern look and feel in line with YDNPA corporate ID;
- search tool;
- document library containing many PDF and word documents – copies of leaflets, fact sheets, Authority minutes and so on;
- A-Z of services content classification tool – to help users find their way to relevant services quickly and efficiently;
- searchable news facility – to allow us to display and archive news releases in a searchable area;

Since 2005 the YDNPA website has been constantly evolving following feedback from users and staff and we have done our best to keep up with constantly changing technology in order to keep our site fresh and accessible. Developments have included the following:

- upgrade from Obtree 4.2 to Livelink 9.5 and then Livelink 9.7 (this is the most up-to-date version of the software in which the website is built);
- addition of new content areas, for example, information on car parks and toilets, 'Nature in the Dales', 'Getting active', 'The countryside for everyone';
- integration of data from our planning database (PACS) with the website system so that users can search for details of up-to-date planning applications, appeals and enforcement cases without having to download enormous PDF and word documents as they did when the website was first launched in December 2005;
- introduction of a new web resources area on the site – from which users can download audio files such as audio trails and birdsong recordings;
- links to webcams across the Yorkshire Dales;
- implementation of the same powerful Ultraseek search tool which is used on www.nationalparks.gov.uk (this was found to be a better product than the search tool initially implemented on the site in December 2005 and so a decision was made to switch to Ultraseek instead);
- overhaul of the pages on which Authority and other committee agendas and associated reports are displayed in order to offer users a more user-friendly means of accessing this paperwork;
- implementation of a tool which the user can simply use to re-size the text to four pre-set sizes.

We have carried out two user surveys on the site since its launch in 2005. User satisfaction has risen during this period – with 50% of respondents rating it as very good or excellent in 2006 – rising to 71% in 2007.

2.1.3 Flexible content management system and shared ownership of the website across the organisation

We now have a website which can be constantly updated with the latest information by YDNPA officers. Four members of the Communications Team are able to add, edit and approve content, whilst around 15 other staff across the organisation have been trained to add and edit content and submit this for approval by the Communications Team. Officers are therefore beginning to have a real sense of ownership for ‘their’ areas of the website.

2.1.4 Increased traffic to YDNPA website

Visitors to the YDNPA website are constantly rising thus indicating that the public are using our site more and more. See figures below:

Year	Unique users	Page impressions
2005/06	137,341	2,034,547
2006/07	167,787	3,703,999
2007/08 (six month figures as of October 2007)	169,970	2,923,395
2007/08 (12 month prediction)	339,940	5,846,790

Obviously this reflects a a more general trend in terms of increased levels of internet usage across the country but it is almost certainly also due to the increased availability of information on the YDNPA website.

2.2 Actual timescale

The new YDNPA website was launched on target in December 2005 to meet the external deadlines imposed by IEG and the Pendleton review of planning services.

2.3 Final costs/resources

The costs of developing our local website during the period July 2004 – May 2007 were as follows:

Design & Build Costs	
Initial workshop (Vamosa)	£750
Design & Build work (Vamosa)	£7,000
Purchase of applications/software	
‘Good to go’ applications purchase (Vamosa) (A-Z classifier, Search, Formbuilder)	£10,500
Applications purchase (from Vamosa) (Document library)	£5,000
Applications purchase (from Vamosa) (News)	£3,950

Support³	
Marcare 1 (purchased March 2005)	£7,500
Marcare 2 (purchased Dec 2005)	£2,250
Marcare 3 (purchased Jan 2006)	£750
Mimcare 1 (purchased June 2006)	£4,000
Training	
Training for IT Projects Officer	No extra costs ⁴
CMS training for YDNPA staff from Devon County Council	£3,000
Planning application search developments (2006)	£12,500
Total expenditure – June 2004-May 2007	£57,200⁵

In addition to the above costs which relate specifically to the development of the local YDNPA website (and associated training), the following costs should also be noted:

- Firstly, over the five year period 2001-2006 the Authority was required to direct 25% of the overall £800,000 IEG funding towards joint working as described in paragraph 1.1 – *Why was the project set up?* (A substantial amount of this went towards the development of the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project website.)
- Since 2005/6, the Authority has been required to pay an annual Joint National Parks Web Portal Project membership fee (as a sub-site member). The fee is currently £12,500 per annum. It is envisaged that this annual membership charge will continue to be made year on year for the foreseeable future.

2.4 Actual means of delivery – who was involved, when etc

2.4.1 Development of Joint National Parks Web Portal Project website – www.nationalparks.gov.uk

As already explained, redevelopment of our local YDNPA website was a direct outcome of our participation in the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project which came to fruition as a result of the Government's IEG programme. Background to this project is therefore given below.

The project really began to get off the ground in 2003, when Anite Public Sector were appointed as the main developers for this project. Anite proposed to develop the new website using Obtree – a powerful and up-to-date content management system (CMS) which would also enable national park authorities to generate their own local website content through a user-friendly interface. The main website (and associated local websites) would be hosted on servers maintained by a company called Titan Internet in London. The project aimed to provide a solid infrastructure for web hosting and storage, a GIS mapping facility, a powerful search tool and it also led to two pilot projects – one relating to e-payments for services in Dartmoor and one relating to e-shopping in Northumberland.

³ Marcare refers to web support purchased from external contractor Vamosa. Mimcare refers to support purchased from external contractor Mimtech – see paragraph 2.4.3 Post launch developments - for details of transfer of YDNPA website support from Vamosa to Mimtech.

⁴ Training for IT Projects Officer was funded through Marcare arrangements.

⁵ Note that the Authority has incurred other web-related expenditure during this period – for example expenditure on the development and maintenance of other websites such as Traveldales and Out of Oblivion but these costs are not included here. This figure of £57,200 represents purely development/maintenance and training costs for the YDNPA main website during the period covered by this report.

Following Anite's appointment, the eight English national park authorities formally agreed to participate in the project, putting around one quarter of their individual IEG funding into a joint budget. The Peak District National Park Authority agreed to oversee the management of the project, taking on responsibility for contractual and financial matters, whilst the Lake District National Park Authority agreed to act as the employing authority for the new Portal Manager. The indicative budget for the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project (excluding local website developments) was around £100,000 to £150,000. This would include shared services (hosting and so on), content management system, an extranet facility with discussion board, Obtree and server support, GIS developments, search engine, e-payments and e-shopping (pilot projects).

[Note: the indicative budgets for the other two joint projects (as outlined in paragraph 1.1 – *Why was the project set up?*) were:

- Rural information network project (LaMIS) - £80,000
- Customer Relationship management system and back office integration - £200,000]

Once these initial arrangements were in place, work commenced on the development of the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project website – www.nationalparks.gov.uk. A joint working group with representatives from all of the English national park authorities began to work on the structure of the website – allowing for development of both the main joint site and local 'sub-sites'. Other joint working groups worked on developments such as GIS, metadata⁶, content and design and implementation of the Ultraseek search engine. Around 40 people across all English national parks were involved in the various working groups at various stages.

It was decided that the website audience comprised of four main sectors typified by:

- a British GCSE student researching national parks for geography project;
- an Australian planning visit to Britain and its national parks;
- a resident wanting to make planning application, and
- an ecologist working within an AONB who wants conservation project information in national parks.

The website was 'soft' launched in September 2004. Note that it was always envisaged that this initial website would be re-designed and re-launched following further work on local sites.

2.4.2 Development of the YDNPA website – www.yorkshiredales.org.uk

The majority of work on our local website commenced in the summer of 2004.

The Senior Management Team approved an overall structure for the website in October 2004. This was based upon the portal website structure and on the IEG 'priority outcomes'.

During the autumn of 2004, it soon became apparent that it would be unrealistic to expect the IT Projects Officer to undertake the entire design and build of the new website in-house. Although the individual concerned had some prior website expertise, this was not sufficient for the project concerned (for example, he had no prior knowledge of the required content management software Obtree) and in addition to this some graphic design expertise was required. The website was, after

⁶ Metadata are basically the 'labels' that are searched when someone is looking for information on the internet. A joint working group developed a national parks metadata schema (or category list) using a schema that had been set up by the Devon Consortium (a group of Devon local authorities) and LAWS (the Local Authority Web Sites project).

all, to become one of our main communication tools and so high standards of design were therefore fundamental.

Following some research by the Communications Manager – in partnership with the Web Editor at the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) – to identify suitable contractors to undertake this work, the YDNPA appointed the Glasgow-based external contractors Vamosa to design and build our website using the Obtree platform in March 2005. Vamosa had previously worked on a number of Obtree-based public sector sites including: North Wiltshire District Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, London Borough of Merton, Historic Scotland, Wiltshire Council, Worcestershire County Council, Salford City Council and the British Council and they were highly recommended.

Vamosa's brief was to come up with a creative design for the website, implement this in Obtree on the portal servers hosted by Titan and install several of their 'good to go' Obtree applications including a search facility, a document library, a news publishing application and an A-Z of services. They were also contracted to provide Obtree system administrator training for the IT Projects Officer and Obtree content management system training for three members of the Communications Team. Although we looked at working in partnership with the LDNPA on this project, in order to achieve economies of scale, this proved impossible as our timescales for decisions were out of kilter (although we did participate in a joint workshop at the start of the project). The Joint National Parks Web Portal Project had been through a competitive tendering process already to purchase the Obtree software and Titan hosting service and at this stage Vamosa was one of the only companies that we were able to identify who could offer the necessary service. The necessary steps were followed, in line with Financial Regulations, in awarding this work to Vamosa.

Following Vamosa's appointment in March, development of the YDNPA website began in earnest. Vamosa quickly came up with a design for the site based on the brief that they were given (in line with YDNPA corporate ID) and they installed the 'good to go' software applications. Customised training in the Obtree system administrator software was provided for the IT Projects Officer and Obtree content management system training was provided for three members of the Communications Team. The first phase of development was signed off in June 2005.

During the next six months the main site build took place. The Communications Team worked with officers across the Authority to source new content, edit existing content and make sure that all areas of our work were covered. In order to ensure consistency across the site, a style guide was developed. Meanwhile the IT Projects Officer concentrated mainly on working with the Planning Department to develop an online version of the draft Local Plan and to ensure that planning application details could be made available via the YDNPA website in time for the Pendleton review of planning services.

Throughout this period we also relied heavily on support from the Portal Manager, who was able to provide ad-hoc advice about the content management system and other related matters and we also shared expertise with other national park staff involved in carrying out the same activity locally – for example, the Web Editor at LDNPA.

In December 2005, we launched the new YDNPA website with help from the Portal Manager and our 'old' website ceased to be available (along with its sister website www.destinationdales.org).

3. SUSTAINING THE PROJECT

Since its launch in December 2005, we have continued to develop the YDNPA website in order to respond to customer and staff feedback and in order to keep up with technological developments.

Responsibility for the website as a whole has been retained by the Communications Team within the External Affairs department. This seems appropriate given the website's role in relation to communications. The IT Project Officer's contract came to an end during the summer of 2006 and over the next six to eight months the Senior Management Team considered how best to resource the website in the future – concentrating in particular on the technical management aspects and giving due consideration as to how this role was fulfilled at other NPAs. In early 2007 a decision was made to create a new Web Administrator role (0.6fte) within the Communications Team, combining both technical and editorial responsibilities. As the individual concerned develops his technical expertise, we are gradually becoming less reliant on external technical support – although some high level expertise of this sort will almost certainly be required for some time to come, if not indefinitely.

The external support arrangements for our website have also changed. Vamosa moved their core activities away from Obtree support and, as a result, some former Vamosa staff to set up their own company – Mimtech, which specialised, amongst other things, in Obtree website design, build and support. The YDNPA therefore transferred its business to Mimtech.

Around 15 officers have been trained to undertake content management duties. These officers can now write their own content, edit existing content using the website's content management system and submit this for approval and publishing to the Communications Team. This has meant that each department has been able to take on a degree of responsibility for updating their 'own' areas of the website. Training was delivered by Devon County Council but is now picked up by the Website Administrator as required. The delegation of responsibility to departments has worked particularly well in some areas of the Authority – namely the Secretariat and Planning departments and the Wildlife Conservation and Access for All teams.

The YDNPA continues to be a sub-site member of the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project. Membership of this group has expanded to include the New Forest NPA and Pembrokeshire Coast NPA, whilst the other two Welsh national park authorities and both Scottish national park authorities are expressing a strong interest in joining the partnership. This provides a clear message that all national park authorities appear to see the need to sustain and develop further this joint website project.

Members have decided that Web-based services should continue to be a high priority for the YDNPA. Websites need to change and to be constantly updated in order to retain the interest of those visiting and we also need to keep up-to-date with current technological developments. It will therefore be important to ensure that web-based services continue to be viewed as a high priority in terms of the resources allocated to this programme. Our website has become a key communications tool and this role is only likely to grow in the future. In addition a great deal of work has been done both in-house and in partnership with Mimtech – subsequent to the period covered by this report - to deliver additional e-planning objectives.

4. LESSONS LEARNT

4.1 What went well and why?

4.1.1 Development of a 'better' and more comprehensive website, implementation of a more flexible website management system and achievement of deadlines

The key achievement here is that we now have a much better website which allows us to deliver a number of services online. It provides the user with much more comprehensive information in a highly accessible format and the Authority has the flexibility to develop this in-house and (within reason!) to keep up-to-date with web technology.

We also met our December 2005 deadline for launching the new website. The website delivered well in terms of meeting the great majority of the Pendleton and IEG criteria.

We have carried out two user surveys on the site since its launch in 2005. User satisfaction has risen during this period – with 50% of respondents rating it as very good or excellent in 2006 – rising to 71% in 2007. This illustrates well the benefits of having a flexible content management system in that we were able to respond very quickly to customer feedback about the site in 2006 by carrying out a number of improvements. From the satisfaction survey, it seems apparent that these improvements have been well received.

In March 2006 the Corporate Governance Working Group also carried out a review of the Authority's new website. They looked specifically at how well it allowed people to find particular pieces of information and how well it explained how the Authority works. The review was generally positive. It did highlight two areas of weakness. Firstly that the Local Plan information was out of date and secondly it noted that information on governance and 'how things are done' was not included. For example our core values, principles of good governance and committee terms of reference missing. These issues have now been addressed.

4.1.2 Joint working

The Joint National Parks Web Portal Project has been a good example of joint working across national park authorities. Through its membership of this partnership, YDNPA was able to take the opportunity to re-launch its own website and to draw upon the invaluable expertise of other national park authority staff across the country. In particular we have had a great deal of support from the Portal Manager. Rather than each NPA re-inventing the wheel, in terms of meeting the IEG and Pendleton criteria, we were able to learn from other NPAs and share our own expertise and ideas.

Additionally the website has been the catalyst for cross-departmental working. Departments and teams have worked (and continue to work) closely with the Communications Team, firstly to generate new content and latterly to keep the site content fresh and up-to-date.

4.1.3 Training

The content management training delivered by Devon County Council was particularly successful and represented good value for money. The trainer concerned had delivered customised training for both Exmoor and Dartmoor NPAs and so was able to deliver a suitable course customised to our own website (rather than an off-the-shelf Obtree CMS course). Having facilitated this training, the Communications Team have since been able to devolve a certain degree of responsibility for the site to officers around the organisation.

4.2 What went less well and why?

4.2.1 Lack of understanding of project scope and unclear division of responsibility

One of the key problems with this project was the fact that because web technology is evolving so fast, it was difficult to have a clear idea of the scope of this project at the outset.

In addition, the project suffered from ‘falling between’ two areas of responsibility – Communications and IT. Some decisions – such as the appointment of the IT Projects Officer – were made without the full involvement of both teams which – with hindsight - might have been beneficial.

At the outset of the project a new IT Projects Officer was appointed with the expectation that he/she would build/design the new YDNPA website or at least provide expert advice on how to achieve this. In retrospect it would appear that the recruitment process did not take full account of the skillset that would be required. In part this was because at this point, the Authority did not really understand what would be required. It is also fair to say that the individual recruited did not in the end have the competence to deliver what was required – this resulted in a lot of time being taken up by personnel issues rather than by actual project delivery.

There was also a lack of understanding about website design and about what we were trying to achieve by revamping our website. Whilst some of those involved did recognise the importance of employing a professional to create and apply a professional design to the website and realised that vast new areas of content would need to be developed to reflect the full scope of the Authority’s activities, this was not initially widely understood by some others in the organisation. Rather, some parties expected that we would simply be transferring information directly across from the ‘old’ website to the new Obtree platform. This had never been the intention and would have been a wasted opportunity. Perhaps this indicates a lack of communication about the project in the early stages?

Once some of these slightly crossed wires had been untangled and those involved began to develop a better understanding of the project scope, however, it became clear that the Authority needed to invest significantly in its new website on a number of fronts – content development, website design and build, training and so on. It was clear that this would require significant external support. Hence the appointment of Vamosa to focus on the highly technical aspects of this project.

4.2.2 Lack of in-house technical web expertise

The YDNPA IT team had no prior website expertise (their remit is predominantly network support and development) and although we hoped to solve this issue by recruiting an IT Projects Officer to advise us in this area, this approach was not entirely successful. Although the individual concerned had some generalist website experience and interest, he was not familiar with the Obtree software that the portal had selected. Admittedly Obtree was a specialist product which we would not have expected anyone to be familiar with immediately but even with training, it soon became clear that the individual concerned could not carry out the full project requirements.

This lack of in-house technical expertise also meant that it was sometimes difficult to make well-informed decisions about technical matters – for example, in relation to the purchase of software. Whilst some other NPAs relied on existing in-house web expertise or dedicated IEG coordinators (see paragraph 4.2.4 – *No dedicated IEG Coordinator*) – we were unable to draw upon such expertise. Our IT Team were already heavily involved and committed to other projects (such as the WAN) and they also did not have the prior web expertise to assist fully in making such decisions. This resulted in a small number of poor decisions – for example we purchased a search tool from Vamosa which later became unnecessary when we established that we were already paying for joint usage of the Ultraseek search tool as a portal sub-site member.

In addition, limited in-house technical web expertise meant that the YDNPA was not able to contribute to the Joint National Parks Portal Project as fully as we might have wished.

4.2.3 Budget

Owing to the way in which the IEG draw-down of funding operated (in that funding for each year was not announced by central government until the start of each year), there was no fixed budget for this project at the outset. This made it difficult to plan and scope the project. In the end, however, this probably became an advantage – in that there was some flexibility over funding for the website as we identified new developments and the project evolved.

4.2.4 IEG coordination

Other NPAs – for example Exmoor NPA and the Lake District NPA eventually made a decision either to second or recruit a member of staff who would coordinate all IEG related activity – including both in-house system developments and the website. We opted for a different approach - with responsibility being spread across several areas – IT and Communications. (Note, however, that in the first two years of IEG spending the grants could not be used to employ staff so any appointment of an IEG Coordinator would have had to be paid for by core funds. This was not an option at the time.)

Unfortunately both teams were already heavily committed during this period – the IT team were committed to the installation of a new network (a major project itself) and associated systems such as the intranet and telephony system, whilst the Communications Team was undergoing a restructure and already had heavy commitments relating to implementation of the CRoW Act. The new IT Projects Officer was expected to bridge the gap between technical developments on the website and in the Planning Department but in fact there was very little integration between these two areas until very late in the day. For example, the Communications Team heard about the Pendleton Review of planning services from another NPA rather than internally via IT Projects Officer as might have been expected.

4.2.5 Lack of formal project plan, limited joint working within the Authority and over-reliance on other bodies

It is probably true to say that this project was never really considered as a ‘project’ in the way that it would be today (following development of the YDNPA Project Management Framework in 2007). There was a rough timescale – leading to the website launch in December 2005 – and within this framework the Communications Team and Vamosa worked internally to a series of deadlines in order to ensure that targets were met. Whilst a very early scoping exercise relating to YDNPA’s involvement in the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project had had been produced by the Communications Officer (who left in 2003), a full project plan detailing the involvement of all parties in the project (for example the input of officers across the Authority in terms of producing content) was never produced. Although many individuals did work closely with the Communications Team, other areas were less responsive. It was particularly difficult, for example, initially to obtain information from the Planning Department, whose staff were quite legitimately busy with other projects and priorities. This situation did, however, improve significantly, once the Senior Planning Technician became more heavily involved in the project.

It is also worth noting that owing to the Joint National Parks Web Portal Project’s decision to use Obtree, we have been highly dependent throughout the project on one external supplier – Vamosa – and on the goodwill of colleagues at other national parks. The LDNPA and Portal Manager were invaluable in this respect. Whilst this has not in the end been a major issue, it should perhaps have been noted as a potential risk.

4.2.6 IT equipment

Following the implementation of the new YDNPA computer network (Citrix), the Communications Team did not initially have the necessary software to manipulate images (Photoshop) or to access CDs. Although these matters were resolved during the period June – December 2005, they did result in significant delays and stress. In addition, this period coincided with the implementation of the new network and the WAN. As already noted in the WAN Project Review (Audit & Review, August 2007) there were significant problems with the WAN performance during this period. This resulted in staff at Colvend (where the Communications Team and IT Projects Officer were based) experiencing notable periods of network downtime or slow performance. All of this slowed down the process of building the website.

4.2.7 Staffing issues

The main period of website development coincided with the time when various working arrangements were being trialled by the Head of External Affairs and when the Communications Manager role was being increased from part to full-time. As a result of all of this, strategic support for the website project was perhaps more limited than it might otherwise have been and this occasionally resulted in delays in dealing with related issues.

4.2.8 E-shopping

Development of e-shopping did not progress for a variety of reasons.

Initially YDNPA Retail Services were concerned that we did not have the in-house resources to deal with administrative side of servicing an online shop. We did not wish to raise customer expectations unrealistically and therefore put this development on hold. We met the IEG priority outcome which related to e-shopping by providing an online catalogue of publications and a telephone-operated mail order facility.

Now that the YDNPA is reviewing its retail operations, it is likely that we will implement an online shop during 2007/8.

4.2.10 Planning application search facility

The initial phase of work carried out by the IT Projects Officer to make planning application data available online was not particularly user-friendly, although it did nevertheless allow YDNPA to meet related Pendleton criteria. File sizes of the files holding the relevant data were very large and they could not be easily searched. This part of the project was therefore re-visited in 2006 with the Senior Planning Technician taking on responsibility for working with Mimtech to achieve a satisfactory outcome.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The project has identified a number of issues that should be considered when developing similar projects in the future. These comments are particularly pertinent to projects that

- a) involve joint working – for example, with other national park authorities;
- b) are ‘Authority-wide’ in that they involve significant input from a number of different departments; and
- c) involve new technology.

Many of the issues identified in this review – particularly those that relate to project management – duplicate recommendations from the ‘Out of Oblivion’ and ‘Public Spaces Private Places’ project reviews and many of these have now been addressed within the organisation. The only ‘new’ recommendations are the final and penultimate ones listed below.

- **Major corporate projects such as this – which involve input from officers across the Authority and involve some critical deadlines – must be clearly identified as a project, with a detailed project plan with clear and realistic estimates of the time and resources involved. This must include a budget (even if this subsequently changes) and a plan for dealing with staff changes should this occur. Regular formal progress reports should be made to SMT as a matter of course.**
- **Good communication is critical to good project management. Even if the links between departments are not immediately obvious, they can in fact be significant in projects such as this.**
- **The Authority should recognise that with projects such as this where the technology involved is changing on an almost constant basis, we will need either a) to pay the market rate (likely to be higher than the YDNPA salary scale) to employ an expert with the necessary technological expertise, or b) to be prepared to access this expertise externally through contractors.**
- **Full account needs to be taken of the necessary IT facilities that officers require to do their jobs both before and during a project. It should also be recognised that these requirements will not always be ‘standard issue’.**

The implications of this not having happened during this project are discussed in paragraph 4.2.6 – *IT equipment*. To some extent this issue has, however, now been addressed with the internal review of IT (conducted by the Head of Park Management) and the establishment of an IT Management Group, which has in its remit the role of communicating departmental IT requirements to the IT Team.