Item 4: 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
   a) The Authority is recommended to note the contents of the report.

3. Implications
   a) Financial: The impact of The Sill on the Authority’s finances is covered in Item 5, Quarter 3 Financial Performance and Budget Update. This shows the potential for a deficit of £61,600. A full review of The Sill Business Plan has been undertaken and assumptions have been updated as part of the Medium Term Budget Plan 2019/20 – 2020/21 (Item 1 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) Although its visitor numbers are strong, achieving the predicted spend per visitor has proved challenging. We are making progress on meeting income generation targets across both activities and operation.
   c) In January 2019 The Heritage Lottery Fund agreed to budget movements reducing the income targets for the activity programme. These changes are now reflected in The Sill project and business plan and are monitored on a weekly basis.

5. Operational Update
   a) Visitor Numbers: Visitor numbers are at 98% of the new target to meet 150,000. The Digital Landscapes Exhibition and the Christmas fair on 17 and 18 November attracted approximately 2500 visitors, contributing improved performance.

![Sill Visitor Numbers 2018/19](image)

Table 1: Year to date cumulative trend in visitor figures
b) **YHA stays:** Bed occupancy continues to fluctuate around expected levels with YTD performance of 55% compared to a target of 54% for the year to January. At a meeting with the YHA executive, discussions included identifying ways to work more closely on educational visits. The YHA is benefitting from funding to work with the National Citizenship Service (NCS) and will see large numbers of young people staying at the YHA and taking part in activities over a 5 week period in July 2019. This will contribute significant numbers to our activity days.

c) **Retail Performance:** Q3 gross retail sales were 109% above target. The spend per head continued to rise from £0.94 in April to £1.91 in the month of December against a target of £1.30 year average. The year to date average spend per head is now £1.21. The gross profit margin has fallen from 43.0% in Q2 to 39% in Q3, this has been due to the increase in sales of higher value items with lower profit margins in the run up to Christmas. Sales of artwork from the Inspired by Our Land exhibition have contributed to income over this quieter period. It is hoped to embed an annual art exhibition into the programme for the Sill.

d) **Cafe:** Revenue from the café remains behind target having achieved 99% in Q1, 82% in Q2 and improving to 88% in Q3. The performance in January was 96% of target. The café now provides a regularly updated menu and an improved food offer for children. Regular meetings continue to be held with café owners and managers to develop new events such as Meet the Maker and stargazing and dining events. The Valentines dine and stargazing event in February was sold out. The new branding for Once Brewed at The Sill is being launched in March. An online brochure promoting weddings and other special occasions is being launched at the same time. Two weddings are already booked for 2019.

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, 86% of target in Q2 and 80% of target in Q3. The new £2 minimum charge has been in place for four months but the benefit will be mostly felt during the spring and summer. Sales of the repriced annual parking permit continue to be steady.

f) **Activity Days:** Since the Sill programme began in 2015, a cumulative total of 55,559 activity days has been achieved. This is 106% of the overall target to date of 52,550 and 94% of the target to the end of 2018/19.
Table 3: Cumulative activity days from the beginning of project to date

Income for the activity programme continues to improve, over the 12 month period average income has increased 24% (to the end of February) since FY 2017/18 and 323% since FY 2015/16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>2015/16</th>
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<th>2017/18</th>
<th>2018/19</th>
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<tr>
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<td>£831.52</td>
<td>£2,366.78</td>
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</table>

Table 4: Average quarterly activity programme income throughout the project

g) Education and Engagement Programmes

**Education Programme:** To Q3 2018/19 the Sill Education team achieved 4,421 activity days, 144% of the total number of days achieved in 2017/18, at 3,076.

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

- This Is Your Landscape school assembly
- River Investigation
- Storytelling: Northumberland Tales
- Investigate Pre History
- University talks (Durham and Newcastle)

We have extended our programme for home educators with a session on Pre History at The Sill in March, led by Ancient Britain (formerly Wild Dog Outdoors). We have also been working with Bonnyrigg Hall Farm to facilitate a group of home educated children to receive a John Muir Award.
We have been working with the Tynedale branch of the U3A on their Shared Learning Project. These projects normally last for 6 months and involve a group of members signing up as volunteers to complete a task. The group is working on digitising archive material belonging to NNPA, which includes photographs, slides, and documents.

Our consultation with secondary schools is ongoing via Susan Priestly (education consultant). This report is expected in April. We have set up a new series of activities for the New Naturalists programme, aimed at children in year 9/10, which runs over 8 Saturdays in spring/summer.

We are attending a careers event at Discovery Museum in March for 600 secondary school children, to provide information about the Park, volunteer/placement opportunities, and speak to teachers about our learning programme.

**The Public Engagement Programme:**

To the end of Q3 2018/19 the Sill Events team achieved 9,701 Activity Days, 119% of the days achieved in 2017/18 at 8,155.

The Winter events programme continues into quarter 4 with good success around our Get Creative theme. Sold out events include spoon making; stool making; 24 hour Landscape Printing and Willow craft for the Garden. We have proven that high ticket price events designed for smaller groups during a period when we anticipate outdoor activity may be hard to programme due to weather constraints will succeed. The summer programme includes some Get Creative in the Year of Green Action events following a similar model.

We have also included a Get Active theme in our summer programme. This highlights special interest walks; electric bike availability and culminates with a family event called Walltown Warrior which encourage adults and children to be active together. This builds on the Elf Run launched at Walltown in December.

Successful return events include the Chalk Dark Skies Disco for families with pre school & primary school aged children and Starry Eyed Valentines Dinner working in partnership with Fresh Element.

We have also extended our partnership with Sage Gateshead and welcomed their Folkestra Youth Ensemble for a residential week at The Sill which culminated in a public performance.

**h) Volunteers:**

During 2018/19 a healthy balance of volunteering activities are being undertaken. The total volunteering to the end of Q3 is 9,097 this is 75% of the total project target of 12,144, meeting our project to date target by 106%. Following the success of Digital Landscapes we are currently working on a long term volunteer led project to digitise our archive in conjunction with the 70th Anniversary Exhibition planned for the summer season.
Table 5: Cumulative volunteer days against the project target.

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i) Visitor Feedback: We collate visitor feedback from both online channels and through comment cards completed on site. Although overall ratings percentages have remained stable, there are a larger proportion of positive written reviews.

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

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<tr>
<th>Trip Advisor</th>
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<th>Current Report</th>
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<tr>
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<td>3.5</td>
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Google Business

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<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Facebook

Current Rating – 4.5 / 5

On Site:

**Satisfaction rating: 76% Good / Very Good**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Positive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
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</table>

Table 7: Summary of onsite visitor comments

j) **Events, Hires and Business Support:**

Bookings continue to perform well and recent visitors included Cambridge University, who ran a 5 day symposium regarding sustainable manufacturing. Their stay included a guided walk and the group stayed in the youth hostel.

Development of new packages has been completed and is due to be launched during March. The Sill is hosting the North East Chamber of Commerce for their AGM, with around 70 delegates from local businesses expected to attend, which will provide a good opportunity to promote our corporate packages.

A number of advance bookings throughout 2019 are already confirmed with growth from repeat visitors helping to embed this growing area of income.

Room hire income has grown from £700 in 2017/18 and £5,000 year to date 2018/19.

k) **Temporary Exhibition Programme**

The ‘Inspired by Our Land’ temporary exhibition ran from mid-November until 24th February 2019. A total of 12 artists participated, with items including original paintings, prints, photographs and ceramics, all reflecting the landscape theme. The exhibition proved popular with visitors and plans are being made to host a similar exhibition every year between the main exhibition times.

The next exhibition, Flow Country, commences on 2nd March 2019. This touring exhibition concerns blanket bogs in Caithness and Sutherland, which are the best examples of their
type in the world. There is a synergy with our own work to conserve our peatland areas and activities will reflect this. The exhibition runs until 22nd April 2019.

7. **Conclusions**

   a) Visitor numbers continue to perform well against the revised target of 150,000.

   b) Income generation remains a key focus and progress is being made across all elements of the programme.

   c) Improvements to the permanent exhibition are being progressed and the temporary exhibition continues to present a changing offer to attract new visitors

**Contact Officers:** For further information contact Rosie Thomas Director of Business Development, email rosie.thomas@nnpa.org.uk

**Background papers:** None