# Governance Committee

MINUTES of a meeting of the Governance Committee held at the National Park Office, Wayfaring House, Murley Moss Business Park, Kendal at 10.00 am on 29 July 2026.

## Present

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| Ms J A Drake (Chair) | Mr M Kidd |
| Mr W Clark | Mr R G Minshaw |
| Ms T Hunt MBE | Mrs S Stolberg |
| | 2 vacancies |

## Also in attendance

Mr B Hall, Audit Manager, Grant Thornton UK LLP

Mr T Taj, Audit Manager, TIAA (virtual)

## Apologies

Mr T Southorn

### 16/26 Appointment of Chair

Ms Hunt nominated Ms Drake to be re-appointed as Chair and Mr Clark seconded the appointment. There were no other nominations.

**Decided:** That Ms J Drake be re-appointed as Chair for the coming year.

### 17/26 Appointment of Deputy Chair

Ms Hunt nominated Mr Clark to be re-appointed as Deputy Chair and Mr Minshaw seconded the appointment. There were no other nominations.

**Decided:** That Mr W Clark be re-appointed as Deputy Chair for the coming year.

## 18/26 Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr T Southorn (Independent Person).

## 19/26 Minutes

**Decided:** that the Minutes of the meeting held on 15 April 2026 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

## 20/26 Chair's announcements

The Chair announced to the Committee and members of the public that the meeting was being livestreamed and that a digital recording of the meeting would be made.

## 21/26 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of a registrable interest or disclosable pecuniary interest relating to any of the business of the Committee.

## 22/26 Questions

There were no questions relating to the business of the Committee.

## 23/26 Public participation

There were no questions, petitions or deputations of a general nature relating to the business of the Committee.

## 24/26 External Audit update

The Head of Resources introduced the External Audit update and confirmed that Grant Thornton UK LLP had begun the audit of the Statement of Accounts, following publication of the draft accounts by the 30 June deadline. Ben Hall, the Audit Manager from Grant Thornton, advised that meetings had taken place with management, the accounts and working papers had been received, and audit testing was underway. Members were informed that the accounts appeared to be of a good standard, with few initial review points raised. The audit findings report, auditor's

report and annual value for money report were expected to be brought forward in September.

In response to a Member's question about the meaning of "fieldwork" in relation to value for money, Mr Hall noted that this referred to the main element of the audit work when evidence is gathered to support the statement of accounts and VFM opinions.

Members also discussed the sector update contained in the report, including legislative and regulatory changes. It was noted that some matters were not directly relevant to National Park Authorities, but that forthcoming audit committee requirements were likely to require an Independent Member to sit on the Governance Committee. The Authority Solicitor clarified that the Governance Committee combined standards and audit functions, and that the addition of an Independent Member would provide independent oversight to the audit functions of the Committee. It was noted that this appeared to reflect a return to previous requirements for independent audit committee membership. Members welcomed the update and commended officers for progress against the audit timetable.

**Decided:**

a Members noted the External Audit update at Annex 1.

The Authority Solicitor introduced her four reports by explained that the overall pattern across the reports was positive, with complaint volumes reducing and very few complaints upheld either internally or externally.

## 25/26 FOI Requests and ICO Complaints from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

The Authority must disclose information when requested by a member of the public. Where someone considers that the request has not been correctly dealt with or dealt within the statutory timescales, they may request that the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) review the matter.

The Authority Solicitor presented a report identifying any complaints made to the ICO and Freedom of Information requests made to the Authority during the year from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

In relation to Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations requests, Members were advised that 89 requests had been received during the year, compared with 77 the previous year. Of these, 83 had been answered within the statutory timescale, only six were late, there had been no requests for internal review, and no complaints had been made to the Information Commissioner's Office.

The Authority Solicitor reported that Tom Antonsen had undertaken much work to improve the LDNPA processes and expressed her thanks.

Members were advised that requests were becoming more complex and resource intensive, particularly in relation to Rights of Way and repeat requesters. The Authority Solicitor highlighted the Officer time required to respond and the importance of ongoing improvements to data management, transparency and training. It was explained that the Authority was considering whether anonymised Freedom of Information responses could be published online.

In response to member questions, the Authority Solicitor explained how Freedom of Information requests could be declined and clarified the internal review process.

**Decided:**

a Members noted the Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations requests received during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026; and

b Members had no suggestions to make regarding improving the Authority's services in the future.

## 26/26 Complaints received from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

The Authority wants to give people who make a complaint a fair, consistent and structured process that resolves the problems in the delivery of our services. This

report identified the key areas of complaint, any discrepancies in the figures and details actions that had been undertaken to improve performance and the recording of complaints for the year 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

The Authority Solicitor reported that complaint volumes had continued to decline, with 24 complaints received during the year, the lowest number since 2017/18. Almost all complaints related to planning functions, particularly planning applications and planning enforcement. The majority were not upheld - with two upheld and one partially upheld - which indicated that decision-making processes were generally sound. Members were advised that most planning complaints were escalated directly to stage two because of their complexity and to preserve a complainant's ability to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman if they wished to do so.

The Committee discussed the reasons why complaint numbers appeared to be reducing. The Authority Solicitor suggested that better communication, more frequent publication of progress briefings, and improved expectation management, particularly in planning enforcement cases, were likely to be contributing factors. Members were told that many complaints arose because members of the public expected immediate action after reporting an enforcement matter, whereas the Authority first had to investigate and determine whether a breach existed.

The Authority Solicitor outlined proposed improvements, including enhancements to the complaints database, refresher training for Officers and designated administrators, more consistent capture of performance data, wider distribution of complaint-handling responsibilities within Development Management, and consideration of how positive customer feedback could be recorded.

**Decided:**

a Members noted the content of the report and the key areas of complaint, the actions undertaken to improve performance and identify trends in coming years; and

b Members supported action to improve performance and had no further suggestions to make.

## 27/26 Complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

The Authority endeavours to give people who make a complaint a fair, consistent, and structured process that resolves any problems in the delivery of our services. Where people do not feel that we have adequately addressed their complaints they may request that the Local Government Ombudsman review the matter. This report identified the complaints made to the Ombudsman and detailed the allegations, decisions, and lessons learned for Ombudsman complaints made during the year from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

The Authority Solicitor reported that four complaints had been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman during the year. In three cases, the Ombudsman decided not to investigate because there was insufficient evidence of fault to justify an investigation. The fourth complaint, which related to a planning application, had been accepted for investigation and, since the report was written, had been allocated to an investigator. Further information had been requested from the Authority and supplied, but the outcome was not yet known.

Members noted that there had been no findings of maladministration or fault against the Authority during the reporting period, and that complaint handling and decision-making processes appeared to be operating effectively. The Authority Solicitor explained that planning-related matters continued to generate referrals and would require ongoing monitoring, but that no corrective action had resulted from Ombudsman decisions during the year. Members commented that the report was positive and noted the continued emphasis on training, guidance and standardised complaint handling to minimise the risk of successful challenges and maintain public confidence.

**Decided:**

a Members noted complaints made to the Ombudsman during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026; and

b Members had no suggestions to make regarding improving the Authority's services in the future.

## 28/26 Complaints received against members from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

The Authority has a statutory duty under the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members. To this end data had been collected data about the number and type of complaints received against Members during the year 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. This report identified the areas of complaint and suggests actions to improve performance for the coming year.

The Authority Solicitor reported that one complaint had been received against a Member during the year, continuing the generally low level of complaints relating to Member conduct. The complaint concerned allegations of bias, predetermination, and a potential conflict of interest during consideration of a planning application by the Development Control Committee. Following investigation by the Monitoring Officer and review by the Governance Sub-Committee, the complaint was not upheld. It was concluded that there was no conflict of interest, no evidence of bias or predetermination, and no breach of the Member Code of Conduct.

Members welcomed the proposal for refresher training on the Code of Conduct, declarations of interest, pecuniary interests, bias, predetermination and predisposition, and were asked to encourage colleagues to attend. During discussion, a Member highlighted the practical difficulty for those who hold more than one public role in understanding which “hat” they are wearing at different meetings or in different circumstances. The Authority Solicitor agreed that this point could be built into the training to provide further clarity. The Committee noted the report and the importance of ongoing training and awareness to maintain high standards and public confidence in decision-making.

**Decided:**

a Members noted complaints made against Members during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026; and

b Members agreed with suggestions to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members of the Authority and suggested one additional training focus.

## The Committee passed the following resolution:

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items. This was because exempt information, as defined in Schedule 12A of the Act, may be disclosed during discussions.

## Part 2

### 29/26 Internal Audit update

The Head of Resources provided an update on progress delivering the 2026/27 internal audit plan and the final elements of the 2025/26 plan. An update on the implementation of recommendations outstanding from internal audit reports previously issued was also provided. Any new internal audit reports were also presented for Members' attention. It was explained that this work is largely delivered by TIAA with their reports attached as Annexes.

Members were advised that the outstanding Tourist Information Centres review from 2025/26 had now been completed with substantial assurance, and that the final Head of Internal Audit opinion remained unchanged from the draft presented as part of the Annual Governance Statement. The Head of Resources also explained that the Coniston Boating Centre report had been completed earlier than expected and was therefore included with the papers, also receiving substantial assurance.

The TIAA Audit Manager confirmed that all audits had concluded successfully, with no limited assurance ratings and several substantial assurance outcomes. Members were advised that the completion of the 2026/27 audit plan was at an early stage in the audit cycle, but scheduled work was progressing.

**Decided:**

a Members noted the final assurance report (Tourist Information Centres) from 2025/26 at Annex 1;

b Members noted the final Head of Internal Audit Opinion for 2025/26 at Annex 2.1 and Section 151 Officers certificate at Annex 2.2;

c Members noted the Internal Auditor's update report for 2026/27 at Annex 3;

d Members noted the new assurance reports from the 2026/27 audit plan at Annex 4 (Coniston Boating Centre); and

e Members noted the update on implementation of prior recommendations at Annex 5, 6 and 7.

(The meeting concluded at 10:53)