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To all: Members of the Peak District National Park Authority

18 April 2023

Dear Colleague

**THE POTENTIAL CLOSURE OF THE NATIONAL PARK VISITOR CENTRES AND  
THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S RESTRUCTURE PROPOSALS**

You are probably already aware that Derbyshire UNISON is the recognised trade union branch for the staff within the Peak District National Park Authority. But as our paths would rarely cross you may not know me as the UNISON officer dealing with issues at the authority.

With that as a way of introduction, it will also not surprise you that UNISON is contacting you directly concerning the restructuring proposals that will be put to you as Members in the very near future and over which we have huge concerns.

Firstly, we have a significant number of members being dismissed from service by way of compulsory redundancy which any trade union branch would fight (I hope!) but secondly, Derbyshire UNISON is a proud promoter of public services making sure the widest layers of the county's population, and beyond, has access to these.

The plans you are having to consider are an attack on public service provision which go far beyond a more pleasantly sounding 'restructure'. They will have a serious effect on staff, and not just those facing redundancy, on the wider public who are frequent visitors to the area, on all those who we want to encourage to visit in the future, on local businesses and residents and, disproportionately, on those who often suffer discrimination in society as a whole.

I make no apologies for this letter being lengthy; you need to be aware of all the issues, many of which I will raise today but all of which our members, the staff, will be able to advise and talk to you about personally given the chance.

From the outset, I am asking you, individually and collectively, to make sure you have been given all the information you need before casting any votes. I have amassed well over 20 pages of tightly packed typewritten submissions from members who work in the visitor centres alone. These are confidential between UNISON and individual staff members, sadly because some feel if they step out of line they face victimisation, but they have been or are being submitted into the consultation. We urge you to make sure you receive ALL the submissions and not a selected few or a summary. You need to be able to read the views of the workers themselves.

As well as gathering and reading the information, we urge you to arrange visits to the centres to talk to the staff about their concerns. Ideally, these should be unchaperoned so staff can speak their mind, without fear of reprisal. It is going to be your decision which could see long-serving staff being sacked; we think you will want to hear from those involved rather than just read what some believe is misleading financial information that has, so far, been provided.

And we want you to think long and hard about the effect any drastic decision will have on both the National Park itself and how its staff view their work going forward, but also the wider community...and, as you are aware, that community stretches a long way outside the boundaries of the park.

Derbyshire UNISON has just launched a petition about the visitor centres and the numbers of supporters are steadily mounting. We will continue to campaign against the closures. At the very least, we believe any decision to sack a whole layer of staff and sell off or lease the centres themselves, is being rushed through. UNISON is quite happy to be involved in feasibility studies, explore alternatives, proffer ideas but, at the moment, with the deadline imminent, our campaign can only be one of complete opposition. We would prefer to work with Members and the various stakeholders to avoid confrontation but that can't be done while the plans are still on the table and the timetable unaltered.

I promised to outline in more detail our reasons for opposing the proposals as they stand. They are many and varied and all come from the mouths of the workers themselves, although we endorse every one of them.

## **History**

As every one of you will be aware, the history of the park is steeped in the struggle for ordinary people to gain access to the land. The opening of the park was a testament to the ('illegal') movement that developed in the post-WW1 period and, in particular, the Kinder Scout mass trespass almost 91 years ago to the day. On the

shoulders of giants goes the saying. Those sacrifices led to the creation of the national parks and it is in all our interests to maintain the visibility of the parks as a public service. Closing visitor centres will, at a stroke, limit or cut off much of that visibility.

### **Providing a public service**

It is striking that in the CEO's [PowerPoint] presentation and FAQs, not once is the phrase public service mentioned (and 'public sector' only in relation to pay). Everything is reduced to a bald financial calculation, but there is, frankly, not enough financial information currently being made available to us to back up the proposals, something I will return to shortly.

The authority's role is to provide a public service. In these times of heightened awareness about climate change and having lived through a pandemic, that role is even more important. On joining the authority, the CEO gave a quote to the press saying

"Joining the National Park Authority at such a pivotal moment for protected landscapes is a huge responsibility and I am honoured and excited to be joining the team. The need for nature recovery and climate mitigation has never been greater, **nor has the opportunity to engage the National Park's residents and visitors.** The Peak District has a special place in the nation's heart and **we need to ensure nature, climate, residents and visitors are at the heart of our work.**" (my emphasis).

UNISON couldn't agree more. But the current proposals bear no resemblance to these 'promises'. They do the opposite and threaten to create wholesale disengagement with visitors and residents.

### **Finance**

UNISON is only too well aware of the financial straitjacket successive governments, with anti-public sector agendas, have applied to local authorities. We have campaigned for years – and invited local authority elected, appointed and employed officials to join with us – for a better deal for all. It is frustrating to hear authorities say 'we have no alternative but to cut services' when we are prepared to join with employers in campaigns to secure more.

I do not underestimate the challenge facing the Peak District National Park Authority but I do expect to be given better financial information to see for myself the possible alternatives (or otherwise). But the figures in the paperwork are severely lacking in

explanation. Saying, for instance, that the visitor centres cost £828k in 2022 means nothing unless this is broken down. Does it include income or does that have to be deducted separately? In which case, it is not an accurate figure for overall costs.

Based on publicly available information about the Authority's budget, Castleton Historical Society, for instance, claim the per visitor cost of the Centres to be £0.81 – not the £4.11 per visitor portrayed by the CEO. Such discrepancies need explaining.

There's a statement in the paperwork saying, "We are operating with a fixed grant from Defra". But this year, it hasn't stayed fixed, has it? There's an extra £440k been allocated to each national park in England. Indeed, the money is specifically for supporting park rangers and maintaining visitor and education centres! A government statement said explicitly:

"It will be provided to the country's ten National Park Authorities to support services such as visitor centres and park rangers. The funding award is in recognition of the vital role that our national parks play in protecting our precious wildlife and landscapes and the importance they have for tourism, the regional economy, and public access."

What is PDNPA using this extra grant for?

Some staff have been told the other parks are closing visitor centres and the Peak District authority is just having to follow suit. Where has this come from? It is true there were closures mooted in two other parks but one was a limited closure of just one centre whilst the others (in Exmoor/Dartmoor) were saved by ... the £440k grant! From our knowledge, it is not a general 'thing' across all ten parks.

Incidentally, as far as I am aware, those who work in and manage the visitor centres have not, so far, been given the opportunity to prepare an alternative business plan for the centres. Rather than rush in an intractable decision, shouldn't there be an extension to the restructuring timetable to at least allow such an alternative to be developed by those whose experience goes back many years and, up to now, has been invaluable?

### **Pay in the authority**

It's no secret that UNISON has raised the issue of the authority's pay structure before and we haven't changed our mind that some of it we believe not fit for purpose. We have specifically raised the issue of planners' pay - as being too low - but we opposed the recent 'one-off' supplement as divisive and adding to the confusion and distrust that abounds in the middle of this larger consultation.

I will put our cards firmly on the table. We will not trade off higher pay for some members with the jobs of others. Not so much robbing Peter to pay Paul but sacking Peter to pay Paul! That's not what trade unions do. And our members who could benefit from increased pay are also firmly behind our stance. They do not want to witness redundancies. They do not want to see the visitor centres close. They enjoy working in the public sector providing public services for a start, but they have also told me they will have no trust in the authority carrying out other promises about pay if this is how it handles the current situation. I understand and share their concerns.

### **Effect on the local economy**

The CEO, again on his appointment, stated

“A lot of people will visit that have no idea what a national park is, they'll not support the national park in any way, they may not even support local businesses, they may come with all their own food and drink.

“The more understanding there is of why this is special, the more care there will be, the more support there will be, and therefore the more sustainable the businesses will be and the communities who live here will be.”

It would appear this immediate post-appointment demonstration of the role of a national park has now faded. We fully concur with Phil Mulligan when he talked about understanding why the park is special and how one of the authority's roles is to show this and consequently help the local business community. Indeed, it would seem to me to be a primary role of a visitor centre!

I feel it would be best if you spoke to the staff in person about the ways in which they can signpost local businesses to visitors. One I hadn't immediately thought of until it was mentioned by a member of staff was the centres stocking a range of locally made goods and crafts from local small businesses who would be grossly affected if the centres were closed.

Just as importantly for you as a decision-maker will be to ask the local business owners (and, in that, I include farmers/landowners) how the closure of the centres will sit with them.

The visitor centre staff also promote public transport, where available, as an efficient and environmentally friendly way of visiting the national park. Public transport provision stands to be affected by the closure of the centres.

There needs to be a fully worked out economic impact assessment done rather than what appears, to me, to be little more than guesswork based on predetermined ideas of what someone wants the service to look like.

### **Effect on visitors to the Peak District**

There is an idea afoot which appears to have permeated into the authority that the visitor centres are just retail outlets which must operate at a profit. They are not just about retail and the staff who work in the service feel their value being assessed in this fashion is completely wrong. That doesn't detract, though, from the fact the visitor centres are operating above budget profile currently.

But, as staff themselves are proud to tell anyone prepared to listen, they see themselves in the role of welcoming visitors to the Peak District and providing information so they can enjoy a memorable, healthy and, most importantly, safe visit to the national park. Again I point you towards Phil Mulligan's own words (quoted earlier), "A lot of people will visit that have no idea what a national park is...". Remove the visitor centres and whole lot more people will have no idea!

On the safety front, there aren't enough rangers available to monitor every square mile of the park and the centres promote the understanding of fire hazards (through cigarette ends and BBQs), keeping dogs on leads, the protection of nesting birds etc. All this will be at risk.

As will the personal safety of individual walkers who often display a tendency to overestimate how far or in what terrain they can walk. Without visitor centre staff coaxing and encouraging walkers to be more realistic, by pointing out potential hazards, I can, sadly, guarantee there will be more calls to the Mountain Rescue teams in the Peak District.

### **Diversity and discrimination**

The public sector equality duty is a duty on public authorities to consider or think about how their policies or decisions affect people who are protected under the Equality Act. Obviously this is a legal requirement and one which, I am sure, the authority takes into account when making decisions. But a good local authority (or other public sector organisation) will not only pay heed to the letter of the law but also ensure their practices don't worsen provision for those protected under the Act.

UNISON finds it hard to see how the closure of visitor centres could not affect people with disabilities, for instance. There are clearly limits to the activities those with some physical disabilities can undertake within the park but those with the best knowledge

about what those opportunities are, other than the ranger service which by its very nature [and name!] is not a static service, is held with the people this restructure seeks to remove.

For people with learning disabilities, the centres not only provide an educational role but are also able to assist carers with specific information for the individuals concerned, so their trip is safe and enjoyable.

Of course, there are many elderly visitors to the park who, though not disabled, may have more limited mobility, who will also be affected by the centres' closure.

I have been very encouraged over some time in talking to our UNISON members who pride themselves in being aware of diversity issues necessary for them to perform their job. Their local knowledge of where there are prayer facilities for Muslim visitors is a resource which won't be replaced, for instance.

As an aside, my sister worked on, and indeed won an award for, the Green Space Dark Skies project in 2022 which saw an enormous boost in those from different ethnic, cultural and other diverse backgrounds being encouraged and able to participate in walking in national parks and other open land in the British Isles. It was seen as somewhat of a breakthrough as was the formation of the Muslim Hikers during the pandemic. The plans to close visitor centres seem to be reversing that trend, something we should collectively be seeking to avoid.

### **What will be left if the visitor centres close?**

What has annoyed many staff in the visitor centres most is the showing round the premises of prospective buyers/renters/lessors while staff are still working in them, at the same time as they're being told no decision has been taken on closing them. That it is being done in front of customers is hardly giving a professional touch to the operation, either.

We are led to believe meetings have been held with external parties/partners where it has been mentioned that visitor centre operations will be withdrawn. If no decision has been taken by you and your colleagues, and UNISON has been assured this is the case, then this should stop now. It is lowering staff morale throughout the authority as everyone is seeing they can't trust what they've been told.

There have been some ideas floated, although not in the original paperwork, about replacements for the centres. I have heard about a tourist info van, which seems a spectacular underestimate for the task (unless it's the Tardis), about unstaffed digital information points in the current centre buildings which obviously omit the human

touch and won't be accessible to everyone. Those who require to talk to someone, not listen to or read from a machine, will be the ones to lose out. In short, they would be no substitute.

There has also been some talk of the ranger service being able to fill the void. This is nonsense. The rangers have their own jobs to do and roles to play. Inferring that people could rely on the 30 rangers and additional ranger volunteers to provide information across the park's 555 square miles is irresponsible. What they would be able to do does not begin to compare to offering a service to the current 400,000+ footfall to visitor centres.

Once again, I do not apologise for this lengthy letter. UNISON will seek to protect its members' jobs and livelihoods wherever we can. We will also fight for accessible public services to be maintained and extended rather than being reduced. This plan is ill-thought out. It should be scrapped and a new plan worked out, with the involvement of the staff, UNISON and other stakeholders such as local business providers, service users including educational establishments and individual visitors to the National Park.

We will continue our campaign and we hope you can join us in protecting what works and what we need whilst talking about how we can better provide for the future.

Please do feel free to contact me to discuss this further but I will reiterate what I said at the beginning. Please arrange to talk to the staff threatened with losing their jobs under this plan before making a decision. Let them tell you what they do and how removing that service will do far more damage than you may well have considered up to now. If you vote without that knowledge, we think there will be countless people who would find it hard to forget or forgive.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

**DAVE GORTON**

Area Organiser