Item 9: 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 2, Chief Executive’s Review of Performance.
   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 National Lottery Heritage 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 were 98% of the 150,000 target at the end of 2018-19, at 146,446. The new target for 2019-20 has therefore been set at 145,000 with the current visitor figures are at 93% of the new target. Although May was a quieter month than expected, June started well with 100% uplift on visitor numbers for the first weekend due to the food festival. The forecast to year end indicates the target will be met.
b) **YHA stays:** Bed occupancy achieved expected levels with end of year performance of 50%. For April and May of 2019 occupancy is at 70.8% against a target of 69.5%. Advance bookings are high at almost 100% throughout June, with full occupancy during week nights for 6 weeks from early July, for the National Citizenship Service groups.

c) **Retail Performance:** End of year retail sales achieved 90% of the target of £195,000 at £174,854. Spend per head for the year was £1.19 after rising firmly into the Festive period from a baseline of £0.94. Profit margin for the year was 42%, in line with the target of 45%. For the first two months of 2019-20, retail sales have continued to fall within the expected target range. Sales are currently 100% of target at £31,785 for the year with £1.18 spend per head. The seasonal target is £1.09, this increases into winter following a profiling exercise on last year’s performance. The current profit margin for the first two months of the year is 43%, the target remains 45%. Over the last year the retail area has been greatly enhanced with improved lighting, new layouts and introduction of new local suppliers. In addition, the profit margins have been reviewed and actions to improve these have been implemented. The shop continues to look for and introduce new suppliers and successful events such as the Christmas fair and food festival help to showcase existing and new food, drink and crafts businesses, which all help to contribute to the local economy. The art exhibition, Inspired by Our Land, was very successful and will be repeated during Autumn/Winter 2019/20. A number of pop-up shops are planned for this summer and the Christmas fair will take place in November this year.

d) **Cafe:** Revenue for the café was 92% of target at the end of the year at £285,840 vs a target of £312,000. In 2019-20 the annual target has increased by an additional £100,000, as a result current performance has dropped to 66% of the new target. There has not been the required rise in visitors or sales. Over the last year the café has carried out a number of improvements, including a revised menu with hot food options, and menu prices have been improved. Fresh Element continue to support events including Dark Skies dining, Meet the Maker and also outdoor catering for the Christmas fair and food festival. This summer customers will be able to enjoy evening dining at The Sill, this is due to start before the summer holidays and will be available during weekends. We have been working closely with Fresh Element on the creation of our joint offer including the corporate hire packages, wedding offer and culinary events. The rebrand of the café has also taken place with new
web content to be launched soon. Fresh Element have also invested in new literature, film and promotional materials.

e) **Car Parking:** Car parking income at the end of year was 92%, £43,044 against a target of £47,000. For the first two months of 2019-20 income has fallen to 83% at £8,660 against a target of £10,462. This is partially due to the fall in visitors during May, figures in April were 99% of target. During 2018 car parking charges were reviewed and revised in October that year. In addition, a new car parking protocol was introduced in 2019, to manage car parking for Sill visits by extending dwell time and reducing the burden on parking at Steel Rigg by encouraging visitors to walk from The Sill to Hadrian’s Wall.

f) **Events and Room Hires:**

The Sill’s new corporate packages were launched in June and the first event with the Rutherford Centre took place in April. The packages offer a unique experience for businesses looking to take a break from their normal working environment and learn a new skill such as archery, go for a walk with a ranger and enjoy first class catering, all in and around our award winning building. The packages are being promoted across networks including the North East Chamber of Commerce and the LEP with take up expected to grow over the next year. We are working with local company All Out Adventures to offer the team building element of some of our packages.

Room hires continue to do well and advance bookings into 2020 demonstrate the success of this service. The service is attracting bookings from a range of organisations including JS Parker LTD and Braveologist.

g) **Visitor Feedback:** We collate visitor feedback from both online channels and through comment cards completed on site. We have seen trip advisor reviews slow considerably but a rise in onsite feedback following the implementation of the digital feedback screen.

**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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Google Business</th>
<th>Current Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Reviews</td>
<td>613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5*</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4*</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3*</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Facebook**
Current Rating – 4.5 / 5
Trip Advisor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trip Advisor</th>
<th>Current Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Reviews</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrible</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On Site:

In January we installed an electronic feedback tablet at the door of The Sill. We have received 2580 responses.

Table showing cumulative feedback responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback details</th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>Okay</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit to the Sill</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Exhibition</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafe</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome team</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Activity Programme

a) Activity Days: Since The Sill programme began in 2015 to the end of 2018-19, a cumulative total of 61,932 activity days has been achieved. This is 105% of the overall target to date of 58,800. Following the first two months of 2019-20, there have been an additional 2,895 activity days, this takes us to 73% of the full project total.

![Cumulative Number of Activity Days](chart.png)

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 from less than £1,000 a month in 2016-17 to more than £3,000 a month in 2018-19. In 2019-20 the income continues to improve with like for like income increasing 30%.

![Total Activity Income](image)

**Table 4**: Average activity programme income throughout the project

Although we are showing growth, the income target for end of project is challenging but we have a plan that we submitted to NLHF that we are in the process of delivering.

![Activity Income Vs End of Project Target](image)

**Table 5**: Activity income target vs 2018 achievement
b) Education and Engagement Programmes

Education Programme: The Sill Education team achieved 82% of their target activity days in 2018-19, 8,530 against a target of 10,300. This represents a 172% increase on engagement from a year earlier. The first two months of 2019-20 have seen continued improvement in growth with like for like engagement increasing 41% year on year.

Primary Programme

2018 – 19 saw our Primary School Programme continue to grow in popularity and reputation. Repeat visits have increased with many schools who came to the Park last year now booked for this year and some have already booked for next year.

During the Spring 2019 term schools took part in a variety of sessions from our Primary School Programme. These included:

- Investigate Pre History
- The Sill Building Tours
- River Investigation
- Astro Explorers

To celebrate National Storytelling Week in January, we worked with local storyteller Jim Grant to develop literacy activities linked to local Northumbrian tales. Some quotes from the evaluation form include: “We loved the gory nature of the Reivers story and the history behind it.” “Pupils enjoyed the stories as they were new to them and they could interpret them in their own ways.”

In March we attended a STEM Career Day at Discovery Museum in Newcastle. This event was attended by 500 children from year 6 – 12, from schools across Tyneside and Wearside.

Our new Geology Rocks workshop was launched and we have delivered this in schools and at The Sill. We also ran a teacher CPD evening to showcase the workshop, which featured a talk from local geologist Lesley Dunlop.

We have been working with three schools on their Discover Arts Award in conjunction with Glendale Children’s Day. The Year of Green Action banners the schools created for Children’s Day will be on display at The Sill over the summer holidays.

Secondary Programme

We have set dates in August to trial a Ranger Summer school. This will involve children aged 11-14 signing up for a week during the summer holidays, to take part in activities with Rangers each day either at The Sill or out on sites in the Park.

The Learning Team attended a careers event at Discovery Museum and engaged with a number of secondary school students. This led to an invitation to speak at Kings Priory careers day, and following this, Kings Priory have gone on to make a booking with us.

We have also begun delivery of the art/history/English pilot projects for Year 9 children from three Northumberland Schools – Prudhoe, Bedlington, and Haydon Bridge. This is delivered in partnership with Newcastle University and Heritage Schools.

Non formal Education

Our programme for Home Educating families has continued, with a Pre History activity day held in March, plus two farm visits. We have also supported Bonnyrigg Hall Farm in the delivery of a John Muir Award with a group of Home Educated children who are working towards the International GCSE in Environmental Management.
SEND

Staff attended the annual SEND Teachers Conference in March, which was a good opportunity to network with teachers and explain the accessibility of The Sill and the adaptability of our programme for students with additional needs. We continue to research and develop our practice in this area. This has been identified as an area of future growth.

HE / FE

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. This has been a very productive relationship and their findings are being built into an archive Story Map which will feature in the Yours Since 1949 exhibition. We also welcomed heritage students from Durham University and Newcastle University, who took part in activities both at The Sill and out on Hadrian’s Wall.

NNPA Training

In February we arranged two training events for staff. One was provided by the John Muir Trust, to better understand how we can deliver the award through our programmes. The second was provided by consultant Annette Shelford and local geologist Lesley Dunlop, to provide information on local geology and explain the resources/activities that they have designed for our new KS2 workshop. The first booking for this workshop is in May.

Partnerships

In conjunction with the Festival of Archaeology, we have been planning a series of activities over two weeks in the summer term. These sessions will be delivered by the Learning Team, our Historic Environment Officer, and our partner organisation Ancient Britain. We have also been planning our schools offer for the Year of Green Action initiative. Our partner organisation Albion Outdoors will be delivering some science workshops for Secondary schools, and we have worked with textile artist Louise Underwood to develop an art workshop for Primary schools, encouraging the children to make their own green pledges.

Our partnership with the YHA is expanding, with the development of education packages that can be advertised and booked via the YHA website. The themes of the packages include History, Geography, and Cross Curricular.

Education Programme Feedback

95% of respondents rated their experience as Excellent.

A small sample of responses:

- “Activities were well organised and planned to accommodate all year groups, pupils thoroughly enjoyed the activities available. Resources were available for the group to use in the afternoon which was great. We were also able to explore the new exhibition, which the pupils also enjoyed”.
- “Both the introductory session in school and session at The Sill were fabulous and interactive for all of the children.”
- “We are now using the data sent to us about the river depth and speed to plot graphs and look at the structure of the river in school”.

The Public Engagement Programme:

At the end of 2018/19 the Sill Events team achieved 11,048 Activity Days, a 23% increase in the days achieved in 2017/18. At the end of the first two months of 2019-20 there were 9,928, or 20% of activity days remaining on the cumulative project total.
Dark Skies

As in previous years we were able to turn dark, cold nights into a positive with 10 Dark Sky themed events programmed. We had success with two dark sky events designed for very specific audiences. The Dark Sky Disco run by Chalk for families with young children was again popular and the Starry-Eyed Valentines Dinner in partnership with Fresh Element was oversubscribed.

Nature

Our nature events continue to prove popular and are building a reputation for offering a specialist and unique experience, for example Airs of Spring. This is an event led by Geoff Sample (Author/producer and regular on Radio 4’s Tweet of the Day), using a parabolic microphone and silent disco headphones. His first event at Carey Burn in the North of the Park sold out.

Walks

Walks to date have an average take up of 9 participants per volunteer walk and the Introduction to Navigation events continue to be popular, consistently selling out. We are reviewing positioning of family walks in the activity programme and plan to take them out of the Walks programme and develop some story walks/Trails that will go in to the wider event programme. Walking in a Volcano, delivered by Ian Kille (Northumbrian Earth) illustrates the success of our strengthened partnership with the Glendale Gateway Trust at The Cheviot Centre. They now have a tablet to assist customers with bookings and we have regular communications with them regarding events in the north of the Park. We are planning to mirror some of the events on offer in the South at The Cheviot Centre in the Autumn/Winter programme e.g. Haunted/Get Creative programme

Family

We continue to include a regular affordable and accessible offer of Sill Sundays in our programme and have extended these to include demonstrations by groups such as Northumbrian Clarsach Society and the Travelling Spinners in addition to Ranger delivered activity. Wild Wednesday continues to attract consistent numbers and is gaining a reputation for providing a unique Northumberland National Park experience. The Willow Trail has been popular and we are working with the Ranger team to develop a Fairy Door Trail that will link with the Duergar Story and we plan to link this with merchandise in the shop.

Get active

Walltown Warrior is enjoying a flush of early bookings following the launch on 14th May. Three Archery sessions have taken place in the North of the Park at Ingram Café & Wooler Youth Hostel, and the RTC at Otterburn. Participant take up was low but they served to further our relationship with new partner venues.

The Get Active offer continues to grow with the introduction of the bookable Ebike offer to visitors.

Get Creative

The successful uptake of events in the Get Creative programme means that this will now become a regular feature in the events programme and we are looking to offer some of these experiences in the North of the Park. Swedish Basket Making was sold out. Wild Garlic Kimchi workshops also sold out and after discussion with Northern Wilds it was identified that the number of sessions in a day can be increased to respond to the growing demand.
Health and Wellbeing

In May we hosted 2 partner organisations for their fundraising events (MIND on 18th May and NE Youth on 25th May). Our relationship with MIND is developing well with plans for a wellbeing day in 2020 and joint PR planned. Both the NE Youth Walk and the MIND walk were a success. We are now planning a walk with MIND to mark World Mental Health Awareness Day (to be held on 12th October), and are working with them on a celebration of the end of RED January, MIND’s push for people to do something active each day in January.

Film

Our relationship with Hexham Forum continued to develop with two showings of the 1974 film The Living wall as part of the Tyndale Film Festival. The screening was followed by a walk and talk visit to Hadrian’s Wall. Attendance was good, almost 40 over 2 showings - higher numbers than we would expect on a basic walk. This event has connected us with North East Film Archive who we hope to work with on similar events throughout the Park.

Reaching New Audiences

The Engagement team have been able to welcome 3 urban BAME groups to the Sill: JET (Jobs, Employment & Education); ID on the Tyne (growing confidence in BAME women through the outdoors) and The Comfrey Project (a growing project for refugees & asylum seekers). We are now working on a closer relationship with the Comfrey Project. JET (Jobs Education & Training) from the West End of Newcastle visited with 16 Asian women and 4 of their young children. This group enjoyed the Exhibitions at The Sill, took the roof walk then ate at the cafe before visiting nearby Walltown to experience good views of Hadrian’s Wall. ID on The Tyne, a project designed to empower BAME women through cultural experiences, brought a group of young Asian women (The Sherios!) for their first visit to the national park. They met with archaeologist Chris Jones to plan further visits stimulated by the permanent exhibition at The Sill. We ran one low price/high participant number craft event in our main programme, ‘Transmittens’ which provided an excellent interactive session for ZigZag, an initiative helping vulnerable adults in West Northumberland explore their county. Fifteen members of the ZigZag group took part in this interactive and innovative workshop with Textile Fellow Lindsay Duncanson greatly enhancing their visit to The Sill.

Building Wide Events

The Engagement team contributed to the Food Fair weekend by co-ordinating demonstrations in the Sill Learning Rooms (Salmon curing; pollinator talks and wine tasting) and by organising the animation of the building (choir; acoustic band; Medieval Woodturners). The Friday evening Hepple Gin event run in conjunction with Fresh Element was a great night and well received by the attendees. The Engagement Team are now building into planning how to work together with the retail arm of The Sill on wider building based events with a clear customer message, resulting in increased sales both in retail & activities.

The public events team is currently planning the last programme of the formal NLHF project. The themes for the Winter Programme will be Get Creative; Dark Skies; Family Fun and Mythical Stories and Places. It will be include events stimulated by the Yours Since 1949 exhibition.

Public Events Feedback

- Ugly Bug Ball: “Wonderful activities, super venue!”
- Swedish Basket Making “The setting was wonderful and I’m delighted to take home my basket.” “Whole day was a pleasure, tutor was knowledgeable and enthusiastic”.

---

Northumberland National Park Authority
Annual Meeting 10 July 2019
• Print Workshop: “All good – from reception meet and greet and throughout” “Enjoyed the mixed content also emphasising the geography of area by Chris and Duncan”.

• Sill Sunday – Spiders: “Children liked getting up close to the spiders” “I really liked the spider hunt - now I am more interested in spiders and I know lots of facts.”

• Dark Skies Disco: “Glitter, dancing, play doh, what's not to love !?” “My daughter's favourite bit was the play-doh”, “All of it, staff so friendly”.

7. Temporary Exhibition Programme

a) Flow Country (which ran from 1st March – 22nd April) was very well received by the public and was a good working example of how cross programming worked throughout the building (from a programme of supporting activities, education workshops to relevant merchandise available to buy in the shop). The exhibition was about the peatlands of the Flow Country, which stretches through Caithness and Sutherland in the far north of Scotland and is the best blanket bog of its type in the world. We ensured that the exhibition included our own National Park context and commissioned two additional display boards to reflect the ongoing work we are doing on our peatlands and to direct visitors to areas within the park where they can experience this landscape for themselves. We created a programme of activity around the exhibition including Citizen Science Sessions explaining the value and importance of mires for carbon capture, historical climate recording as a habitat for a unique range of species. Our Beautiful Bogs, a day with National Park experts to visit bogland and top tips for non-peat gardening and a STEM Event with a peatland focus for 100 young people in partnership with Northumberland Country Council.

The Flow Country exhibition was a great hit with visitors. We recorded 6,466 visitors entering the exhibition and received a range of positive comments from all ages including:

“This is exactly the type of exhibition I’ve been waiting for and really makes The Sill the National Landscape Discovery Centre”

“This is a great temporary exhibition to complement the fantastic main exhibition”

“I love this exhibition, the dressing up costumes are brilliant. I love nature”.

b) The current exhibition is an external exhibition designed specifically for The Sill by Discover our Land (Northumberland County Council) to showcase their photography competition winners and runners up. Discover our Land has been well received by visitors and showcases a range of beautiful landscapes across Northumberland. It also includes a children’s colouring in competition. This will run until July when it will be replaced by our 70th anniversary exhibition, Yours Since 1949.

c) Yours Since 1949 will run until the end of September and will celebrate the journey of the creation of National Parks through the 1949 legislation, the work that National Parks currently do and will look to the future to galvanise support and engage visitors around what the future might hold for National Parks. Many aspects from the exhibition will be placed into the permanent exhibition once the temporary exhibition has come to an end.

8. Volunteers:

During 2018/19 a healthy balance of volunteering activities are being undertaken. The total volunteering at the end of the year is 10,380 this is 85% of the total project target of 12,144, meeting our project to date target by 113%. 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. Volunteers have
continued to engage the public out in the National Park, led Guided Walks, delivered talks to community groups, and helped at events, as well as undertaking practical access and conservation projects.

![Cumulative Volunteering Vs Target Graph]

**Table 7: Cumulative volunteer days against the project target.**

In quarter 4 (Jan-Mar inc.) we recorded 1,260 volunteer days bringing the ‘Year to date’ total to 3,486 days representing 129% achievement of the annual 2,707 days target. In the quarter, we engaged 60 new people.

The quarterly total includes 30 ‘professional’ volunteer days with expert volunteer astronomers and navigation trainers leading delivery of our Dark Skies events and navigation training activities. 72 volunteer days in the quarter were supporting the operation of The Sill. This includes volunteers supporting our Welcome Team and undertaking grounds maintenance projects. We have two young volunteers undertaking regular shifts as part of our Welcome Team. 157 volunteer days in the quarter were recorded against training. Navigation and Outdoor First Aid training courses were completed by volunteers requiring these skills to undertake their roles. Four (4) students completed a week’s work experience, 4 college students completed a GIS Training day, and a young volunteer completed a Lichen Survey Placement. A Masters student from Northumbria University started a placement and a second Masters student from Durham has started a placement helping us to develop a Digital Archive Project that is establishing the Authority's Digital Asset Bank of imagery. 976 of the volunteer days recorded contributed to providing a visitor welcome out in the National Park, undertaking conservation work, sites maintenance, and access projects. This includes a significant contribution from new volunteers engaged in a new Digital Archiving project, and also a new project with Blyth Star Enterprises providing volunteering opportunities for people with barriers to engagement.

April and May saw the employment of 2 (now former) volunteers into The Sill staff team and a number of new volunteers introduced into The Sill FoH team. We also have Summer holiday internships advertised to support the Yours Since 1949 Exhibition and the Ranger team. The Digital Archive volunteers have unearthed some great imagery and researched the designation story of NNP to assist with Exhibition content.
9. Conclusions

a) Visitor numbers continue to perform well against the revised target. We continue to focus marketing efforts on promoting the venue.

b) Income generation remains a key focus and whilst challenging, there remain many areas of untapped potential and audiences. Progress is being made across all elements of the programme.

c) We continue to monitor feedback across both the venue and activity programme and this remains generally very positive. We use this to inform future developments.

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

Background papers: None