Item 10: The Sill Update

1. Purpose of Report

To provide Members of the Authority with an update on The Sill Project for the reporting period.

2. Recommendations

Members are recommended to:

a) **Note progress being made in all aspects of the project.**

b) **Note that visitor figures have now exceeded the year one target agreed with HLF and are on track to achieve, and has now exceeded, the stretch target set by the Authority.**

c) **Note that income generation remains below target however, significant progress across retail, activities and venue hire has been made in the last quarter.**

3. Implications

a. **Financial:**

   The impact of The Sill on the Authority’s finances during 2017/18 is covered in Item 2 on this Agenda.

b. **Equalities:** None

4. Background

   a) The Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre opened to the public on 29 July 2017 and has exceeded many of its planned activity targets since opening.

   b) A programme of events and exhibitions has taken place throughout the year with the third temporary exhibition, Digital Landscapes, due to launch on 2nd July

5. The Sill Capital Build

   a) The Authority continues to actively manage snagging lists for works requiring further attention on the landscaping, building and interpretation contracts.

   b) The final settlement with the main contractor Sir Robert McAlpine has been agreed following agreement from the Sill Project Board. The final contract sum being £8,816,169.

   c) The Sill Project Board have agreed the allocation of the £140,000 of earmarked reserve for fit out of The Sill to priority areas including the exhibition and signage improvements and works to improve the middle and lower car parks.

6. Operational Update

a) **Key Performance Indicators**

   i. **Visitor Numbers:** In mid-February, The Sill’s full year annual visitor figure target of 100,000 was surpassed. The stretch target of 120,000 visitors was exceeded by the end of April 2018 and with May Bank Holidays, Easter and the warmer weekends still to
come we are now on course to achieve and exceed 150,000 visitors during the first full year of operation (fig 1).

Figure 1: Year to date cumulative trend in visitor figures.

ii. **YHA stays:** The total number of overnight stays at the hostel since opening to end of March 2018 is 8,954; 124% of target with YHA income at 148% of target. Since opening, the YHA at The Sill has achieved 48% occupancy; target is 50%. Occupancy peaked at 91% during the summer dropping to 12% during December before rising again to 41% in March. This is in line with the expected visitor profile during the winter months.

iii. **Retail Performance:** Quarter 4 saw a worsening retail performance as the prolonged poor weather, including a 5 day period when the Sill was forced to close due drifting snow, affected sales. January and February saw income at 78% and 80% of target respectively, while March income dropped to 64% of expected income. Retail uptake remained ahead of expectations at 22% of visitors; however, spend per head is below target at £0.87 (target - £1.34) based on The Sill Business Plan in place for the 2017/18 financial year. This overall trend is expected to improve into quarter 1 2018-19 following improvements to the weather and visitor figures in the new financial year. A review of both the product range and profit margins is also ongoing.

iv. **Cafe:** to the end of March 2018 the cafe has consistently operated ahead of target at 133% of the operator’s agreed business plan. This trend is set to continue as the business develops, particularly the corporate/ private events side with confirmed wedding bookings and corporate bookings in the diary going forward. In addition, we have continued to develop joint public events with Fresh Element, including a programme of Meet the Maker events which are supporting both the business plan and HLF targets.

v. **Car Parking:** income to the end of March from car parking remains significantly below target at 50%. To address this, improvements are currently being made to the onsite signage and messaging to improve compliance and understanding of the system.
Officers will continue to closely monitor car park data and look for ways to improve this figure. A full review of car parking across the Authority’s car parks will take place as planned later this year; the results of this review will inform any changes which may need to be made at the Sill to improve performance of this key metric.

vi. **Activity Days:** to the end of March 2018, 12,195 Sill Activity Days (67% of the target for 2017/2018) had been provided through 450 events; 48% of these activities engaged audiences through the public events programme, whilst education and training activities accounted for 18% and 34% respectively.

Since the Sill activity programme began in April 2015, 40,383 activity days (119% of the project target to date) have been provided enabling people to engage with 1,221 Sill events.

Although income from Sill Activities remains behind target there has been a significant improvement in performance of 190% compared to last year; Activity Income Apr 16 – Mar 17 = £9,978, Activity Income Apr 17 – Mar 18 = £28,815.

![Yearly Income - Project Start to Date](image)

Figure 2. Yearly Activity Income

Further details on the development and content of the Activity Programme are given in section 7 below.

vii. **Volunteers:** Our ‘ways of working’ with volunteers are continuing to develop with new volunteering roles at The Sill being introduced. During 2017-18, for example, Sill Welcome Ambassador volunteers contributed 180 volunteer days and Sill Landscape Maintenance volunteers a further 63 days. In total, 710 ‘volunteer days’ were recorded for the Quarter 4. Year to date (there have been 2,442 volunteer days bringing the Project to Date (PTD) total to 6,894. This is on target at 129% of PTD (56% of the 12,144 five year target).

Although the overall target for volunteers days is being met there is still work needed to achieve transformational change in terms of the type, ability, age and background of volunteers. Some progress is being made, for example through our young volunteers supporting the delivery of Sill Sundays, but more is needed to achieve the aspirational aims of the wider project and changes are underway to enable this.

viii. **Visitor Feedback:** We collate visitor feedback from both online channels and through in person comment cards completed on site.
Online: We have several accounts online where the public can rate and review The Sill:

- Trip Advisor
- Google Business
- Facebook Pages (both NNPA and The Sill)

Trip Advisor
Trip Advisor does not encourage users to leave reviews unless the people have the Trip Advisor app installed on their phones with notifications running. Google Business, however, encourages Android users to leave reviews or provide photos of the site through in-built GPS notification.

Current Rating – 3.5 / 5  no change
No. of reviews – 174
Excellent – 32%
Very Good – 25%
Average – 14%
Poor – 17 %
Terrible – 12%

Common Positive Trends: friendliness of staff, quality of café, accessibility, architecture, good exhibition,

Common Negative Trends: quality of exhibition, price of café, exhibition mainly aimed at children, car park signage and charges

Google Business
Google Business is a far less robust review platform. It, instead, exists, to provide Google with up to date information about businesses. As such, most reviews only provide a star rating out of five and occasionally a very short overview.

Current Rating – 4.2 / 5
No. of reviews – 283

Common Positive Trends: building design, exhibition space, quality of food in café. Views from rooftop, reasonably priced parking, helpful and friendly staff

Common Negative Trends: signage, quality of exhibition, unable to bring dogs into the building, prices in and quality of café, price of parking.

Facebook
People can leave reviews either on the main Northumberland National Park Facebook page or on The Sill’s own Facebook page. For the purposes of this report the rating will come from The Sill page as the NNP page is primarily for reviews of the National Park but common trends will be collated both.

Current Rating – 4.5 / 5

Common Positive Trends: Quality of building, good views from building, good food.

Common Negative Trends: Cost of food in café, car parking charges.

On Site:
To year end, 254 reviews were submitted on site, of these 91% were from respondents who have a good/ satisfactory experience (Table 1).
Satisfaction Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>178 (70%)</td>
<td>54 (21%)</td>
<td>22 (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Visitor satisfaction**

Common areas that respondents included in comments on onsite feedback cards are summarised below in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roof</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facility/Building</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exhibits</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Signage (internal, external and road signage)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parking (predominantly payment complaints)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requests for large map of Northumberland</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Summary of onsite visitor comments**

* Many comments included feedback and suggestions, for example relating to signage or car parking information.

b) **Events, Hires and Business Support:** Room hires were slower during the winter months, as was anticipated. However, there were still bookings from a range of businesses, including the North Pennines AONB, Forestry Commission, Church of England and National Trust. Bookings at the Hive remain a priority area for improvement.

7. **The Sill Activities Programme**

a) **Events**

Overall project to date events Activity Days remain ahead of target at 130%. During 2017-2018, 8,155 Activity Days were achieved against a target of 10,900 for the Events programme. This reflects a focus on the development of new high value low volume
events in order to make a step change in the level of income generated from the events programme.

This year has seen our first sell-out thematic programmes such as Dark Skies which offered engagement opportunities for a broad range of audiences e.g. Dark Sky photography, a family Dark Skies disco and star tips for profit (a B2B event). Due to the Dark Skies programming completely selling out, during 2018-2019 we will use our learnings from this to develop the business model and develop and increase the programme for the coming winter.

Following the successful trial of Sill Sundays in quarter 2 and 3 we have now embedded this programme for quarter 4. We have also embedded a regular Wild Wednesday programme, delivered every Wednesday in the Northumberland school holidays which was originally trialled in 2016-2017. Also new for 2017 was a low price self-guided trail, sold through the Front of House team, using willow animal sculptures placed around the Sill site during Easter. Participants received a poster with facts and local knowledge relating to each wild animal as a prize to encourage them to visit and explore other places in the National Park.

February’s Meet the Maker event with Hepple Gin was a sell-out, as was the Valentine’s dinner and stargazing event. Both of these events resulted in overnight stays out of season for the YHA.

In addition to delivery with partners such as local producers as part of our new low volume high income events we have also developed our use of third party businesses for family events, particularly those that have an existing audience and following which they can bring to the Sill programmes e.g.:

- Chalk – sold out event for new audiences
- Wild Dog Outdoors
- Professor Pumpernickel

Looking forward into 2018-2019, we will be trialling a quarterly thematic approach to programming events, e.g. the events from July to September will respond to the themes of the Digital Landscapes temporary exhibition. Using a thematic approach will help us to make the most of our marketing potential and will help us to provide a clear call to action to encourage audiences to directly engage with Sill programmes. To build capacity within the event development and delivery team a number of student intern positions have been identified and are advertised. Greater emphasis is also being placed on reviewing attendance and income from individual events to support forecasting income and footfall to future events to ensure agreed targets are met. Once the new booking system and CRM system are launched our intelligence around audiences will be improved helping us to identify successful engagement and income opportunities.

b) Education: 2017-2018 saw the launch of the Primary Partner School Programme and piloting and embedding of the core Key Stage 1 & 2 formal education offer. In 2018-2019 we are already beginning to see the benefits of this new offer with an increase of 244% on the number of schools booked for workshops corresponding to a 129% increase in the number of pupils expected to engage with our programme in the 2018 spring/summer term.

During 2017-2018, 3,076 Activity Days were achieved against a target of 6,000 for the Education programme. This has been a development period for the education programme, during which the volume of engagements might be expected to be lower. The cumulative effect of this is that the actual number of education Activity Days project to date is at 95% of the cumulative target.

In line with the Education Action Plan and agreed strategy for the development of the Education programme, the focus for 2017-2018 has been primary schools. The Sill's
Primary programme, developed in association with the Sill Partner Schools in spring/summer 2017, has been open for bookings since September 2017, in addition, since the launch of the new websites in May 2017 teachers and schools have been able to access programme listings. In addition to facilitated workshops and assemblies there are now several downloadable resources available for teachers on our website.

During the last year we have also developed several sessions for home educated children and their families. These have all been fully booked and several futures dates are already scheduled.

In order to directly market the schools programme we have offered free school assemblies. To encourage schools to convert this free offer to a paid for experience any school booking an assembly has then been offered a discounted price on workshops with us until July 2018. The conversion rate to date has been 86%.

After discussions with the YHA, the staff at their contact centre have now been briefed on the NNPA’s Sill schools offer and can help sell to schools making bookings with them. They can directly sell two of our sessions at The Sill.

In addition to our work with Partner Schools the Education team have also developed several other partnerships to support the delivery of the Activity Programme, including:

- Queens Hall
- Glendale children’s day
- Arts Mark – we are working with three schools to help them achieve their Artsmark status.
- Tyne Rivers Trust
- Vindolanda/Hexham Book Festival
- Newcastle University Robinson Library

Work on development of the secondary school offer was due to start in September 2017, however, since the opening of The Sill: NLDC there has been strong demand from university groups and we have hosted several visits for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. As a result the Action Plan for Formal Education has been adjusted to reflect the work being done now on the FE/HE offer. This means that work on the FE/HE offer will take place in 2018, earlier than expected, and detailed work on the secondary school programme will begin later with the launch of the secondary partner schools programme moving to Q3 2018-2019, later than expected.

New Education Programme in development for summer/autumn 2018 include:

- First World War Centenary Experience: Sessions developed in partnership with Time Bandits (costumed interpreters), to be delivered in October (in Rothbury) and November (at The Sill: NLDC) to commemorate 100 years since the end of the Great War
- Digital Landscapes: Digital workshops for KS2 and 3 in development with Electrocat
- Dark Skies: School sessions to be offered to schools on day trips to The Sill: NLDC and also YHA groups in the evening
- Loans boxes

c) Training:

Overall project to date training Activity Days remain ahead of target at 138%. The training programme continues to develop however; this is largely through external partners and/or third party providers or through our volunteering programme. This is an area which will be developed in the coming year including a series of internships supporting a wide range of the National Park’s work areas, e.g. conservation work on
the Lampert Mosses and Digital Landscapes. During 2017-2018, 964 Activity Days were achieved against a target of 1,200 for the Training Programme.

8. **Temporary Exhibition Programme**

The Dark Skies exhibition was extended to mid-May and has continued to be a success. The Digital Landscapes exhibition launches on 2nd July and runs until 30th September. Using pioneering interactive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality and photogrammetry, the exhibition will bring treasures of the National Park to life for visitors. This exhibition also launches our thematic approach to activity programming, with events linked to the exhibition taking place across the national park. Designed to coincide with the Great Exhibition of the North’s innovation theme, the exhibition will be divided into three main sections and explore the concepts of ‘Digital for Adventure’, ‘Digital for Learning’ and ‘Digital for Conservation’. The exhibition showcases the benefits that new technologies, 3D modelling, drone surveys and digital mapping have had on tourism and leisure and for land management and conservation. There will also be opportunities for local businesses to get involved either through collaboration, sponsorship or one of the events, as well as a number of workshops held at the start and end of the exhibition programme aimed directly at working with local schools.

9. **Sill Staffing**

The Sill has continued to experience absence or sick leave of The Sill Manager. An Interim Sill Manager has been recruited to provide cover. A staffing review has been completed to bring front of house and other staffing levels in line with the agreed Business Plan as we enter Year 2 of operation.

10. **Conclusions**

a) Visitor figures have now exceeded the year one target agreed with HLF and has exceeded the stretch target of 120,000. This suggests that concept has been a success with the public and provides a strong platform for us to build on.

b) Operational income remains below target, however, significant progress across retail, activities and venue hire has been made in the last quarter.

c) Activity Plan income and expenditure both remain below target and a review of the Activity Programme in agreement with the HLF is a priority as discussed in Item 1: the Medium Term Budget Plan. The activity programme has begun a journey of transformational change, event attendance figures have begun to rise and we are beginning to trial new ways of working in order to improve our income received. However, there is still a long way to go on this area of work.

d) Following the completion of the capital and fit out programme, some minor snagging continues for both the main contractor and interpretation contractor.

e) Overall visitor feedback has been largely positive and we continue to review and spot trends for improvements.

f) A second temporary exhibition ‘Northumberland’s Dark Skies’ is now open and a third, ‘Digital Landscapes’ is in development ahead of opening summer 2018.

**Contact Officers:** For further information contact Claire Mason, Interim Sill Manager, e-mail: claire.mason@nnpa.org.uk or Sarah Glynn, Sill Manager, e-mail: sarah.glynn@nnpa.org.uk

**Background papers:** None