Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority **Item 10**

Audit & Review Committee

15 July 2025

Customer Service Excellence

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with information regarding an alternative to the Customer Service Excellence accreditation and enable a decision on whether the Authority should continue with the Customer Service Excellence process.

Recommendation

2. That Members determine whether the Authority should continue with the Customer Service Excellence accreditation or transition to an internal audit-based approach.

Strategic Framework

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

    - Corporate Plan Objective 29
      Provide high quality, efficient and effective services and communications to the public and other stakeholders and so maintain the Customer Service Excellence standard every year.

Background

4. The Customer Service Excellence (CSE) standard provides recognition for organisations that are successfully assessed against the criteria. The five criteria of CSE are:

    i. Customer Insight
    ii. The Culture of the Organisation
    iii. Information and Access
    iv. Delivery
    v. Timeliness and Quality of Service

    Within the 5 criteria are 57 separate elements that are assessed on a 3-yearly rolling programme, with 19 elements assessed each year.

5. The Authority has undergone an annual assessment against the CSE standard since 2010. The assessment involves several pieces of evidence being uploaded to the CSE portal prior to the assessment. During the assessment visit, the CSE Assessor examines the evidence and holds a range of meetings with staff, managers, visitors, partners and other service users/customers. The last assessment took place in July 2024.

6. The Authority has long understood the benefits of independent external validation for the quality of our customer service, while also recognising that the CSE process requires significant officer time and resources, particularly from the Head of HR. Recently discussions have taken place with the Internal Auditors to establish whether they could provide an assessment that would reduce officer input but still satisfy our requirements and include recommendations for improvement, a feature currently lacking in the CSE assessment.

7. The annual cost of the CSE assessment is £1,530. An estimate of officer time spent on the assessment has been calculated at approximately 65 hours including preparation for the assessment, the collation and uploading of evidence and meeting with the assessor during the visit.

Internal audit proposal

8. Our Internal Auditors have developed a proposal which can be found in the **Annex** and which outlines a number of different customer service audits that could be conducted. The proposal also helpfully notes the internal audits that have already been completed that indirectly relate to elements of the CSE standard.

9. Customer service audits would be charged at Veritau's standard day rate of £395 plus vat (for 2025/26). An audit taking 3 to 5 days would cost between £1,185 and £1,975. As the remit of the audit would be reduced there would be much less officer time involved. It is estimated that the total officer time spent would be up to 10 hours to include approving the terms of reference for the audit, providing evidence to the internal auditor and attending to any follow up actions/recommendations.

10. Whilst the proposal suggests that there may be an option to undertake a customer service audit as part of the annual work programme, following a discussion with the Section 151 Officer, it is proposed that customer service audits would remain separate to this.

Benefits and drawbacks

11. There are benefits and drawbacks for maintaining the current CES accreditation and for transitioning to an internal audit-based process. The below table provides a breakdown of these.

Feature	CSE Accreditation	Internal Audit Approach
Cost	£1,530 per year	£1,185 - £1,975 per year
Officer Time	Approximately 65 hours per year	Up to 10 hours per year
Improvement Recommendations	Not included	Included
Flexibility	Standard criteria	Tailored focus areas
External Validation	Nationally recognised	Internal assurance

Practice at other National Park Authorities

12. Other NPAs were asked if they obtain formal accreditation of their standards of customer service. The Peak District and North York Moors NPAs both confirmed they had followed the CSE framework in the past. Both Authority's stated due to the excessive officer time required and internal customer surveys being developed and shared, the decision to stop the CSE assessment was taken a number of years ago and they are no longer CSE accredited. The Lake District NPA does not use any formal methods to assess customer service.

Financial Implications

11. The cost of changing from the CSE annual assessment to an annual customer service internal audit is broadly cost neutral. However, it is anticipated that a saving would be achieved through reduced officer time.

Legal Implications

12. None.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

13. None.

Conclusion

14. The Authority has undergone an annual CSE assessment for the last fourteen years and Members are asked to determine whether they would like to maintain the status quo or take an alternative approach to assessing customer service. The outcome of either approach would continue to be reported to this Committee.

Vikki Thomas **Clare Burrows**
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