

Resilient and Sustainable Services in Snowdonia National Park Authority

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 In 2020-21 we undertook a review of the resilience and sustainability of services at Snowdonia National Park Authority (the Authority) to provide assurance on how well financial and capacity challenges are being addressed. This report sets out the conclusions of our review and makes proposals for how resilience and sustainability can be strengthened in the Authority.
- 2 The British Standards Institute (BSI)¹ defines organisational resilience as, ‘the ability [of an organisation] to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to events – both sudden shocks and gradual change’. In simple terms, that means an organisation must be adaptable, competitive, agile and robust in order to survive and flourish. A resilient organisation is one that can anticipate and respond to threats and opportunities, arising from sudden or gradual changes in its internal and external environments.
- 3 Since 2018 the three National Park Authorities in Wales have been working to priorities set out in the Welsh Government’s Valued and Resilient statement.² The statement places an emphasis on improved collaboration with partners and on supporting resilient environments and communities. To enable this, Welsh Government specifies that National Park Authorities should adopt resilient ways of working.
- 4 Our review considered the impact of COVID-19 and the risks related to the recovery planning phase. It provides assurance to the Authority, Welsh Government and to taxpayers regarding the risks and opportunities ahead and establishes a baseline against which the Authority’s response to these challenges can be judged. We sought to answer the overall question: **Is the National Park Authority effectively managing its resources to secure its long-term organisational resilience?**

What we found

- 5 Overall, we found that **the Authority responded well in the pandemic but the challenges it faced have highlighted a need to improve its resilience and sustainability in the longer term.** This overall conclusion is informed by our findings in relation to the five specific areas that we looked at:
 - **Finance:** the Authority’s sound financial position masks a need to embed the legacy of short-term grant funded projects to maximise their impact.

¹ [British Standards BSI, November 2014](#)

² [Valued and Resilient: The Welsh Government’s Priorities for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks, July 2018](#)

- **Governance:** the Authority has sound governance systems but there are opportunities to learn from the dynamic decision-making adopted during the pandemic.
- **Workforce:** the Authority has a skilled and committed workforce, but capacity and resilience have been stretched.
- **Assets:** the Authority has a diverse portfolio of assets, but in light of the pandemic it needs to re-evaluate its strategic intent and future role in managing these.
- **Business continuity:** the Authority did well to maintain services during the pandemic, but it needs to capture corporate learning to help boost resilience.

Proposals for Improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

The table below sets out proposals for improvement that we have identified in undertaking this review.

Proposals for improvement	
PFI1	To support resilience the Authority should consolidate and appraise its new ways of working in relation to governance, business continuity and remote working.
PFI2	To maximise the impact of grant funded projects the Authority should develop a framework to appraise their potential contribution to progressing Cynllun Eryri and to ensure appropriate legacy planning takes place.
PFI3	To support greater resilience the Authority should consider how and when to expose officers to new experiences in wider services and teams to build skills, knowledge and capacity

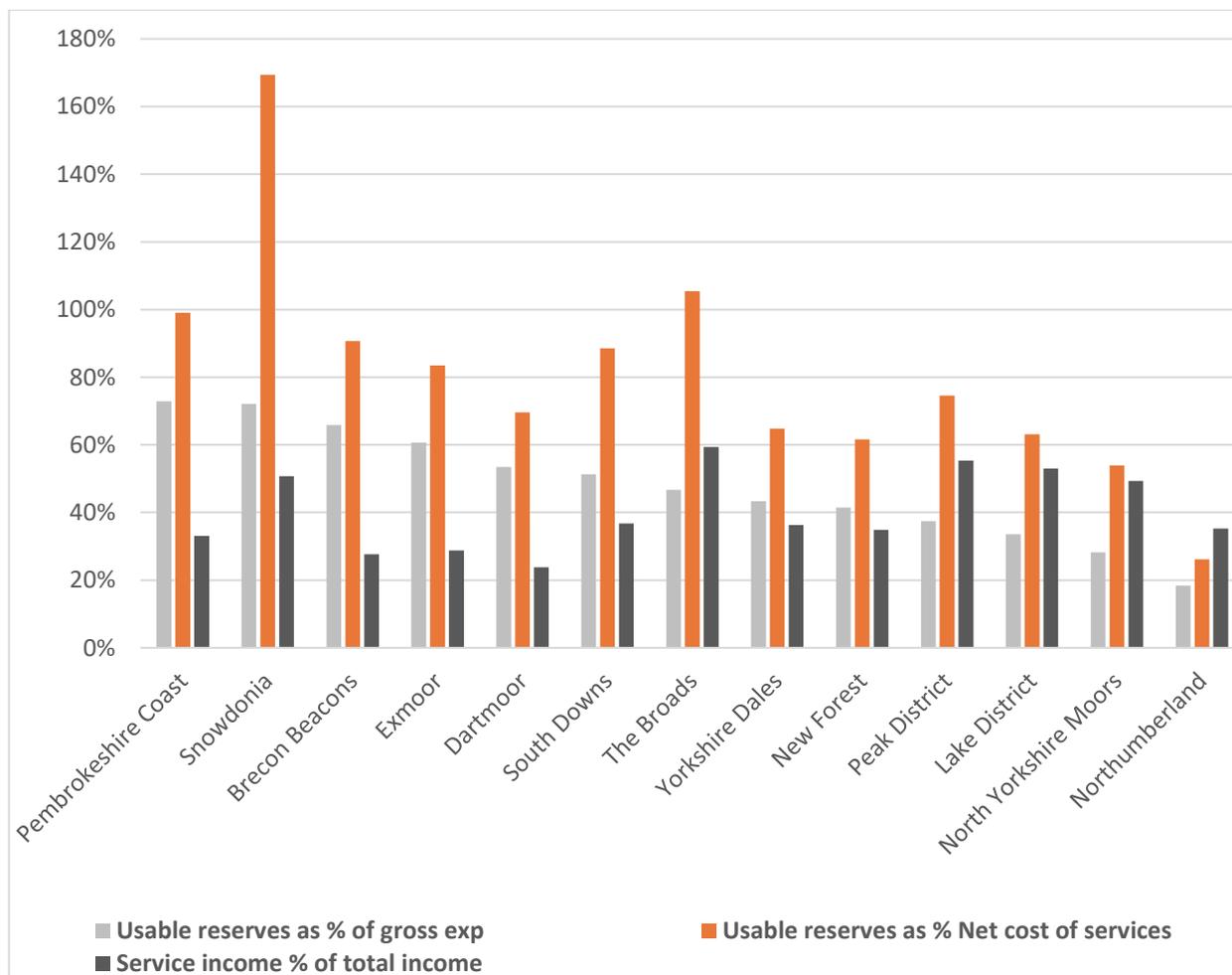
Detailed report

The Authority responded well in the pandemic, but the challenges it faced have highlighted a need to improve its resilience and sustainability in the longer term

The Authority's sound financial position masks a need to embed the legacy of short-term grant funded projects to maximise their impact

- 6 National Park Authorities differ from other local authorities in that they are not precepting or billing authorities. They are primarily funded through a Welsh Government core grant and each National Park Authority is also able to draw down a levy from their constituent local authorities. In addition, National Park Authorities generate income (eg through planning fees and commercial assets such as car parks) and they also secure grant funding to deliver specific projects.
- 7 The Authority generated £6.4 million of service-related income during 2019-20, representing 51% of its total general funding. This was the highest for Welsh National Park Authorities (41%) and is above the average for all English and Welsh National Park Authorities (43%).
- 8 The Authority spent £11.1 million on providing services during 2019-20, the highest spend of the three National Park Authorities in Wales and the fourth highest of the 13 National Park Authorities in Wales and England.
- 9 As at 31 March 2020 the Authority had £8.0 million of usable financial reserves. This is equivalent to 72% of the Authority's annual spend on services. This is amongst the highest percentage of all the National Park Authorities in Wales and England. Most of the reserves (88%) are earmarked for specific purposes. The Authority's general fund balance of £659,000 as at 31 March 2020 represents 6% of its annual gross expenditure on services. The average for the three Welsh National Park Authorities is 11%, and across both England and Wales, 21%. **Exhibit 2** shows the levels of reserves in National Park Authorities in Wales and England.

Exhibit 2: as a proportion of the net cost of services, the Authority’s level of usable reserves is the highest of all National Park Authorities in Wales and England



Source: Audit Wales analysis

- 10 Determining financial resilience is not an exact science. Organisations need to manage their spending within available resources and forecast demand and future challenges to ensure they can remain financially sound over the medium term. As a key instrument for proactive financial management, therefore, it is important that the Authority has a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) in place which is based on a clear understanding of its operating environment.
- 11 The Authority’s MTFP refers to its service priorities and operating principles, suggesting an integrated approach to financial planning. Taken together, these priorities and principles broadly reflect a policy commitment to achieve more with less. For example, by encouraging services to play an enabling role to facilitate local communities to manage and take responsibility for providing services, and to avoid embarking on projects with long term maintenance commitments. There is also an emphasis on identifying new income sources.

- 12 This emphasis has led to the Authority increasing its reliance on grant funded projects in recent years, to offset reductions in core grant from the Welsh Government. This is not without risk. More income streams from increasingly diverse sources place pressure on officers to manage them, and financial management systems need to work effectively to monitor spending within available resources. We found that officers are under pressure, and remote working during the pandemic has highlighted weaknesses with the internal financial management software being used, causing frustration amongst budget holders. Operational weaknesses in systems are considered to have contributed to the Authority risking missing its expenditure targets on a grant funded project in January 2020.
- 13 A greater emphasis, and, by extension, a reliance on grant funded projects, means that the Authority is constantly seeking new money and regularly submits bids to various funding bodies. Typically, these bids may outline the need for a project officer(s), hosted and employed by the Authority. Clearly, once employed, project officers do not work in isolation – they rely on other teams and internal services to support project delivery. These include corporate services such as communications, information technology (IT) services, assets and facilities management, finance and human resources. We found that the additional, often hidden or underestimated, collective demand arising from grant funded projects creates unplanned pressures on corporate services.³
- 14 In addition, grant funding opportunities made available at short notice can compound these challenges, especially when awarded at the end of a financial year. They can create difficulties around project planning, requiring officers to be switched at short notice to deliver various activities. Difficulties in spending grant funding can result in monies being transferred to the Authority's already growing reserves. A greater focus on using the new project toolkit and on project exit planning, as well as a clear framework to guide decision making regarding which potential projects and funding to bid for, will help the Authority to better balance pursuing new sources of funding with progressing and delivering its vision within Cynllun Eryri.
- 15 The Authority's early analysis of the financial impact of the pandemic, considered by Members in May 2020, estimated a net loss of between £511,000 and £1.3 million depending on the duration of restrictions. 38% of officers who responded to our survey felt that the main impact of the pandemic on the Authority had been the loss of income. 44% of officers highlighted the flexible and agile budget controls (eg being able to spend money not originally budgeted for) as a positive of the Authority's response to the pandemic.
- 16 The initial loss of income during the first quarter of 2020-21 was compensated by Welsh Government and the full financial impact on the Authority is expected to be significantly less than first anticipated. However, dealing with the on-going impact

³ This is mitigated in relation to Welsh Government grant funded projects, where the National Park Authorities now receive an additional 10% of the value of the grant funding to help fund the administration and facilitation of project delivery.

of COVID-19 and uncertain public funding in the future will continue be a challenge. 84% of the officers and Members who responded to our survey highlighted an anticipated drop in income as a major risk in the months ahead. In line with its Annual Governance Statement, the Authority needs to carefully consider and continually assess its funding position, and regularly challenge and update its MTFP assumptions to ensure its forecasting supports sustainable and resilient finances.

The Authority has sound governance systems, but there are opportunities to learn from the dynamic decision-making adopted during the pandemic

- 17 Governance is the system by which public bodies in Wales are directed and controlled. It is concerned with structure and processes for decision-making, accountability, control and behaviour of an organisation. Governance influences how an organisation's objectives are set and achieved, how risk is monitored and addressed and how performance is optimised.
- 18 Resilient public bodies embrace open dialogue and use their scrutiny function to provide constructive challenge to senior leaders as they make difficult decisions around service provision and the use of resources. Good governance practices can also play a leading role in helping Members and senior management to create the right culture for an organisation to be successful and ensure a motivated and effective workforce.
- 19 Within the governance structure, key decisions on the day-to-day running of the Authority lie with the senior leadership team, made up of the Chief Executive, the Director of Corporate Services and Director of Planning and Land Management. On a Member level, the key pillars of the Authority's governance structure include:
 - The full National Park Authority: comprises all 18 Members – nine local councillors appointed by Gwynedd Council, three appointed by Conwy County Borough Council, and six appointed by the Welsh Government. The full Authority performs and ensures compliance with key legislative requirements, agrees key plans and annual budgets.
 - The Performance and Resources Committee: consists of all 18 Members and its remit includes the audit and scrutiny of performance, governance, financial and resource management, risk and assurance.
 - The Planning and Access Committee: guides the shaping of planning and access policies and exercises the powers and duties of the organisation as the Local Planning Authority. All 18 Members sit on the Planning and Access Committee.
 - The Standards Committee: consists of one representative from each of the three appointing bodies (Gwynedd Council, Conwy County Borough Council and Welsh Government), and three independent members who are not otherwise Members of the Authority. Its role is to promote and monitor the standards of conduct by Members.

- 20 All Authority meetings were paused during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic with officers using the scheme of delegation to make and approve decisions. This helped the Authority to respond dynamically to the rapidly changing situation. Emergency legislation passed by Welsh Government in April 2020⁴ enabled local authorities to hold meetings, make decisions and carry out their functions remotely using technology. The Authority responded swiftly to restore its democratic functions and involve Members, with a Special Authority Meeting held just four weeks later.
- 21 The dynamic decision making seen during the early weeks of the pandemic was consistently highlighted during our fieldwork, and 71% of survey responders rated the agile and quick decision making by senior officers as a strength in how the Authority responded to COVID-19. However, we found elements of frustration amongst officers that this dynamic approach contrasts with how decisions are usually made. Officers are concerned that, when 'normality' eventually returns, so too will the traditional, often slow and resource intensive, decision-making. Through its Governance Task and Finish Group, the Authority has an opportunity to review which elements of the streamlined governance approaches it wants to embed to improve agility, whilst ensuring the due process remains robust.
- 22 In addition to its established committee structure, the Authority has a number of working groups in place to tackle specific issues, with membership often including both officers and Members. A working group can be an effective forum where officers receive informal guidance, Members can harness officers' expertise, and both parties collaborate to identify and recommend solutions. In a more informal setting like this, culture and behaviours are crucial to maintain the interface and distinction between the roles of officers and Members.
- 23 Member training and development are important tools to maintain these behaviours and high standards of conduct. It also helps to ensure Members are primed to respond to future risks effectively. Although key to the Authority's adaptability and resilience, we found that Members are not making the most of the development opportunities on offer, despite the Authority's commitment to the Wales Charter for Member Support and Development.⁵
- 24 Our review concludes that the Authority has an appropriate governance framework which reflects the principles of good governance published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).⁶ There are, however, opportunities to learn from the more dynamic decision-making seen during the Authority's response to the pandemic.

⁴ [The Local Authorities \(Coronavirus\) \(Meetings\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2020](#)

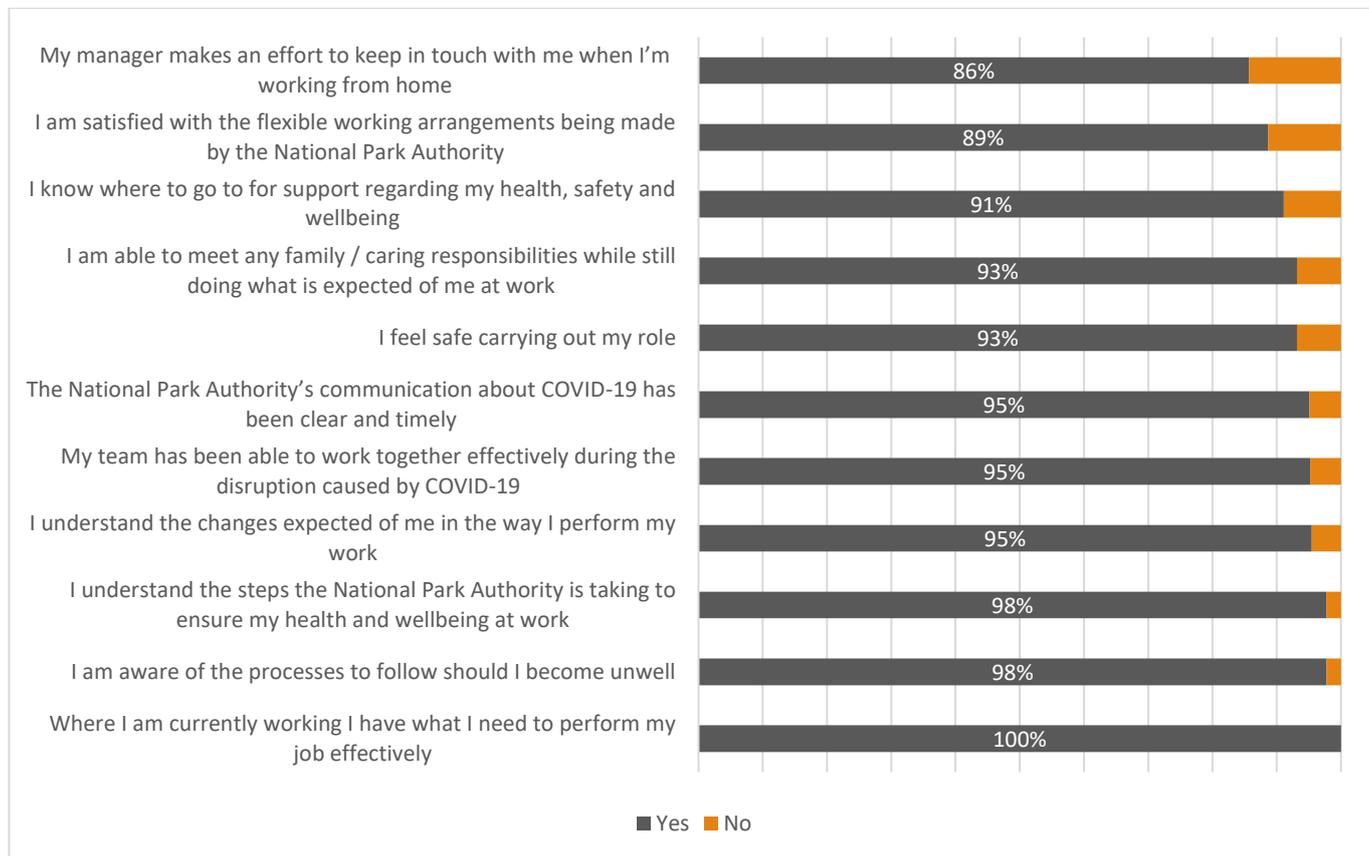
⁵ [Wales Charter for Member Support and Development, Welsh Local Government Association \(WLGA\)](#)

⁶ [Delivering Good Governance in Local Government, CIPFA/SOLACE, 2016](#)

The Authority has a skilled and committed workforce, but capacity and resilience have been stretched

- 25 At the heart of a resilient organisation is a workforce made up of effective and highly motivated staff who can adapt to changing circumstances. Characteristics of a resilient workforce include passionate, energetic staff with high levels of morale and low staff turnover. Access to effective training opportunities, career progression and fair pay can also help create a more enthused and resilient workforce.
- 26 The Authority is not short of passionate officers who believe in what they do. Indeed, in all National Park Authorities in Wales we find consistently high levels of enthusiasm amongst officers and a genuine commitment to overcome challenges to conserve and promote the National Park area. Whilst the Authority can find it challenging to compete with the salaries offered by other employers, it punches above its weight in what it offers in respect of job satisfaction.
- 27 We found that officers were well supported during the pandemic. Officers were provided with equipment to enable home working and new teams established during the pandemic were able to meet face to face outdoors as part of their induction. Regular online, informal catch-up meetings helped to provide assurance that colleagues were coping with the demands of remote working. However, a proportion of officers who responded to our survey (14%) disagreed that their manager made an effort to keep in touch with them when working from home. In particular, the Authority needs to ensure it manages the pressure on the small number of staff who were at the forefront of dealing with unprecedented demand when restrictions were eased in 2020.
- 28 Corporately, internal communication was felt to be much improved during the pandemic with regular all-staff bulletins from the Chief Executive and Chair. Many felt the pandemic, and remote working in particular, helped to address some long-standing cultural barriers and divisions between satellite staff (eg wardens or car park attendants) and those who were predominantly office based.
- 29 Our survey asked officers to describe how different ways of working during the pandemic had impacted on their well-being. Our analysis is set out in **Exhibit 3**. We have removed the small number of 'don't know' responses for clarity.

Exhibit 3: officers responded positively when asked about how new ways of working had impacted on their well-being



Source: Audit Wales survey analysis

- 30 The Authority's experiences of new ways of working has clearly led to benefits for staff. By capturing the elements that have worked well in relation to a more agile and flexible way of working it can embed these new ways of working to sustain and further improve people's work-life balance.
- 31 The Authority has also introduced an online recruitment portal. Since introducing the portal, officers report an increase in the amount of applications being made for jobs advertised. The portal is also helping to make the process easier to manage for recruiting managers.
- 32 A number of teams have been undergoing restructures recently. At the time of our review, the Wardens team restructure was on track to be completed by April 2021 and the refocused Engagement team was felt to be bedding in well. Some challenges remain in resourcing the Planning service, where the competition for more specialist skills in the local labour market is felt more acutely.
- 33 The Authority's response to the pandemic has demonstrated its workforce's ability to respond to periods of change. However, effective workforce and succession planning remains a significant challenge. This risk needs to be addressed to

improve the Authority's resilience in the medium term. The Planning service is just one example of where the Authority has traditionally relied on small number of committed staff to deliver its work, which presents a challenge to succession planning. There are examples of where the 'grow your own' approach has worked well for the Authority with junior staff acting up. However, this approach can expose the Authority to risks when relatively inexperienced officers are asked to step up to fill vacancies in senior roles. The Authority could strengthen its workforce resilience and capacity by building on its 'grow your own' approach and exposing officers to different services and teams.

- 34 The Authority's emphasis on identifying new sources of funding results in a number of officers being appointed on short term contracts to deliver specific projects. These project officers often leave the Authority prior to project completion, creating risks for project delivery and putting pressures on other colleagues. It also risks losing opportunities to evaluate and capture corporate learning.

The Authority has a diverse portfolio of assets, but in light of the pandemic it needs to re-evaluate its strategic intent and future role in managing these

- 35 Following employee costs, the largest cost to the Authority is what it spends on its property. Good asset management is therefore critical to its ability to demonstrate resilience and good value for money. Buildings need to be fit for purpose and maintained well to avoid large costs and preventable expenditure of public money. Effective management coupled with the right vision can help to ensure that an asset does not become a liability. The pandemic also raised questions about the future of large office spaces, which all public bodies in Wales will need to consider.
- 36 The Authority has a diverse portfolio of assets, ranging from small woodlands and car parks to high profile buildings such as the Snowdon Summit Café building. The Authority's 60 pay-and-display car parks are the Authority's biggest source of generated income, and we found it had diversified maintenance responsibilities for these sites to reduce risks. During the early weeks of lockdown, the Authority moved swiftly to close car parks near the main attractions in the National Park (eg Snowdon and Cadair Idris) to help discourage tourists and visitors and the spread of the coronavirus. The Authority acknowledges the need to incorporate the lessons learned in relation to closing these sites to help inform its approach in the future if faced with similar challenges.
- 37 The travel restrictions meant the Snowdon Summit Café, leased by the Authority to Snowdon Mountain Railway, was not opened as normal during 2020. This exacerbated maintenance issues which resulted in significant damage to the building. The Authority has responsibility for maintaining the building and given the collapse of Carillion in 2018 it now faces potentially significant repair costs.
- 38 Plas Tan y Bwlch is another of the Authority's high-profile asset and was also closed during the pandemic. The nature of the site presents maintenance challenges and the traditional business model which focused primarily on attracting

school children and older people for residential courses was not viable during much of 2020-21 which impacted severely on its profitability. Whilst the furloughing of officers working in Plas Tan y Bwlch alleviated some of the financial impact on the Authority, in reality the pandemic exposed well known and pre-existing difficulties. The Authority has now adopted a revised business model which involves running bed and breakfast accommodation. However, it has committed to subsidising Plas Tan y Bwlch. Members will need to continually monitor and scrutinise performance to gain assurance that the revised business model is realised.

- 39 Yr Ysgwrn is a very different asset to Plas Tan y Bwlch but faces similar challenges in the longer term. Yr Ysgwrn is a cultural heritage site of national importance and the National Park's statutory purposes clearly justify its acquisition by the Authority. From a commercial perspective, however, the fact that the asset is running at a loss raises questions over the Authority's long-term vision and strategic intent, especially given Welsh Government's emphasis on National Park Authorities pursuing commercial opportunities. Its lack of an overarching strategy setting out its intent and role in managing all its major assets means the Authority remains largely reactive to long term risks. Re-evaluating its strategic intent and clearly articulating its vision for managing its assets will help to address this.

The Authority did well to maintain services during the pandemic, but it needs to capture corporate learning to help boost resilience

- 40 The main principles of good approaches to business continuity are in identifying critical activities and any threats to them, developing a plan which sets out how the Authority will maintain services, and to train staff and exercise plans, so the Authority can be confident that its arrangements will work when needed. Effective business continuity should be embedded into organisations so that its application becomes second nature to officers.
- 41 The business continuity plan specifically for Yr Ysgwrn – a requirement of the Heritage Lottery Fund as the primary grant funding provider – was described by officers as a very useful guide to respond when the pandemic hit. The wider corporate business continuity plan was, however, felt to be less helpful. Whilst the principles were loosely followed – in particular, establishing a core response leadership group which met daily to coordinate its response – it did not provide sufficient depth and coverage to help the Authority respond to the challenges it faced. The continuation of fortnightly meeting with all Heads of Service is felt to be a strength, especially given prolonged remote working arrangements.
- 42 From an IT perspective, the Authority's investment in Microsoft 365 proved worthwhile and enabled remote working to be as effective and secure as possible. Planned investments in a new telephone system will help to further improve remote working. Officers articulated a good awareness and understanding of the increased threat of cyber-attacks. However, despite good systems being in place, officers

acknowledge that more could be done to raise the awareness of staff and Members across the Authority and test the response to potential attacks (eg phishing emails).

- 43 From a business continuity perspective, the Authority was also able to overcome challenges to successfully recruit and provide induction training to new officers during the lockdown period. Such examples of doing things differently are important to capture in order to improve corporate learning and future resilience. This applies to all the new ways of working experienced during the pandemic. Reviewing and appraising recent experiences means the Authority can embed the things worked well to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the future.
- 44 Externally, the Authority's long-established partnerships and collaborative approach mean it was well-placed to respond when the pandemic hit. The Authority fostered new relationships and worked effectively with existing partners such as local authorities and the Welsh Government. This collaboration led to ensuring commonality in external communication which was aimed at maintaining restrictions and keeping communities safe.
- 45 Prior to restrictions easing during the summer of 2020, the Authority consulted local communities to inform their approach to reopening and understand potential concerns about welcoming visitors back to the National Park. The Authority's key collaborative forum – Fforwm Eryri – continued to hold bilingual virtual meetings throughout the pandemic and through this forum key partners contributed to the review of the assumptions and priorities included in Cynllun Eryri prior to its adoption in November 2020. This process helped to ensure that Cynllun Eryri reflects the rapidly changing operating environment.
- 46 The Authority prioritised the safety of local communities during the pandemic and its response has clearly given it an enhanced national profile. The Authority's articulation of how local communities need to be supported to thrive in order to conserve the national park area shows a clear understanding of its role. However, the challenge of striking the right balance between its two statutory purposes is likely to be exacerbated in the medium term, with an anticipated rise in visitor numbers and wider demand. The Authority address this by building on its strong ethos of partnership working to develop a shared vision and action plan for sustainable tourism with local destination management partners.
- 47 We conclude that the Authority's experiences of responding to the pandemic shows its resilience in the short term. By consolidating and appraising its learning it can further improve its resilience and sustainability in the medium term to ensure it is well placed to harness its enhanced profile and the internal momentum seen during the pandemic.

Appendix 1

Methodology

To inform our overall conclusions we explored the following lines of enquiry:

- Does the Authority have robust and effective financial management systems?
- Does the Authority have effective governance and scrutiny arrangements to ensure effective decision making on financial and workforce matters?
- Is the Authority workforce resilient to respond to periods of significant change both now and in the future?
- Does the Authority manage its assets economically, efficiently and effectively to ensure they remain sustainable in the longer term?
- Does the Authority have effective business continuity plans in place that support corporate resilience and help create sustainable services?

We undertook the review during the autumn of 2020. Our methods included:

- consolidating our cumulative audit knowledge and experience, including intelligence gathered as part of the COVID-19 Learning Project;
- reviewing data and key documents;
- interviewing 10 officers and three Members;
- inviting all officers and Members to share their views through an online survey (six Members and 46 officers responded);
- keeping in regular contact with the Land, Nature and Forestry Division in Welsh Government; and
- providing a verbal summary of our emerging findings and conclusions to the senior management team in December 2020.

Appendix 2

Appraising new ways of working

This report and the proposals for improvement make references to appraising new ways of working to improve corporate learning and embed new approaches, to improve its resilience in the medium term. The model below provides a potential structure to undertake this exercise.

What should the Authority stop doing?	What should the Authority start doing?
What should the Authority do more of?	What should the Authority do less of?



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