Item 1 : 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 Half Year Financial Performance and Budget Update. This shows the potential for a deficit of £66,100 without any improvement in year. 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 are awaiting tender prices.

6. Operational Update

a) Visitor Numbers: Having exceeded the 100,000 visitor mark substantially in the first year achieving 172,000 visitors in the first twelve months from July ‘17 to July ‘18, the Sill business plan was updated to anticipate 150,000 on an ongoing basis. Visitor numbers exceeded this target during Q1 then dropped below the anticipated profile during Q2. Visitor numbers dropped off, as anticipated, following the end of the school holidays and were performing at 98% of plan to the end of October. The forecast anticipates a year end outturn of 92% approximately 140,000 visitors. The Christmas fair on 17 and 18 November for example attracted approximately 2500 visitors.
Table 1: Year to date cumulative trend in visitor figures since opening.

b) **YHA stays:** Bed occupancy continues to fluctuate around expected levels with YTD performance of 68% compared to a target of 69% during the summer season. Opportunities to work with YHA on group bookings are developing and recent examples include bookings by Tynedale Choir and Hexham Village Band. Both events involved hiring the education rooms for successive days with attendees staying in the youth hostel.

c) **Retail Performance:** The retail performance continues to improve month on month. Q1 of 2018/19 saw retail sales achieving 86% of target, retail during Q2 achieved 89% of target. September was our first month of achieving sales above target. The spend per head continues to rise from £0.94 in April to £1.44 for the month of September. Spend per head in October was a further improvement achieving £1.49 against a target of £1.30. The gross profit margin has stabilised at 43.0% against a target of 45% this is an improvement on 40.5% for the last financial year. While the kiosk has performed below expectation, a focus on margins and prices along with adding some new suppliers and products has helped to achieve stronger sales in the shop.

d) **Cafe:** Revenue from the cafe has fallen behind target having achieved 99% in Q1 and 82% of target in Q2. The cafe menu has been updated and hot food sales are helping to boost the spend per visitor. The shortfall against target in catering income is not from the cafe operation but from a slower start in the promotion of corporate events, special occasions and weddings. A new set of branding guidelines have been developed in conjunction with the cafe owners in order to progress this.

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 95% of target and 86% of target in Q2. Car parking at The Sill has been reviewed and a new minimum charge of £2 for 2 hours was implemented in October. 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 53,070 activity days has been achieved. This is 115% of the overall target to date of 46,300 and 90% 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 7 months of 18/18 have generated 200% of the income generated over the same period in 2017/18. Activity programme income targets are the subject of a review and a proposal for reforecasting has been sent to HLF for their consideration. A decision is expected before Christmas.

![Cumulative Activity Days - Project Start to Date](chart.png)

Table 3: Cumulative activity days from the beginning of project to date

g) **Education and Engagement Programmes**

(i) **The Schools Programme:** To Q2 2018/19 the Sill Education team achieved 3,243 activity days, 193% of the number of days achieved to Q2 of 2017/18, at 1,680. The number of Educational Activity days achieved to Q2 2018/19 is more than 100% of the total number of days achieved in the whole of 2017/18 at 3,076.

**Autumn term sessions:**

We have delivered a variety of workshops this term, for a range of age groups, led in school, in The Sill, and out in the Park.

- River Investigation
- Sill building tours
- Sill Story Time
- Investigate Pre History
- Nature Detectives
- Sill Stargazing
- First World War Centenary Experience
Home Education:
Our home education programme has progressed. A visit was arranged to Bonnyrigg Hall Farm in September, which was fully booked. A second session took place in October, specifically for students working toward the International GCSE in Environmental Management. This was also fully booked, so a further session is booked for November. We also ran two days of our First World War Centenary Experience for home education families, which took place in the Jubilee Hall in Rothbury.

Farm Visits/CEVAS:
Following the CEVAS training course in August, we supported Bonnyrigg Hall Farm in delivering their first group visits. We have also visited Carr Edge farm to support them in preparing for their first visits, which will take place next year.

First World War Centenary Experience:
We commissioned re-enactors from Time Bandits to run a series of workshops to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War. The sessions were held in the Jubilee Hall in Rothbury in October (including a walk to the practise trenches), and at The Sill in November (including a walk to the Wall). Over the course of the sessions we engaged with 383 children.

Vallum Walk:
In September we led some training with volunteers who are interested in leading our new proposed offer for school groups – a guided walk along the Vallum to Sycamore Gap. Four volunteers came to do the walk and this will be available to book in the spring term.

Uniformed Groups:
With the Engagement team we have developed a flyer to hand out to group leaders, particularly for uniformed groups such as Scouts and Guides etc. This highlights the variety of activities we can run with groups, particularly in helping them achieve their badges. We are attending a uniformed group event at Discovery Museum in November, which will be attended by up to 300 children, to run activities and hand out information to leaders.

Partnerships:
Discussions have taken place with Toni Bush; consultant for the HLF project at St Michael’s Church at Alnham, on how we could support their plans and possibly deliver schools activities from the Church. Our current pre-history offer could fit in well here, and there is potential to develop some new activities linked to local history studies.

Meetings have taken place regarding the development of our secondary schools programme. Pilot sessions for our history/art/literacy programme have now been scheduled for summer 2019, delivered in conjunction with Newcastle University and Heritage Schools. Hayden Bridge High, Berwick Academy, and James Calvert Spence College have signed up to take part in the programme.

An education consultant, Susan Priestly, will meet with us to discuss a brief on conducting research with teachers around our geography/science offer.

Learning staff agreed to speak at a conference at The GNM: Hancock in Newcastle in October, as part of their programme for “Dippy on Tour.” Our session covered the benefits of outdoor learning, and how we build confidence in children and teachers to take part in outdoor learning. Teachers from fifty schools attended the conference, with those from 28 schools attending our session.

We are involved in the launch of the new wildlife education webpage, led by Kielder Water. This is a new website designed to showcase outdoor learning providers in Northumberland. Our
programme information has been provided for the website and we are attending the launch event in November, with teachers from 20 schools scheduled to attend.

Discussions have taken place with members of Tynedale U3A on whether we can support them in a Shared Learning Project (SLP). SLP’s involve a small group of members conducting a research project for an organisation, providing a report/research that the organisation can use. Discussions centred on a project involving the digitisation of images/documents for the National Parks 70th anniversary project.

**Resource Development:**

We are developing exhibition resources to be used in The Sill over the winter season. This is an expansion of the school resource bags we already offer, with additional activities included and new backpacks for children to carry them in. We are also re-designing our exhibition trail, which families can use during their visit to help them engage in the landscape exhibition.

**The Public Engagement Programme:**

To the end of Q2 2018/19 the Sill Events team achieved 8,748 Activity Days, more than 100% of the days achieved in 2017/18 at 8,155.

Quarter 3 saw the publication of two events leaflets; *Out & About in October* and our winter (November-March) *What’s On* guide. Producing a monthly guide for October not only helped us to highlight our special half term events, but bridged the change over from *Eventbrite* as a booking system to our chosen in-house booking system, *Gamma*.

We had programmed our October events to coincide with Northumberland and Newcastle school holidays, but were surprised to find the Sill was busier the previous week when Gateshead, Durham and Cumbrian schools were taking half term holidays. The table below shows the visitor numbers and number of Willow Trail’s sold during each week. The sales for the second week reflect the lower number of children using The Sill. This will inform our future family event programming.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Visit Numbers</th>
<th>Willow Trail Sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon 22nd October - Sunday 28th</td>
<td>2754</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October Incl.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon 29th October - Sunday 4th</td>
<td>2243</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November Incl.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

The November 2018 to March 2019 *What’s On* guide sees a move away from the traditional visitor guide. It concentrates on events and guided walks, rather than generic visitor information, and is strongly themed to allow specific audiences to easily find what events are of interest to them. The themes this season are Walks; Family Events; Dark Skies; Get Creative and Christmas at The Sill. The fold out leaflet also has a calendar listing of all events & walks and a section looking forward to the next guide.

We saw success with two events which did not fit neatly into our themes, but allowed us to test out a new delivery partner and a new partnership. The new deliverer was actor Stephen Tomlinson who included us in his *Haunted* event programme, a series of ghost story readings relevant to the venue. 20 people were thrilled by this atmospheric evening. 26 people attended *The Rivers of Life* event, organised by Newcastle University Humanities Department as part of the national festival of humanities, *Being Human.*
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 8,559 this is 70% of the total project target of 12,144, meeting our project to date target.

During 2018/19 we have continued to develop new areas and roles for volunteers. Specifically, the Digital Landscapes exhibition provided a large number of opportunities attractive to a wide range of people. In the last quarter we have:

- Introduced a ‘vulnerable adult’ and a young person, both now regularly volunteering in the Sill Welcome Team.
- Continued ‘ring fencing' appropriate Sill events for young volunteers (under 18’s).
- Been working with ‘Blyth Star Enterprises – Next Steps Project’ to develop gardening/horticultural volunteering arrangements for people living with learning disabilities and lifelong mental health issues.
- Recruited a team of ‘Dark Skies Volunteer Astronomers’ to deliver this winter’s dark skies event programme.
- Continued the corporate volunteering arrangements with Akzo Nobel refreshing the National Park boundary plaques and repainting picnics benches at all our sites. This project has provided urban-rural volunteering opportunities for people of working age and potentially more diverse backgrounds.
- Community based volunteering – working with: the Revitalising Redesdale project to develop volunteering arrangements for this project; Tarset Archive Group to develop a digital archive internship, and; Coquetdale Community Archaeology Group regarding the UK National Parks volunteering awards.
- Coquetdale Community Archaeology won the UK National Parks 2018 volunteer project award on Saturday 17th November for their ‘Border Roads' project.

Table 5: Cumulative volunteer days against the project target.
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)

Trip Advisor
Q 1 and 2 has seen a higher percentage of ‘excellent’ reviews and lower percentage of ‘poor’ or ‘terrible’ reviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trip Advisor</th>
<th>Previous Report</th>
<th>Current Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Reviews</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrible</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Google Business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Google</th>
<th>Previous Report</th>
<th>Current Report</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Reviews</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5*</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4*</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3*</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</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 Facebook, Trip Advisor and Google

Facebook

• Interesting place to visit. Staff friendly and helpful. Restaurant good
• The staff are super helpful and friendly, lovely place to visit.
• lovely cafe; and excellent information about the area. Staff were very helpful.
Trip Advisor

- I can't understand all the grumbling about The Sill Centre. It is a new facility that tells you all about the surrounding landscape in a clear, easy to understand way. It's great for adults and children and great that there are interactive displays. Some of them make you stop and think how we treat the landscape and areas in which we live. It is bright and airy and an ideal way to spend time on a rainy day. The car parking seems to cause an issue with some but The Sill is free to go into so makes it an affordable place for families. I can't comment on the cafe as we didn't have a drink there. However it is a choice that can be made. I would also add that the staff are incredibly helpful, not just about The Sill but the surrounding area. A very helpful lady gave us some good advice on places to visit. If I was in the area again I would definitely go back.

- Parked here to head to sycamore gap, we were able to pay for parking by card which was very handy. On the way back we were able to use the facilities and get a hot drink. Very convenient car park and tourist centre.

- The Sill is a great centre a short walk from Hadrian's Wall. It has a brilliant interactive education space and a great family friendly café with dairy and gluten free options available. Our five year old loved the activity sheet and following clues to find hidden wicker animals and the staff were really friendly and helpful. There is also an YHA youth hostel at thus site which looks great and well positioned for local attractions. The Sill is a short distance away from a Roman museum. The two could easily be combined to make for a great fun and educational day out.

Google

- Wonderful place

- I'm a Northumbrian by birth so absurdly proud of all things 'Hadrianesque' and pleased to see this well -designed building arrive near "the Waal". The large vat of soup was good according to the spouse and my sandwich was acceptable. The service was warmly Northumbrian and sincere. But the museum appears to be a half empty addendum to the gift shop and there is no easy access to the Wall itself on the other side of the busy military road and over several fields. The Romans would have designed it better.

- A wonderful, airy place with a fine interpretive presentation; and lovely scones and toasted teacakes to cap off the visit. The staff are friendly and efficient.

On Site:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Rating</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(73%) increase of 3%</td>
<td>(18.4%) decrease 2.6%</td>
<td>(8.6%) decrease of 0.4%</td>
<td></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>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Summary of onsite visitor comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility/Building</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signage (internal, external and road signage)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking (predominantly payment complaints)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests for large map of Northumberland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

j) Events, Hires and Business Support:

The year to October saw over 450 users hiring the various rooms from 24 bookings. Some bookings were for more than one day and several were repeat bookings including North Pennines Training. Just over £3,600 was generated by these bookings, which doesn’t include spend in the shop, additional café spend or income for the youth hostel.

Bookings for the winter include the University of Cumbria, North East Chamber of Commerce and Cambridge University.

We are continuing to explore ways to achieve income from the Hive. This includes working with partners including Newcastle Gateshead Initiative and exploring potential new income streams, for example development of bespoke packages for corporate ‘days out’ and using the Hive as a hires spaces to manage sometimes conflicting demands for our education rooms.

k) Temporary Exhibition Programme

The Digital Landscapes exhibition ran from July to the end of September and was a big hit with visitors of all ages. Around 30,000 people visited and enjoyed the exhibition. The sandbox, which was a very popular aspect of this exhibition, has been returned on a temporary basis and is located in the permanent exhibition space, pending a newly designed, permanent model which will be fitted in the permanent exhibition. Work is ongoing to locate other items in the permanent exhibition.

Work is ongoing to deliver a programme of exhibitions during 2019, including celebrating 70 years of National Parks. We are also working with partners to host a touring exhibition called Flow Country, which is about peatlands and their role in helping to regulate planet’s climate. The exhibition has been shown at The Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh and Aberdeen Science Centre, among others. It is funded by The Heritage Lottery Fund and RSPB Scotland. This exhibition is expected to run from March to April 2019.

A new exhibition focussing on local artists who have been Inspired by Our Land launched on 17th November. This exhibition has been developed to showcase artists living in the North East who produce work inspired by the land in and around the national park. The exhibition includes original pieces, prints and lithographs, photography, sculpture and ceramics. It runs until February 2019.
7. **Conclusions**

   a) Visitor numbers have remained strong and well ahead of the original plan and a pattern of seasonal visitors is now emerging which will be beneficial to forward planning and trend analysis.

   b) Achieving income targets remains a challenge however a number of initiatives are taking place to combat this.

   c) Visitor feedback is improving and is being used to challenge and improve services.

**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