

Austin R, Garrod G, Thompson N.

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Assessing the Performance of the National Park Authorities: A Case Study of Northumberland National Park, England

Author Names and Affiliations

Richard Austin, Nicola Thompson, Guy Garrod

Newcastle University, Centre for Rural Economy, School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Agriculture Building, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU. UK.

richard.austin@conservancy.co.uk; nicolabellofacomb@gmail.com; Guy.Garrod@ncl.ac.uk.

Corresponding Author

Guy Garrod

60 Word Biographies

Richard Austin

Dr. Richard Austin is a graduate in protected area management from Newcastle University. He is a practitioner, and is currently working at Chichester Harbour Conservancy, as the Manager of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Prior to that, he worked at Northumberland National Park Authority for seven years, and before that, three years at Darlington Borough Council.

Nicola Thompson

Until early 2015, Dr. Nicola Thompson was a lecturer in rural development at Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy. She specialized in the governance of protected areas and European rural development policy.

Guy Garrod

Guy Garrod is a Reader in Environmental Economics and the current Director of Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy. His research focuses on the economics of public goods and encompasses issues in landscape and natural resources management.

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Abstract:

Although the legislation for the designation of national parks in England dates back to the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, it was not until 1997 that free-standing and independent national park authorities were established to help manage these landscapes. In 2014/15 the ten English national park authorities were allocated £44.6 million from the Department for Food, the Environment and Rural Affairs to deliver their conservation and recreation purposes and their socio-economic duty. This paper discusses how the performance of the national park authorities has been assessed, using Northumberland National Park Authority as a case study.

Keywords

National Park Authority, Performance, Measurement

Disclosure Statement

To the best of their knowledge no financial interest or benefit will accrue to the authors as a result of the direct applications of this research.

80-Word Summary

Although the methodology behind the English National Park Authorities Performance Assessment was flawed, it was accepted that the very process of examination raised standards and led to some long-lasting changes. However, the extent to which the resultant scores and analysis are meaningful remained open to debate. It was concluded that the assessment of performance was more about compliance than genuine improvement. Looking ahead, the challenge to the National Park Authorities is to devise robust performance assessment methodologies that are fit-for-purpose.

Article

The movement to designate parts of the English countryside as national parks gathered momentum after Second World War. The founding legislation for the English national parks was the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act* of 1949. These stated two purposes for the national parks: to conserve and enhance natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the national parks by the public. The ensuing years saw seven national parks designated in England. However, the 1949 Act did not harmonize the governance structure by which the national parks would operate. Only the Peak District National Park and the Lake District National Park were run as boards with a greater degree of independence from the conventional local authorities. In the other areas, joint committees of

the local authorities were appointed when a national park lay within the area of more than one local authority, or a single committee when the national park lay within one local authority area. With increasing pressures on the countryside (for example, in changing land management practices, the use of the space for military training, and a growth in outdoor recreation), the *Local Government Act* of 1972 resulted in the appointment of national park officers (now usually referred to as chief executives) and professional teams to develop a management plan. This arrangement remained until the *Environment Act* of 1995, which acted upon recommendations of the *Fit for the Future* report (Edwards, 1991) to legislate for the establishment of standalone national park authorities, and to underpin the two national park purposes with a new socio-economic duty. These special purpose local authorities became fully independent and were created for all of the English national parks. With the additions of the Broads (1987), the New Forest (2004) and the South Downs (2010), there are now 10 national parks in England covering 10.7 percent of the land area. In 2014/15, the collective annual core budget for the national park authorities to achieve their objectives was £44.6 million, entirely allocated from the Department for Food, Environment and Affairs (Defra) (Table 1), and supplemented by additional external funds from other distributors on an ad-hoc basis (usually project based). This paper will explore how the performance of the national park authorities in delivering their purposes and duty has been assessed in recent years, with a particular focus on a case study of Northumberland National Park Authority.

	English National Park Grant (£millions)								
	2012 Population	2007/ 08	2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12	2012/ 13	2013/ 14	2014/ 15
Broads	6,271	£4.1	£4.3	£4.3	£4.2	£4.0	£3.7	£3.5	£3.2
Dartmoor	34,000	£4.5	£4.7	£4.8	£4.7	£4.5	£4.2	£4.0	£3.6
Exmoor	10,600	£3.8	£4.0	£4.1	£4.0	£3.8	£3.5	£3.3	£3.0
Lake District	40,800	£6.6	£6.9	£7.0	£7.1	£6.5	£6.2	£5.8	£5.2
New Forest	34,922	£3.7	£4.0	£4.3	£5.0	£3.8	£3.6	£3.4	£3.0
Northumberland	2,200	£3.2	£3.3	£3.4	£3.3	£3.1	£3.0	£2.8	£2.5
North York Moors	23,380	£5.2	£5.4	£5.5	£5.4	£5.1	£4.8	£4.6	£4.0
Peak District	37,905	£7.9	£8.3	£8.5	£8.3	£7.9	£7.4	£7.0	£6.3
South Downs	120,000	/	/	/	£8.5	£11.3	£11.0	£10.6	£9.8
Yorkshire Dales	19,654	£5.2	£5.3	£5.5	£5.4	£5.1	£4.8	£4.5	£4.0
Total	329,732	£44.2	£46.2	£47.4	£55.9	£55.1	£52.2	£49.5	£44.6

Table 1. Annual English National Park Grants, 2007-2015. All Authorities lever-in external funds from other funding distributors to supplement their Defra allocation. Source: National Parks England, 2015.

Evaluating a special purpose local authority

For 2014/15, local government in England was responsible for a revenue expenditure budget of £98.8 billion (DCLG, 2014), a significant sum even after the public sector cuts of 30 per cent to 40 per cent since 2010. The challenge of devising a methodology for measuring the

performance of local government has been the subject of much discussion in the local government literature (Boyne, 2003; Boyne and Gould-Williams, 2003; Feiock and Jang, 2009; Micheli and Neely, 2010). This has been particularly so after the New Labour Government introduced a series of Best Value indicators from 2000 (replaced in 2008 by the National Indicator Set) and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) from 2002 (replaced in 2009 by the Comprehensive Area Assessment). The CPA was developed by the Audit Commission, an independent body, and the process approximated a performance score for a wide range of local services, using a simple to understand five-category scale (Revelli, 2010). In 2010, the Coalition Government replaced the National Indicator Set with a single and comprehensive list of data, whilst Comprehensive Area Assessments were replaced with self-assessments and the publication of performance data. Both new measures were designed to be inexpensive and transparent.

For the national park authorities, established in 1997, some form of performance evaluation needed to be created. The options were either for Defra to undertake this process, or for the national park authorities to develop their own form of assessment. The modernisation agenda that took place at the start of the 21st century (Laffin, 2008) provided impetus for the national park authorities to pursue the latter option, to develop the National Park Authorities Performance Assessment (NPAPA) to measure their own performance as special purpose local authorities. The first round of assessments took place in 2005/06. Although the NPAPA methodology largely drew upon the CPA methodology it was refined to fit national park purposes. Even though local government organizations moved away from the CPA in 2009, the NPAPA continued and a second round of assessments took place between 2010 and 2012.

The second round of the NPAPA assessments was conducted following a series of stages:

- An independent consultant was appointed by National Parks England, the umbrella body for the ten national park authorities, to oversee all the assessments. The consultant chosen was Solace Enterprises.
- The national park authority under scrutiny published a self-assessment report, based around categories agreed across the national park family (as shown in Table 2).
- A team of five people was appointed to make the external assessment, as agreed by Solace Enterprises and National Parks England. For the second round of assessments, the team consisted of three lead officers from other national park authorities, a representative from a local government organization, and a contact

from Solace Enterprises (to ensure consistency). Documentary information was circulated, including the self-assessment, the five-year management plan, the three-year business plan, and the annual corporate plan, leading up to a visit to the national park and the authority for one week. During this time they undertook a tour of the area and had discussions with staff and partners.

- At the end of the week, the team reported back some emerging findings to the national park authority, and shortly after that, published their report.

The national park authority (NPA) that was being assessed would then have to act upon the findings of the report, publishing a performance improvement plan. The emphasis of the NPAPA was on the national park authorities learning from each other. Since the NPAPA is based on the CPA methodology, a lot of strengths and weakness of that approach would be replicated. Therefore in order to assess the effectiveness of the NPAPA, it is worth considering the CPA in more detail as a tool to measure local government performance.

Evaluating the evaluation

The start of the 21st Century marked the beginning of a new dawn of local government evaluation. A series of indicators, called Best Value, were developed to record data, alongside a new assessment procedure, the CPA. There were three main reasons why Best Value performance indicators were introduced: to set benchmarks and targets; to provide local electors with a basis for measuring performance; and to provide central government with a mechanism for monitoring and regulating local government (Boyne, 2000; Boyne, 2002; Nunn, 2007). Right from the start there were problems of interpretation around the word 'effectiveness', and the difficult task of satisfying the multiplicity of local government stakeholders (Boyne, 2002). Further questions arose around whether the assessments should focus on the processes at work, or the impact or effect on an area (Goodland *et al.*, 2005). Meanwhile the 'plethora' of performance indicators (Gutiérrez-Romero *et al.*, 2008: 767) became the subject of 'gaming', in the sense that it was possible to hit targets, yet miss the point, or reduce performance where targets did not apply (Bevan and Hood, 2006). In their own research on performance indicators, Bevan and Hood (2006: 115) also found that a performance manager of a local government organization prioritized 'quick-win' activities because it promoted the score of the organization without incurring too much effort. Aside from the gaming aspects, Bevan and Hood (2006: 116) pointed out the whole contradiction of government policy:

Central government is rewarding local authorities in poor areas for their deprivation, and punishing them for their poor CPA scores. And rich areas are being rewarded for their good

CPA scores and punished for the lack of deprivation. Government policy comes dangerously close to being self-defeating.

For instance, by 2005 the Audit Commission had judged almost three-quarters of unitary and upper tier authorities to be 'good' or 'excellent', although public satisfaction in local government was declining (Martin and Bovaird, 2005). It was also stressed that changes in performance take time to be realized (John, 2004; Gains *et al.*, 2005). Yet once a set of modernisation initiatives appeared not to have succeeded, central policy makers were quick to replace them with another set (Laffin, 2008).

A further critique of the CPA process was its apparent inability to take account of circumstances beyond the control of local policy makers. Whereas some local government organizations were falsely lauded for operating in favourable circumstances, others had been wrongly criticized for their performance during difficult economic times (Andrews *et al.*, 2005; Gutiérrez-Romero *et al.*, 2008; Leach, 2010). There was also an argument, that is particularly pertinent to the national park authorities, in that assessors were not comparing like for like (Gutiérrez-Romero *et al.*, 2008: 775):

It is likely to be harder for authorities to provide services to a geographically dispersed area. With regards to population size, there may be benefits of having a sizeable population, because [of] the principle of 'economies of scale'.

It was argued that rich authorities are able to 'buy' better CPA scores (Gutiérrez-Romero *et al.*, 2008). Despite this unevenness, in constructing a methodology for performance judgements, policy makers created a competitive process where similar organizations were considered together. Rather than challenge the validity of this process, each local authority sought to maximize its CPA judgement compared to other local authorities (Davis, 2011).

In the following section we examine a case study of the evaluation of the performance of Northumberland National Park Authority. Through this analysis we demonstrate how some of the criticisms made of the CPA process in local government are also pertinent to critically examining the benefits and shortcoming of the NPAPA. This is because the process adopted drew heavily on the CPA method despite the initial emphasis on the NPAs themselves leading the process. The analysis contained in this paper draws on a combination of participant observation (the lead author was an employee of the Authority at the time of the inspection), documentary analysis of the NPAPA 'results' and interviews with key stakeholders conducted as part of the larger project on partnership working in national parks.

Evaluating Northumberland National Park Authority

Northumberland National Park is the most northerly of the English parks comprising an area of 1,048 square kilometres of remote upland. The Park was designated in 1956 with the National Park Authority becoming an independent, freestanding organization in 1997. Prior to this the Park was administered by a committee of Northumberland County Council. The population of the Park is 2,200, the fewest of any UK national park. In reality the NPA works extensively with communities on the fringe of the Park (nearer 29,000 people in total). This work draws on what the NPA itself terms an 'action area' approach that recognizes the interdependence between particular areas of the Park and 'gateway' communities outside the formal boundary (NNPA, 2009). Despite this, the national park grant is still allocated on the basis of the 2,200 people actually inside the national park. In 2014/15, it received the lowest share of the English national park pot from Defra, at just 5.6% of the total funds.

Northumberland NPA was subject to an NPAPA inspection in 2010. This was the second NPAPA that the Authority had participated in. The 2010 results are summarized in table 2.

	Self-Assessment Score	External Assessment Score
Quality of Vision	4	4
Setting and Using Priorities	4	3
Conservation	3	3
Promoting Understanding and Service Delivery	4	2
Wider Sustainable Development	4	4
Use of Resources	4	3
Leadership and Improving Performance	3	3

Table 2. A comparison of scores across a range of performance categories for the Northumberland National Park Authority self assessment and the external assessment. The ratings are: (1) performs poorly; (2) performs adequately; (3) performs well; and (4) performs excellently. Sources: NNPA, 2010; Solace Enterprises, 2010.

It is interesting to note that the self-assessment scores are generally the same or higher than the external assessment score. There are a number of factors that may have affected the comparatively high self-assessment scores. The imperative driving the conduct of NPAPA, mirroring that of the CPA, encouraged authorities to avoid the stigma of seeming to be underperforming and encouraged them to reflect on their work in the best possible light. Furthermore, in 2010 the Authority was facing the largest funding cuts in its history and members of staff were only too aware of the threat of involuntary redundancies. Therefore, common sense would dictate that staff would want to present their own areas of work as

successful. In addition, and as was noted many years earlier by MacEwen and MacEwen (1987), national park authority staff do not have comparable salary gradings to equivalent officers at local councils. Given that members of staff are relatively under paid, to then be told that they were performing adequately or poorly may result in dissatisfaction. This could range from a general decrease in morale of those affected, to even opening discussions with union officials to challenge the validity of the self-assessment. In summary, the very process of self-assessment put the Authority in a difficult position, resulting in high scores across the board. In all likelihood, the Authority took a pragmatic view of the self-assessment process, knowing that in some cases different results would be revealed with the subsequent independent assessment. The whole self-assessment process is multi-faceted, with implications that go beyond simply measuring performance.

When the particular context of Northumberland is considered it also becomes apparent it is hard to make an objective appraisal of performance that allows meaningful comparison across the NPAs. National parks were given a socio-economic duty in 1995, yet the extent to which this duty can reasonably be pursued in Northumberland is somewhat difficult given the lack of people and businesses. It also has the smallest national park grant, therefore the fewest members of staff (and following the spending cuts of 2010, the size of the Authority reduced from 65 to 46 full-time equivalent core-funded members of staff). This theme of the importance of a complex context to performance is further developed through examining two areas of the NPAPA findings: the achievement of sustainable development; and the success of its partnership working, the latter of which is a cross-cutting area.

The NPAPA review did not make an attempt to define what sustainable development is, or what success looks like, despite concluding that the Authority's work in this field was 'exemplar' (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 12). It would be fair to assume that the NPAPA team took a broad view to sustainable development and favoured the innovative 'action areas' of the Authority.

The Authority has been ambitious in setting its objectives wider than just the national park boundaries. The Authority has a very clear view that its ability to deliver its statutory purposes is highly dependent on the social and environmental well-being of communities outside its boundary and, to a lesser extent, within the wider region (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 6).

The NPAPA concluded that the Authority was 'extremely effective in engaging local communities' and as a consequence has 'produced many local sustainable development

initiatives' (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 11). However, the NPAPA team went on to say that improvements could be made around the operation of the 'action areas', specifically to do with governance, boundary definition, maintaining community support, and evaluating of the benefits of this innovative approach. The achievement of sustainable development at Northumberland National Park Authority scored the maximum 4 out of 4 in its quantitative assessment.

In reviewing the delivery of sustainable development, the value of the process could be critically examined on a number of levels. It is very difficult to define what sustainable development is and how it can be achieved, so to assess and provide a score is highly subjective. One could also question whether the NPAPA review team could reasonably conclude in the space of a week that an organization is effective in engaging with local communities. It is a very difficult assertion to make and could be open to challenge. Hence the NPAPA process in this case seemed to take account of the difficult context in which Northumberland NPA was working, rewarding them for taking a different approach in the score given. The NPAPA seemed to avoid some of the rigidities associated with the CPA process noted above. However, the 'results' for sustainable development, alongside the analysis of the process, point to the seeming superficiality with which authoritative statements are made on a major ongoing area of work.

Another difficult and cross-cutting area to assess was the ability of the Authority to successfully work in partnership with others. The results were mixed with praise for the management plan partnership and an acknowledgment that there was room for clarity in defining partnership roles.

The Management Plan Partnership, established to oversee the delivery of the management plan, now provides a strong guiding and monitoring role (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 5).

The role and connection of some key partners is not clear. There are organizations whose role as defined key partners, or as delivery bodies, is not clearly translated to activity and there may be a mismatch in organizational expectations that could benefit from clarification. This includes organizations that do not have an obvious contribution to the delivery of the wider objectives, and organizations who feel they could do much more to connect with the work of the Authority and in the achievement of its priorities (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 8).

Furthermore, there was criticism of its approach to working with others, which was interpreted as heavy handed at times.

Partner contributions were not always secured to best effect. On a small number of occasions the Authority managers are so clear about what they want from discussion that they seem less likely to want to hear other partners' positions. This can cause frustration with partners who prefer, and are used to, Authority staff being more collaborative in their working (Solace Enterprises, 2010: 9).

This judgement is also open to challenge on the basis of the evidence base on which the NPAPA could draw on in the time available to it. It is also difficult to see how the performance of different NPAs with regard to partnership working can be meaningfully compared through the NPAPA process. Assessors looking for a 'one-size-fits-all solution' (Laffin, 2008: 121) are likely to be disappointed by the impossibility of this task. The complexity of the relationships involved also make it difficult for assessors with tightly limited resources to make credible judgements because such a wide range of different stakeholders are involved in the National Park. The literature points to how local authorities had strong incentives to engage in partnership working because it was an object of inspection under the CPA. Likewise partnership working has been an imperative pushed by Defra and strongly pursued by those leading NPAs. Although the voluntary sector may have the incentive of attracting possible grants, other statutory agencies and the private sector have little incentive to push the partnership working agenda to the same degree. Any analysis of partnership working requires a methodology which takes into account the politics surrounding the formation and operation of a wide range of partnerships. This requires a level of detail not possible through the NPAPA.

Gutiérrez-Romero *et al.* (2008: 771) described the whole CPA process as 'based on a narrow methodological format.' This was echoed by Leach (2010) who saw fundamental issues around subjective variables, such as focus, ambitions and future plans. Examining the Northumberland NPA case study we can make parallel arguments regarding the superficiality of the NPAPA scores and narratives. Those conducting the review had appropriate expertise and took into account the context in which the Authority worked but the process itself did not allow for the kind of detailed exploration that would be required to provide a rigorous analysis of performance in the two key areas we have examined.

Conclusion: compliance or improvement?

Even if it is accepted that the methodology behind the CPA and the NPAPA are flawed, the progressive intent has been acknowledged (Bovaird, 2008; Revelli, 2010; Davis, 2011; Lawless, 2012). It could be argued that the very process of examination has raised standards and led to some long-lasting changes. Indeed, if the intention of introducing assessments was to destabilize local government, to unlearn old ways and embrace the new ways of working introduced by the New Labour Governments (Laffin, 2008: 119), then these objectives were achieved. This was as much the case with NPAs as special purpose authorities as with conventional local government. The question remains, however, of how meaningful the resultant scores and analysis that the NPAPA generated are given the narrowness of the process and the complexity of some the areas of working examined.

As of 2015, the contract between National Park England and Solace Enterprises has expired. Even if the findings of the NPAPA are open for debate, the process has seemingly given Defra the confidence that the national park family can undertake its own assessments. In this sense, the assessments were more about compliance than genuine improvement (Moxham, 2013), and it seems that the overall reason for undertaking the reviews has become confused. Although there will always be room to refine and improve evaluation methodology, there was no doubt in the eyes of key stakeholders interviewed that in undertaking assessments standards of delivery have been raised. The problem remains, however, of how to create 'benchmarks' in a context where authorities even in the same 'family' have markedly uneven levels of resourcing and work in different socio-economic and well as physical environments. The challenge is perhaps open to NPAs, and other special purpose organizations, to develop performance assessment methodologies which, rather than following the conventions of 'mainstream' local government, lead the way in balancing the need for thorough and critical review with an appreciation of context.

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