

YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY  
AUDIT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

15 September 2006

**LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE 'OUT OF OBLIVION' PROJECT**

**Purpose of report**

To provide an assessment of the 'Out of Oblivion' project and to identify lessons learnt from it, which should be taken into account in the development of future projects.

**Strategic Planning Framework**

The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and its approved strategic planning framework:

- ***Best Value Performance Plan***  
Introduce arrangements for reports on progress and lessons learnt from major projects to go to the appropriate Committee

**Background**

As part of the NPA Performance Assessment last year, the Peer Review Team's report concluded that:

"Learning from projects and other experiences is not consistent in the organisation. There is no structure in place to ensure that the completion of activities and projects includes the identification of learning for the benefit of future work and performance improvement".

As a result, the Authority's Improvement Plan identified the need to put in place systems for extracting learning and sharing it across the organisation. This included a specific action for reports on progress and lessons learnt from major projects to go to the appropriate Committee.

This is the first such report. As such, it is something of a test case, which will give Members the opportunity to see how the proposed review process (set out in detail in a later item on this agenda) operates in practice.

**Out of Oblivion**

A full report of the project's achievements and the way in which they were delivered is set out in the **Annex**. A short presentation on the project will also be made at the meeting – to give Members the opportunity to see some of the work produced.

## **Conclusions**

There is little doubt that the Out of Oblivion project has been a considerable success. While the real cost to the Authority (somewhere in the region of £25,000) was significantly more than originally budgeted (£5,000 cash and £5,000 'in kind'), it has delivered a step-change in the way in which the public are able to access information about the historic environment of the Park. As such, it represents very good value for the Authority's money.

The project has highlighted a number of areas of weakness within the Authority's approach to project development and management - not least that there is no standard approach in place (something which the Authority has already identified in its Improvement Plan that it will tackle next year). Whatever approach is put in place, it should reflect the recommendations set out in the final section of the attached report.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That Members note the achievements of the 'Out of Oblivion' project and endorse the recommendations for future projects.

GARY SMITH  
HEAD OF CONSERVATION AND POLICY

Background documents: None

5 September 2006

# Lessons learnt from the 'Out of Oblivion' project

## INTENTION OF THE PROJECT

### WHY WAS THE PROJECT SET UP?

The Out of Oblivion project was intended to improve physical and intellectual access to our Historic Environment Record (HER) – formerly known as the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR).

Previously, the HER was only physically accessible by visiting the Authority's office in Bainbridge during normal working hours (and no disabled access). This also had to be by prior arrangement because NPA specialist staff had to retrieve the material. Access was, therefore, severely constrained. Despite this, there was increasing demand for HER information (averaging over 700 consultations a year in 1999/2000 and 2000/2001).

The HER was also very dry and 'specialist' in the way information was catalogued and presented. The project was, therefore, intended to present some information in a more accessible form, to encourage new audiences of all ages and abilities to take an interest in the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales.

### WHAT WAS THE PROJECT INTENDED TO ACHIEVE?

The stated objectives of the project were to:

- Provide information and syntheses on the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park to new and existing audiences, crossing boundaries of accessibility to provide education, information and awareness regardless of physical, financial or transport constraints.
- Encourage and improve the educational use of the HER and the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales.
- Promote research, understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales.
- Encourage active participation in the collection and interpretation of information about the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales.
- Stimulate local participation and more effective management of the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

More specifically, the project was to provide:

- a) new Internet access to the HER;
- b) accessible thematic overviews of the HER, available via the Internet or CD Rom;
- c) an 'outreach' mechanism for the HER

### ORIGINAL TIMESCALE

Two years – from November 2002 to December 2004.

## ORIGINAL RESOURCING

The total cost of the project was calculated to be £100,000. In 2002, the Authority successfully bid for a grant of £90,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (the maximum grant then available for HER access projects). Over the two years, the project design envisaged a cash contribution from the NPA of £5,000 and an “in kind” contribution from volunteers etc of £5,000.

## MEANS OF DELIVERY

The overall project was to be managed by the **Senior Conservation Archaeologist (SCA)** with:

- a full-time **Project Officer (PO)** to undertake the bulk of the day-to-day work;
- a **Project Team** (comprising the SCA, PO, Senior Information Technology Officer, Education Officer, Volunteer Coordinator and the Head of External Affairs) to monitor progress, provide quality assurance and deliver various aspects of the project.
- a **Steering Group** (containing representatives of local archaeological and historical societies, local educational establishments, and regular non-professional HER users) to provide advice, evaluate the project and provide external quality assurance.

## THE REALITY

### ACTUAL ACHIEVEMENTS

- A new website was created — [Outofoblivion.org.uk](http://Outofoblivion.org.uk) — containing:
  - Introductory information on the Dales through different time periods (chosen, in part to link up with national curriculum and BBC history web periods)
  - A thematic section based on different historic topics (e.g. agriculture, defence, industry);
  - 8 area sections – providing history and information on specific areas of the National Park, together with things to see, how to get there, and other tourist information.
  - A virtual reality video clip showing the development of the Malham Cove–Malham Tarn area from Ice Age to post-medieval times.
- A ‘kids’ zone’ – containing ‘Dalesfolk’ (a series of twelve ‘history-mystery’ stories for children) and examples of the work of Dales-based Young Archaeologists);
- Visitor information taken from the website and adapted for use on the touch-screens in National Park Centres;
- Laptop and digital projector used for display and lecture purposes, including as part of the village show programme for 2006;
- Talks given by the Project Officer and HE staff to local history societies etc;
- Cleared a small part of the backlog of entries to go on the Historic Environment Record.

The table below gives the numbers of visitors to the website since the launch in June 2005 and the number of pages viewed – the latter being in many ways a more accurate figure of the usage of the site.

<b>Month</b>	<b>Total visits</b>	<b>Pages viewed</b>
June	1674	10,023
July	3830	12,816
August	5484	15,917
September	5199	13,926
October	7403	20,158
November	5960	15,792
December	4837	12008
January	6521	17583
February	7400	17187
March *	4927	8592
April	9410	17082
May	8654	16327
June	8413	14338
July	8581	14958
<b>Totals</b>	<b>88,293</b>	<b>206,707</b>

\* No figures are available for the second two weeks of March.

These figures do not include access to the version available through the touch-screens at the National Park Centres.

## **ACTUAL TIMESCALE**

The Project Officer formally started work in January 2003 and the website went live in June 2005. Minor amendments, changes and data input continued until December 2005.

## **ACTUAL COST**

The project was completed at a direct cost of £100,160 (0.16% over budget). In the end, this included £10,000 of direct expenditure by the Authority, in addition to the £5,000 'contribution in kind' made by the Dales Volunteers (the travel costs of whom were absorbed in the Dales Volunteers budget).

However, there were some additional costs; some planned, some not. The time put into the project by the Senior Conservation Archaeologist and other Authority staff amounted to at least £15,000 over the two years.

## **ACTUAL MEANS OF DELIVERY**

The Project Officer post was subject to external competitive selection. The successful candidate, Dr Karen Griffiths, was an internal candidate who was seconded from her post of Interpretation Officer. The proposed two-year post was slightly extended by brief periods of part-time working on the lead-in to the project and towards the end of the initial two year period, thus enabling continuity of input in the build up to the launch of the website.

All members of the Authority's historic environment team had some involvement in the project.

The development of the website was contracted through an external tendering process to Firebrand Design Ltd. In addition to being the most competitive tender, their presentation and

proposal appeared to offer the best combination of high quality design and the personal involvement of principals. An added bonus was that the company had an office in the National Park (although this office and its manager were subsequently relocated causing some loss of continuity).

The Steering Group comprised a local museum curator (Skipton); the Head of Heritage Studies at Craven College; representatives of two local history societies; a GCSE school student intending to study A level archaeology; NYCC's Education Adviser (History); the Archaeological Monitoring Co-ordinator (a volunteer post co-ordinating archaeological volunteers in YDNP); an officer from the Archaeology Data Service; and the YDNPA SCA, OoO Project Officer and Education Officer. The Group met regularly during the main stages of the project (meeting with less frequency towards the end although e-mail contact was maintained throughout).

The Project Team met only 4 times, during the early stages of the project. There was sporadic attendance by some officers and the group effectively ended in June 2003. The SCA, PO and Education Officer continued to meet under the auspices of the Steering Group above.

The use of volunteers began slightly later in the project than initially envisaged – it was necessary to draft texts and identify gazetteer examples before the records could be enhanced by the volunteers. The project design had anticipated that the volunteers would be coordinated by the Archaeological Monitoring Coordinator (itself a voluntary post). Unfortunately, the post-holder left early in the project, which meant that much of the coordinating role fell on the Project Officer.

Articles by the Project Officer describing the project were published in the NPA's *Visitor* newspaper, the residents' newspaper (*Dales 2005*), and in *Dales Heritage*. Press releases have been picked up by the local press as well the archaeological press. A leaflet accompanied the launch and has been widely distributed to local schools, museums, libraries, societies, outdoor centres, tourist information centres etc

A number of additional elements were incorporated into the project at little extra cost – e.g. the 'Dalesfolk' stories, which had been developed through the Authority's education programme.

## SUSTAINING THE PROJECT

Responsibility and budget for future maintenance and development of the site has been transferred to the External Affairs Department (who are also responsible for the NPA's main website). A contract has been let with Firebrand for maintenance and updating from 2006. The on-going costs to the Authority are around £2,000 per year (including staff time).

The recent installation of visitor internet access points in four NPCs means visitors to the Centres can now browse through the complete Out of Oblivion website for themselves (as intended in the original project design – see below).

Evaluation of usage of the site is continuing (through e.g. questionnaires and analysis of web statistics undertaken by a Bradford University archaeology placement student). The results are being used to inform development of the site, particularly choices for new thematic information sections. An on-line feedback mechanism is also being used to help inform developments of the record and monitor its effectiveness.

The NPA's agricultural show programme for 2006 is featuring the historic environment and OutofOblivion, thus bringing the project closer to the local community. A further 10,000 copies of the promotional leaflet have been printed and are being distributed.

The archaeology team is continuing its work to identify and collect data to fill gaps in the HER, input the huge backlog of records, and continuing to make available those records that cannot readily be converted into an electronic format. As the SMR has been a priority E for the Authority, progress is very slow.

## WHAT WENT WELL, AND WHY?

### ***Project bid/design***

Supporting evidence had been collected prior to inception of project through annual feedback from the Historic Environment day school and a log of visitors to the SMR, supplemented by community views obtained through the Area Actions programme.

### ***Appointment of in-house Project Officer.***

Brought very strong specialist interpretive knowledge, experience in project delivery, archaeological skills, and a very good background knowledge of the Yorkshire Dales. This meant there was little need for familiarisation at the start of the project. Seconding a member of External Affairs staff also helped to ensure liaison and communication with the section of the Authority most involved in communication with all sectors of the public.

### ***Choice of designers***

Firebrand was a high risk choice due to their relative lack of experience in web design and database management. The company did, however, bring a high level of enthusiasm and design skills to the project, and this shows in the final product. The company are justifiably proud of their efforts and advertise it in their publicity, thus reaching a different audience. A potential downside of using a bespoke site (rather than the more generic approach which has since been developed by Vamosa for the main National Park Authority website) is that the website may be less adaptable and expandable (additional functionality rather than new content) than may otherwise have been the case. It is also more likely that any such changes will incur design fees. Quality visual design however adds significantly to the user satisfaction of the site.

### ***Volunteers***

The use of volunteers was a very productive part of the process. Their main activities were visiting sites to provide an up to date photographic record and commenting on the physical access, particularly as regards surface conditions, terrain, type of stile, disabled access etc. One Dales Volunteer designed and mapped a series of walk trails for each dale. Another volunteer contributed a thematic essay which saved on officer time. This element had a considerable spin-off in strengthening contact and understanding between the Historic Environment staff and the DVs. Several DVs have now moved onto another archaeological project — recording the condition of scheduled ancient monuments for the 'Monuments at Risk' surveys.

### ***Steering group***

The diversity in age, background and experience on the Steering Group brought a variety of interests and skills to the project. The group provided ideas, suggestions of topics, and text testing etc. While the level of input from individual members varied, overall it was a very valuable resource for the project, particularly in the early stages. The involvement of the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) meant the Group had very strong specialist IT skills/knowledge and web experience – a considerable support to the project officer and SCA.

### ***Utilisation of work by local schools***

This gives a strong link by two local communities to the web site and clearly demonstrates the educational potential of the historic environment. Much of the initial impetus for the 'Young

Archaeologists' group (now based at the Dales Countryside Museum) came from a teacher from one of these schools.

### ***Distinctive project title***

'Out of Oblivion' (the name was originally planned for a volume of papers on the historic environment of the National Park) provides a unique character to the project and works very well in search engines. However, the downside is that it is not intuitive. The 'domain name' should have been purchased before the tender process began in order to ensure it was available for use.

## **WHAT WENT LESS WELL, AND WHY?**

### ***In-house Project Team***

This group declined in involvement during the life of the project, partly through changes in personnel, although logistics and other departmental priorities also meant it was not as effective a champion for the project as was expected.

### ***Limited availability of supporting literature***

The HER has a very small library. This was slightly augmented during the project. The YDNP is also distant from any academic libraries. Background research by the Project officer relied heavily on the personal library of the SCA.

### ***Project timescale***

This was drawn up more with good faith than knowledge – two extensions were sought and granted. The flow chart developed for the project proved to be too rigid and did not adequately reflect some process flows. The initial project design was ambitious (see below) and, as the first such project conceived by the Authority, was designed in the absence of prior experience although it did benefit from some discussion with Durham County Council who had developed web access to their HER, albeit with a much larger technical support section. This resulted in the initial time allocated for some tasks being unrealistically short while for others the activity needed to take place at a different stage in the project. The principal element underestimated by the project design was the time taken by the website designers to develop the web site. The core format of the web site – examples of the thematic studies, area studies, period synopses and gazetteer — all had to be developed before detailed work on the design of the site could begin.

### ***Over ambitious project design***

This had not been adequately costed or thought through with regard to some activities – e.g. web provision of historic mapping or the practical difficulties of collating and maintaining an up to date list of local society lecture programmes. On the latter, the ATP website already provides this facility so this would simply have been duplicating what was already there.

### ***Under-estimation of real costs***

The project design envisaged most of the work being carried out by the Project Officer. This was the case but the project still involved considerable input from the SCA (providing information, identifying sites and sources, reading and commenting on texts, as well as overall project management). This was considerably more time consuming than anticipated and represents a 'hidden' cost that had a negative impact on other aspects of the historic environment work.

Little thought was given as to the resources needed to maintain the website etc once it had been set up. The direct cost is not large but it is a long-term commitment.

### **Publicity**

This could have been wider and more attention should have been paid to ensuring that the HLF were credited in all publicity material. Feedback from the NPA's placement student from Bradford University suggests that she had not been aware of the site prior to considering a placement with the NPA although its content would have been useful. Wider publicity may still be required. An apparent decline in direct academic queries to the HER however may be linked to the availability of both the Outofoblivion website and to data via the ADS – anticipated as the main academic access to the HER. A larger print run for the initial leaflet would have been beneficial. The 5,000 printed were soon consumed (possibly because the leaflet is attractive in its own right). However, the Authority has subsequently funded a further print run of 10,000 for the 2006 summer shows season. A direct link though from the newly launched National Park Authority website ensures potential access for the thousands of visitors that we know visit that site every month. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Information Advisers in the National Park Centres are increasingly using the website as a source of information for visitors.

### **Access through National Park Centres.**

A key part of the original project was the installation of computer workstations in the National Park Centres – so providing access to the website for visitors. However, the Best Value Review of 'promoting understanding' cast doubt on the viability of two of the NPCs. It also transpired that the logistics (and thus the costs) of creating the workstations were more difficult than originally believed. This was circumvented by agreeing the use of 'touch-screens', linked to tourist information, in order to provide some remote access for the public. This meant that only a limited amount of information was available but had the advantage of being accessible even when the NPCs were closed. While this was a reasonable compromise, the failure to follow through on the agreed project design *could* have caused significant difficulties with the funding body.

### **Non-reproduction of material in CD Rom format**

A CD version was not produced. This decision was taken as a result of the general increase in internet usage following the original design of the project – all local schools now have broadband – which meant that a CD version for educational use (which would not be easily maintained or developed) was considered superfluous. However, subsequent discussions with the YDNPA Retail Services Manager suggest that there would be a market for a CD/DVD on the archaeology of the Dales, if one had been produced at reasonable cost. It may now not be cost-effective to do so.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

The project has identified a number of issues that should be considered as part of the development of future guidance on the management of major projects:

1. Most projects would benefit from an external viewpoint (from potential users of the service) as an integral part of the development of the project.
2. Consider whether there is a need to bring in external advice to deal with specialist/technical issues, if the expertise is not available in-house (either because the Authority does not have the expertise or the relevant staff already have other commitments).
3. The plans for all major projects should include clear and realistic estimates of:
  - a) the time that will be needed for project management (and the cost of that time);
  - b) the time that will be needed from other YDNPA officers (and the cost of that time);
  - c) the likely means and on-going cost of sustaining the project on completion.

4. The final project plans (see above) should be formally signed off by SMT to confirm the availability of the necessary time and resources to the project from across the Authority before any commitments are entered into (e.g. before any funding bids are submitted).
5. Opportunities for using volunteers should be considered in the design of all major projects. In doing so, it is important to recognise that this is not an easy or 'no-cost' option; the time needed to set-up and organise the work of volunteers effectively needs to be taken into account.
6. Opportunities for generating income should be considered as part of the development of any project, with advice being sought from the Retail Service.
7. All major projects should include regular progress reports to SMT to ensure cross-departmental commitments are maintained and any significant issues clearly resolved.