YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY **ITEM 7**

Committee: **National Park Authority**

Date: **27 November 2023**

Report: **SOCIAL MEDIA REVIEW**

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with a summary of a recent Social Media Review.

Recommendation

2. That Members note the findings and recommendations from the review and approve the updated social media strategy.

Background

3. The Communications Strategy 2020-2025 sets out that we will use whatever form and content of communication will best achieve effective engagement with our audience, with the intention of encouraging them to care for the National Park and to positively interact with us.

4. Social media is at the heart of our communication and interaction with audiences and is the only channel for which audiences are growing. During the life of the Communications Strategy 2020-2025 we are committed to examining options for developing, enhancing and resourcing this aspect of our approach.

5. The current Social Media Strategy and Social Media Guide was approved by Members in December 2021. Since then, the Authority's channels have continued to grow. We now have over 300,000 followers across seven platforms delivering an average weekly reach of just under 1m and an average weekly engagement of just under 60k. These are communication channels capable of reaching a large audience.

6. The social media landscape is changing at pace, with more change in the last six months than the last decade. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have been the three default social channels with the public sector since 2010, but video is now more than just YouTube. Facebook and Twitter have evolved, 'Threads' has launched, and TikTok is now being used by over 23m people in the UK.

7. Considering our current social media reach and the pace of change in this space we commissioned a specialist review of our social media from an experienced public sector communications specialist to look at our audiences, channel performance, and approach to content creation and delivery.

8. Key findings and recommendations from the review are summarised in this paper, and have, where appropriate, been incorporated into the updated Social Media Strategy in the attached **Appendix.** A summary of these changes are detailed below.

Summary of findings

9. The social media channels the Authority operates are well maintained and at times reach a nationally significant standard. ("Even the more routine content exceeds the standard others aspire to").

10. The Facebook page "sets a standard not just for National Parks in the UK, but also for the public sector' and engagement rates exceed the industry marker for a good standard. The Instagram is "gold standard and surpassing expectations with twice the engagement rate of a successful account".

11. The future success of good communications is linked to good digital communications. Good digital communications are increasingly reliant on good video. For example, half of all time spent on Facebook is spent watching video, Instagram is increasingly video with 'Reels' content being pushed on the channel, and the video-sharing platform TikTok is the fastest growing channel across all demographics. Video is critically important.

12. TikTok is now used by a third of people in the UK, and while we are making baby steps in terms of our presence on the platform, with just over 1,000 followers to date, we are aiming to become increasingly active in this space, which the review notes is "good to see". TikTok provides a useful way to reach an under 50 demographic for visitors (less so for residents).

13. The YouTube channel contains some good content, but engagement rates are below what we deserve for the quality of content we have on there.

14. While the Authority is struggling to reach an audience on X (formerly known as Twitter), we are not alone as a National Park Authority in facing this challenge. The channel itself is facing some challenging times.

15. The Authority is using LinkedIn constructively and needs to focus more on professionally engaging 'corporate' content and less on landscapes and other visual content.

Summary of Recommendations

16. Relevant operational recommendations have been incorporated into an updated Social Media Guide for the Communications Team. Key remaining recommendations are covered below.

17. The increasing prioritisation of video within social media algorithms and the popularity of video content amongst younger audiences, highlighted in the review, indicates an increasing need for the Authority to invest additional

capacity into the creation of in-house video content to achieve effective engagement; particularly in relation to our second statutory purpose.

18. The review recognises that those living in the National Park are likely to be reached by a limited amount of social media, which supports our multi-channel approach to communicating with residents e.g. *Dales* newspaper, direct mail, email groups, news releases, forums etc.

19. However, we should pivot our Facebook use to additionally connect more widely with communities within and around the National Park, specifically the 72 community Facebook groups that currently exist and the 162k members within them.

20. Minority communities need face-to-face relationship building to be reached. Communications on their own will not reach these audiences. The review also suggests that reaching underrepresented groups is not a communications challenge, but a strategic challenge for the organisation, supported by the communications team. This is something we are doing, supporting the outreach work being undertaken by the Authority's Officers.

21. The review recommends the creation of a set of social media house rules to govern comment, criticism and abuse. This was something we introduced last year and has proved a useful tool in reducing instances of abuse.

22. We will step up our approach to user-generated content (sharing the content of, and collaborating with, others) and work closely with the Access & Engagement section to encourage, through their work with schools and other partners/projects, the creation of user-generated content for use across our channels.

23. While the review recommends we dial back from daily use of X, formerly known as Twitter, we consider there are enough partners, stakeholders and others still active on the platform to continue with our current approach to using X.

24. We will look to widen the content on LinkedIn to reflect and support professional people and businesses in and around the National Park and showcase the Yorkshire Dales National Park as a great place to work.

25. **What changes are there to the social media strategic approach?**

- Changing the overall purpose of the strategy from *developing* our social media platforms to *maintaining* our social media platforms as effective, high-performing external-facing comms channels.
- Prioritising the creation and publication of video content to drive engagement.
- Prioritising joining local community and special interest 'groups' set up on Facebook to provide important and relevant information directly to them.

- Leveraging the scale we now have on social media to more effectively reach and engage audiences.
- Committing to a further review of our approach to social media in November 2025.

26. **What changes are there to the social media guide?**

- Encouraging increased use of video content on our channels, and inspiring teams to share their video content with us. Accompanying this is updated video 'best practice' and specific guidance for the comms team on using TikTok.
- A different approach to sharing website hyperlinks now that links in posts are being penalised on some platforms.
- Encouraging the creation of 'events' on Facebook to support our bigger pieces of activity such as Cheese and Dark Skies Festivals.
- Encouraging the use of 'deliberate engagement content' which ask questions of our audience without there being a call to action.
- Increasing the use of crowdsourced images and video (user-generated content) to add variety to our content.
- Guidance around the use of AI in creating social media content.
- Updated guidance on the type of content being created for the different platforms we are on.
- Reference to our Social Media House Rules, created to maintain our channels as a safe space for healthy, open and insightful comment/discussion.
- Updated guidance on the use of TikTok on Authority-owned mobile devices.
- Updated guidance on the importance of hashtags and how to use these effectively to reach young and under-represented groups.
- Updated guidance around content delivery, and the different types of content to be using on LinkedIn.
- Updated guidance on the use of YouTube tags and metadata.

27. **What other changes are we making?**

- Following the social media accounts of the 25 National Park Members, where they exist.
- Updating the website footer with our newer social media channels.
- Preparing ourselves for WhatsApp Channels when it becomes available.

Mark Sadler
Communications Manager
27 November 2023

Social Media Strategy 2024-2027

Purpose

1. This Strategy is designed to deliver two objectives:

- To maintain effective, high performing social media platforms delivering external facing communications complimentary to - and operating in parallel with - our print, media and other digital channels.

- To deliver engaging social media content to our target audience, in line with our vision and core values, and in support of our overarching communication objectives, detailed in the Communication Strategy 2020-25 namely:

    - Promote, conserve and enhance the special qualities of the Yorkshire Dales National Park by stimulating engagement, action and care.

    - Promote the positive work the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority does to ensure that stakeholders recognise this work in delivering National Park purposes.

Approach

2. The vision for the National Park, laid out in the NPMP, sits at the heart of all our communications:

    > ‘Through their passion for this special place, local people, businesses and organisations will keep the Yorkshire Dales National Park a thriving area. Its unique cultural landscape will be treasured for its stunning scenery, exceptional heritage and wonderful wildlife, and every year millions of people will be inspired to be a part of it’

3. This vision will be achieved by delivering our statutory purposes through the objectives set out in the NPMP.

4. It is our strategic objective to reach and engage audiences wherever they are, and increasingly that is on social media. With a significant and growing social media following we want to take advantage of - and leverage - that scale to reach them more effectively.

5. To successfully deliver the social media strategy we need to understand:

    - Who our target audience is and how they use social media
    - What content we’ll be sharing with them and how to engage
    - Where to share that content with them
    - When to share that content with them

Our target audience

6. Our audience is composed of five distinct categories:

    - People (and organisations) who live and/or work here: residents, businesses, land managers, community groups and local/parish councils.
    - People who visit here: visitors whilst they're here, and potential visitors, both national and international.
    - People who are opinion formers and policy makers: politicians and journalists, National Parks England and campaign groups, and organisations with interests in the environment or outdoor recreation.
    - People with a keen interest in the Yorkshire Dales National Park and what we do as an Authority, but who don't visit, work or reside here.
    - New target audiences including minority ethnic and young people.

Understanding how our audience use social media

7. We will keep across how our audiences are using social media and will adjust our approach accordingly. Using social media analytics - and taking each of the five categories in turn - will help us understand how platforms are being used by our audience and how platform algorithms are evolving, this way we can confidently select the right platform for our comms to sustain growth and engagement.

8. We will keep across the gender, demographic, geographic and social profile of our social media following to help identify the audience categories where we need to grow, for example under represented groups, young audiences etc. allowing us to devise strategies/campaigns to encourage growth and engagement.

9. We will use social media ad-tools (where we pay to boost posts) to support Authority activity where we need to reach bespoke audience groups or deliver messaging into a bespoke location.

10. We will prioritise joining relevant local community and special interest social media groups so we can provide important local information and updates directly, when required.

What content will we be sharing

11. Our content can be broken down into four key themes:

    - Content that supports the delivery of our statutory purposes and works being delivered by the National Park Authority and its partners through the National Park Management Plan.
    - Content that promotes the special qualities of the Yorkshire Dales National Park.
    - Content created to inform, influence or educate audiences. Or which reflects the sense of day.

- Content we amplify on behalf of NPP, NPUK, NPE, DEFRA, EuroParc etc. and in support of commercial activities.

12. We will use social media scheduling tools and internal planners to ensure a balanced delivery of all themes across a day. Content for the main social media platforms [1] will only ever be prepared and scheduled by the Comms team.

13. We know that images and video content drive the highest levels of engagement on our social media. The Authority's Social Media Guide [3] details our content requirements and expectations for each platform. We already have an extensive media library of images which we make available to any organisations which share our vision and purposes for the National Park. We will prioritise the commissioning of images and video which reflect new and under represented audiences engaging with the landscape.

14. Teams will be encouraged to use video to showcase their projects and work. With improving smartphone technology and access to high quality video editing software it is becoming easier for us to create good quality video content to sit alongside our existing film commissions.

Understanding how to engage

15. The Authority's tone of voice on social media reflects our vision and values - consistent with how we speak across our other communication channels such as *Visitor* and *Dales* - while recognising the need for a degree of fluidity depending on the content and target audience.

16. Where we are creating social media content that helps audiences follow or understand rules and avoid risky situations, we will always highlight the positive behaviours we want people to adopt, not just what behaviour we want people to avoid [2].

17. We will, on occasion, reply to positive or negative comments left on our social media posts at the discretion of the Digital Communications Officer. We have provided specific guidance on how to engage with audiences in this way in the Authority's 'Social Media Guide' [3].

Where we will be sharing our content

18. Understanding the social media platforms our audience is using is important in helping us select the right platform for our content and messages, as is knowing when our audience will be most receptive to content and messages.

19. We will use our suite of social media analytic tools to make decisions on the right platform to use for the right target audience and when best to schedule posts. We will also use location and demographic targeting tools within each platform for more pinpoint targeting of our content and messages when required.

20. The availability of social media platforms will be kept under constant review by the Communications Team with a view to expanding or contracting our suite of social media communication channels as required or as trends dictate [1].

21. As the UK social media landscape evolves that data will be updated in the Authority's Social Media Guide [3] as will guidance on choosing the right platform for our content and messages.

When we will be sharing our content

22. We will use our suite of social media analytic tools to make decisions on when best to schedule posts. This will vary on the type of content/message being delivered and the target audience we're looking to reach.

23. Reference should be made to the Authority's Social Media Guide [3] before scheduling social media posts as this guide contains important information on frequency of posts per platform to maximise engagement alongside guidelines on the best time of day to post.

24. With this insight we can be tactical in delivering individual messages and content, using more of the social media toolkit and the right platforms to reach the right audience with the right message.

Measuring success and improving what we do

25. We have a corporate plan objective to achieve top quartile status for total followers on our social media platforms against all the UK National Parks. To support this, and to track followers, reach and engagement on a weekly basis we have an internal social media dashboard [4].

26. We will highlight social media posts that achieve above average reach, impressions and engagement, and look at what we can learn from the performance and whether that learning can be incorporated into the Social Media Guide [3].

27. We will keep under review whether further KPIs or metrics need to be introduced to support the continued development of our social media communication channels and undertake a regular review of our approach to, and use of, social media [5].

APPENDIX

[1] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Threads, YouTube, LinkedIn and TikTok.
[2] The Government Communication Service's 'applying behavioural science to local communications and public spaces safety strategy' study.
[3] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority Social Media Guide.
[4] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority Social Media Dashboard.
[5] Dan Slee's review and report into the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority's use of social media.

Reference can also be made to:

[6] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority Communications Strategy 2020-2025.
[7] Social Media Protocol for Members.
[8] Social Media Training for Members by Dan Slee, February 2021.
[9] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority IT User guide and policy.

Mark Sadler & Wendy McDonnell, October 2023