Item 5 : Quarterly 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 the progress being made in all aspects of the project.

b) Note the success of this summer’s Digital Landscapes Exhibition

c) Note that income generation remains below target however, continued improvement is being made across all aspects of the project.

d) Note the improvement in customer feedback

3. Implications

a) Financial: The impact of The Sill on the Authority’s finances is covered in Item 6 First Quarter Financial and Budget Update. This shows the potential for a deficit of £70,000 without any improvement in year. This is only a half year update and actions are being taken to reduce this potential deficit.

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, which launched on 2nd July 2018

5. The Sill Capital Build

We are still holding the retention on contract works whilst we look to resolve challenges of roof leaks, some grounds works and issues with the fire alarm system. We are now progressing with the capital improvement works. We have gained planning approval for the planned drainage works and have begun seeking quotes for both the drainage and lighting improvements.

6. Operational Update

a) Visitor Numbers: In mid-February, The Sill’s full year annual visitor figure target of 100,000 was surpassed; we have exceeded 172,000 in the first full year. Although we continue to exceed visitor number expectations across the year, we have noted less of a steep climb between our shoulder periods and the main visitor season. From this we can conclude that The Sill is meeting its aim of extending the visitor season and strengthening our year round visitor offer. We have revised our expected visitor numbers in The Sill Business Plan to 150,000 per year and we have experienced visitor numbers at this level since April 2018.
Table 1: Year to date cumulative trend in visitor figures since opening.

b) **YHA stays**: The total number of YHA stays since opening until July 2018 is 16,132 with 8,954 up to March. This means that the YHA are operating at 117% of their occupancy target. Occupancy is lowest at 12% and 13% in December and January rising to around 70% during the summer months. This follows the YHA’s national business plan and staffing model. We are currently working on processes with YHA to create a joint offer to better promote group bookings over the winter period and cross sell educational opportunities.

c) **Retail Performance**: The retail performance has improved following the last quarters report which included the period of poor weather during Q4 of 2017/18. Q1 of 2018/19 saw retail sales achieving 86% of target at £44,600, retail in the first 2 months of Q2 achieved sales of £44,300, 83% of target an improvement on the previous quarters 78%. Our current spend per head has risen from £0.87 to £1.20. The gross profit margin is 44.3% against a target of 45% this is a 4.8% improvement on last year. We are not yet seeing a significant impact from the operation of our kiosk and we will be taking steps to enhance this offer going forward. As we refine our product range and demonstrate a track record of sales we will be better placed to enhance margins.

d) **Cafe**: Café takings for the quarter were £81,500 with spend per cheque stabilising in the new year between £8.50 and £9.50. Revenue remains approximately on target in Q1 at 99%. Since opening the café has received mixed reviews and some poor café reviews have affected the overall review scores for The Sill. Working with directors from Fresh Element a number of improvements have taken place in the café at The Sill. A new chef has recently joined the team at The Sill cafe and is introducing changes to the menu. This includes re-introduction of hot meals with a daily special planned for coming weeks. In addition the café has increased the range of cakes and pastries available and an improved breakfast menu has been introduced.
e) **Car Parking**: Car parking income has been adjusted in The Sill Business Plan to reflect a more realistic target. Income performance in Q1 was 108% of target at £13,422 compared to a target of £12,489. July income achieved 101% of target for the month and August figures show an income of 116% of target at £8,361 against a target of £7,184. Car parking at The Sill is currently part of the full car parking review and as soon as signage has been updated we will implement the new charging structure. This should further enhance the car parking income bringing it closer to the original Business Plan estimates.

f) **Activity Days**: Since the Sill programme began in 2015, a cumulative total of 45,842 activity days has been achieved. This is 114% of the overall target to date of 40,050 and 78% of the target to the end of 2018/19. As you can see from the chart, there has been a step change in income generation following the opening of the Sill. The first 5 months of 2018/19 have generated £9,189. This is 166% of the income generated over the same period in 2017/18 which at the end of August stood at £5,541. Activity programme income targets are the subject of a review and a proposal for reforecasting has been sent to HLF for their consideration. The proposal submitted does not impact the Authority’s reserves.

Table 3: Cumulative activity days from the beginning of project to August
Table 4: Cumulative Activity Income

9) Education and Engagement Programmes

(i) The Schools Programme: In Q1 2018/19 the Sill Education team achieved 2,365 activity days, 165% of the number of days achieved in Q1 of 2017/18 at 1,433. The number of Educational Activity days achieved in Q1 2018/19 is more than 75% of the total number of days achieved in the whole of 2017/18 at 3,076. The number of Educational Activity days achieved in Q1 is 23% of the target of 10,300 days by the end of the year or 93% of the target for the period.

At the end of the summer term we worked with year 7 and 8 from Haltwhistle Middle School to trial one of our bookable secondary schools programmes in partnership with Wild Dog Outdoors. The past quarter also saw work that we had gained from converting Glendale Children’s Day participant schools to sign up for a more in depth programme of work. We worked with Swansfield Primary and Morpeth First, to gain their Arts Award. Their work included designing posters for the day, acrostic poems, still life drawings, creating their own perfect picnics, building tractor models from cardboard boxes, and making sculptures from natural materials. All children passed and will receive certificates from Arts Council. Some feedback from one of the teachers: “The children loved doing it and we are very happy to commit to it again next year if it were to run. As I said on the day, it gives a deeper purpose to a school trip which we don't usually spend a great deal of time on after the event. It also inspired lots of other creativity.”

As part of Great Northumberland the learning and engagement teams worked with Hexham Book Festival on their schools writing competition, Women on the Wall, which culminated in an event at The Sill for the children shortlisted in the two categories. Children from Ponteland Academy, Hexham Middle, Corbridge Middle, Meadowdale Middle and Ovingham Middle attended, and winners received prizes for their school presented by children’s author Caroline Lawrence.
In Q2 the learning team worked with with the Engagement Team and Farming Officers to arrange CEVAS (Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme) training for farmers who plan to undertake educational visits. The training took place over 2 days in August, with portfolios to be completed by the end of September. One volunteer attended the training, along with NNPA staff and farmers from Bonnyrigg Hall Farm, Barrowburn Farm, and Carr Edge Farm.

Work has begun on preparing to apply for the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge for The Sill. This will happen in two stages – firstly, an application for The Sill building and the activities that specifically take place there. If this application is successful, stage two involves a more comprehensive piece of work in applying for all of the outdoor learning opportunities we offer across the Park, which is a much more in depth application.

(ii) **The Public Engagement Programme:** In Q1 2018/19 the Sill Events team achieved 2,772 Activity Days, more than 300% of the days achieved in the same quarter in 2017/18 at 847.

Quarter 2 saw the roll out of our Digital Landscapes events programme to compliment the temporary exhibition. As part of the programme we trialled new delivery partners, Electro Cat and hosted six Minecraft on the Wall sessions, of which five were completely sold out. In partnership with Ride Electric we hosted electric bike guided tours of Hadrian’s Wall, nine sessions were run over three consecutive Fridays, with 90% of spaces sold. We also hosted Mammal Monitoring sessions over two days, one of these events was over-subscribed and the other 50% full. The added value of the sessions was that we were gathering information and data useful to the organisation and training of two members of staff.

Despite these success stories we are monitoring attendance across our regular events, such as guided walks and Wild Wednesday which have seen a drop in attendance. We will continue to review our events programme closely to ensure that we are not delivering too many events in competition.

In the coming season we are developing our marketing approach to allow our customers to better find our activity offers. We are also creating promotional campaigns based on key themes and building on the success of last season’s Dark Skies programme.

h) **Volunteers:**

During 2018/19 a healthy balance of volunteering activities are being undertaken, with an increasing number of Sill volunteers needed for the Digital Landscapes exhibition. The total volunteering to date is 8,088 this is 67% of the project target of 12,144, this meets our project to date target.

Q1 and 2 has seen the implementation of schemes to increase the diversity of our volunteer base. Actions taken include:

- Developed models to increase the number (and quality) of: school work experience; university placements; internships.
‘Ring fenced’ appropriate Sill events for young volunteers (under 18’s) and developing the Young Volunteer Ranger placement scheme (e.g. to introduce a Hadrian’s Wall Path placement from spring 2019).

Work with ‘Foundation Futures’ to develop a programme of volunteering/engagement with 12-16 year olds excluded from mainstream education.

Work with the ‘Learning Development’ department of Newcastle College to introduce ‘vulnerable adult’ to volunteering at The Sill.

Digital Landscapes Exhibition – is providing a high volume and very different type of volunteering opportunity which is attractive to a much broader set of people... volunteers range from age 13 to 75 in the exhibition. The average age of volunteers in the exhibition is a full 10 years below the average for the service as a whole.

Corporate Volunteering – Work with Akzo Nobel and early work with Sage PLC to develop volunteering opportunities for people of working age and potentially more diverse backgrounds.

Table 6: Cumulative volunteer days against the project target.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015/16</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016/17</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017/18</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018/19 Q1</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Cumulative volunteer days against the project target.

i) **Visitor Feedback:** We collate visitor feedback from both online channels and through 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)

(i) **Trip Advisor**

Q1 and 2 has seen a higher percentage of ‘excellent’ reviews and lower percentage of ‘poor’ or ‘terrible’ reviews.
### Trip Advisor

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Previous Report</th>
<th>Current Report</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of Reviews</td>
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<td>Excellent</td>
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<td>Very Good</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrible</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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</table>

### Google Business

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Rating</td>
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<td>5*</td>
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<td>58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4*</td>
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<td>27%</td>
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<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td></td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 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**

Our three most recent reviews from Trip Advisor and Google:

_A mine of information_

_The Sill was not on our itinerary but very glad that we stopped by. The eco-roof is amazing and the exhibition is both fun and informative. The staff are polite and helpful._

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Joyce C

Reviewed 3 days ago

Thank Joyce C
Wonderful experience in a magical place

The Sill YHA is a beautiful, artful, airy modern building which proclaims the YHA is joyously embracing the 21st century. The friendly staff (and small but tasty selection of malt whiskies behind the check-in desk) added to the feel-good vibe which was reinforced by the allocation of smart card room keys doubling as a late night entrance keys after 11pm. Our modern en-suite double room had well-designed facilities and the bunk-side piller with its very useful table ledges, lamps, usb and mains sockets also proved to be a big thumbs-up feature.

We'd booked in for two nights and took advantage of a leisurely itinerary to ramble from Housesteads back to the Sill via 'Sycamore Gap' famously featured in 'Robin Hood Prince of Thieves'. A bus to Housesteads (Roman Fort) departs hourly from the stop directly outside the main Sill Centre. (The entrance fee to the fort is waived for those intending to only walk the route alongside the wall and not visit Housesteads itself). The exertion of this beautiful walk was suitably rewarded by a great meal and pint or two in the Twice Brewed Inn 200 yds from the hostel.

We held off our visit to the main Sill attraction to our last day and were further blown away by the exhibits, approach to learning and thought-provoking background information on this beautiful area. The Discovery Centre itself is modest in size but packed with a host of hands-on/interactive exhibits and does great credit to the creative energy behind the project. As a Geordie visitor to the area in the old ‘Once Brewed’ hostel days I had reasonable knowledge of the surrounding landscape but still found this exhibition stimulating and highly informative. Any one new to this area would be well advised to absorb as much as they can from The Sill Centre before setting off to explore the surrounding countryside - their appreciation of the nature and beauty of it will be vastly magnified.

All in all an absolutely wonderful experience and one we intend to repeat at least annually!

Show less

Small, but interesting

I was staying in the YHA next door and thought I could spend the day relaxing at the centre, but it's much smaller than it's made out to be. There is only one major exhibition and it's interesting and informative, but the whole experience takes less than an hour or 1.5 hours at most.

Upstairs is the rooftop walk which is over hyped. It's nice with some views, but it's again about a 10 minute walk in total there and back. The café has some nice choices and is reasonably priced too.

Overall, it's worth a visit but only in passing as you have to pay for the parking and there isn't much else nearby unless you are planning to walk part of Hadrian's Wall.

Show less
(iv) **On Site:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Rating</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(73%) increase of 3%</td>
<td>(18.4%) decrease 2.6%</td>
<td>(8.6%) decrease of 0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility/Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signage (internal, external and road signage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 : Summary of onsite visitor comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parking (predominantly payment complaints)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests for large map of Northumberland</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

j) Events, Hires and Business Support:

Q1 and Q2 saw bookings from a large variety of clients including North Pennines Training, National Trust, Church of England, Northumberland Tourism, CLA, Forestry Commission, Creative Fuse and Tynedale Hospice.

Upcoming bookings for Q3 include Historic England, Hexham Village Band, National Trust, Cambridge University and Bravelogist and the North East Chamber of Commerce.

We have also made two new hot desk partners that we hope will use the Hive in the coming months. September and October will see the launch of a campaign designed to promote corporate and office opportunities across both The Sill and Eastburn.

k) Temporary Exhibition Programme

The Digital Landscapes Exhibition runs from July to the end of September this year. The exhibition uses interactive technology to show how it can help conserve and enhance the landscape including virtual reality and a digital sandbox. To date over 26,000 people have visited the exhibition which equates to approximately 70% of all visitors to The Sill. It has proven attractive to a wide-ranging audience, from 5 years olds to 85 year olds. Feedback has been collected via a guest book and an interactive tablet. Customer satisfaction has remained very high throughout the exhibition at 91% to date. Comments are also extremely positive and a small selection are shown below. The exhibition has been supported by 2 interns who have worked with a number of volunteers throughout the summer to ensure visitors have the best possible experience.

Feedback Comments Include:

- It was amazing I think everyone thinks this is amazing
- Amazing! A brilliant interactive exhibition brought to life by supportive staff, well done.
- Fantastic examples of how technology can enrich our lives.
- Amazing exhibition! It feels like a museum space from the future. Seriously engaging!
- Really good interesting and educational displays. Very unique concept to spark people's interest,
- A really fun exhibition with interactive toys for all generations! Thank you.
- Fantastic technology – really engaging for kids big and small!

We are now working on incorporating our learning from this programme and aspects of the exhibition into our permanent exhibition.
7. Conclusions

a) Visitor numbers continue to exceed expectations however, August, has provided less of a spike in attendance compared to the opening year. This mirrors our findings in income generation across all areas including the activity plan.

b) The Digital Landscapes programme has been successful at interesting a more diverse range of visitors and volunteers and improved visitor experience. We are currently making arrangements to use this learning to add to the permanent exhibition.

c) Income generation although not as high as the budget targets continues to improve in the shop and through activities and hires. Some targeted marketing and communications campaigns are planned to build upon this to enable us to continue to make progress in closing the gap on our business plan targets.

Contact Officers: For further information contact Rosie Thomas Director of Business Development, email rosie.thomas@nnpa.org.uk or Claire Mason, Interim Sill Manager, e-mail: claire.mason@nnpa.org.uk or

Background papers: None