Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority **Item 5**

Audit and Review Committee

14 April 2026

Performance Review: SSSIs in Authority Management

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider the findings of the performance review of Authority-managed Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

Recommendation(s)

2. That Members note the findings of the review and approve the recommendation for future actions set out in the recommended action plan (paragraph 25) in the attached report.

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 31**
      Provide high quality, efficient and effective services to the public and other stakeholders, achieving substantial assurance through an annual Customer Service audit.

Background

4. The Committee determined in July 2025 to carry out a performance review of the Authority-managed SSSIs. The review was prompted by 93% of Authority-managed SSSI land being in an 'unfavourable and declining' condition in March 2025.

5. The Review team was led by the Member Champion for Natural Environment (Mark Corner) and a Committee member (Lizzie Bushby). The other members of the review team were: Gary Smith (Director of Conservation and Community), Alan Hulme (Head of Park Management), Ian Court (Senior Wildlife Officer), Josie Wilson (PA to Director of Conservation and Community) and Kate Clark (Performance Management Officer).

6. The Review Team began work in September 2025 and completed in March 2026.

Consideration

7. The review team's report is **attached.**

8. The Authority's holding of SSSIs is small and fragmented. The main focus of the review has been on the only two significant SSSI sites (Langcliffe Scars, and Freeholders Wood). They account for 93% of the of the SSSI land managed by the Authority and, in March 2025, both were in 'unfavourable-declining' condition. In both cases, the issues affecting the sites were thought to be insurmountable. However:

    a. Positive management action has been take at Freeholders Wood, which has led to it being re-classified as 'unfavourable-recovering' in August 2025. However; Members should note that it is still not possible for it to brought into favourable condition because of the profusion of Ash Dieback (**Appendix D**).

    b. Natural England has indicated that it *may* be possible to return Victoria Cave at Langcliffe Scars SSSI to favourable condition by preventing public access to sensitive areas (**Appendix E**). Doing so would be difficult and, therefore, expensive. The Review Team's view is that the Authority should seek further assurance from Natural England about the benefit of such an approach before any decision is taken on whether to pursue further action

9. The review team considered alternatives to continued Authority management of our SSSI landholdings but concluded that there was little to be saved from these.

10. The full set of recommendations for future action are in paragraph 25. Whilst most actions do not require additional resource, any remedial work to Victoria Cave is likely to be time-consuming and expensive. Any such proposal will be brought to the Authority for determination separately. Subject to Members approval, relevant actions will be included in the Authority Action Plan for 2026/27, for consideration by the Finance and Resources Committee in May.

Financial Implications

11. Future actions identified by the review would only require small amounts of officer time. Should remedial work for Victoria Cave be considered practicable and cost-effective, this will be separately costed and brought to the Authority for determination.

Legal Implications

12. The Authority has an on-going responsibility to conserve and enhance the special features of sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) that it owns or manages. Resolution of a handful of potential SSSI mapping anomalies with Natural England may change the designation of some areas of Authority-owned land.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

13. None.

Conclusion

14. Despite the headline figures, there are no significant concerns with the Authority's management of SSSIs, given the significant constraints on achieving favourable condition status at the only two large sites. Implementation of the review's recommendations should ensure we continue to manage our SSSIs appropriately, and monitor performance in line with national standards.

Gary Smith
Director of Conservation and Community

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