

Setting the Scene

The New Forest National Park

The New Forest has a long and proud history, a strong foundation for the National Park. One of the most significant events was the establishment by William the Conqueror of the New Forest as a royal hunting ground in 1079. The practice of commoning and the system of common rights developed from medieval times or earlier and were formalised by the end of the 17th century. Although some of these rights are no longer practised, the rights of pasture (for ponies and cattle) and pannage (the foraging of pigs) are still very important and are protected by the New Forest Acts administered by the New Forest Court of Verderers. There are around 590 active commoners living in and around the Forest today.

In 1923, the Forestry Commission was made responsible for the management of the Crown Lands in the New Forest. These cover 25,825 hectares, 47% of the National Park. The New Forest Heritage Area was identified in 1985 and special planning policies were adopted to protect it. Five years later, in 1990, the New Forest Committee was established with the primary purpose of promoting and co-ordinating measures to ensure the conservation of the Heritage Area.

In October 1999, the Countryside Agency began the process of designating the New Forest as a National Park. A public inquiry took place in 2003. Designation as a National Park was confirmed on 1 March 2005. The boundary was modified slightly in 2006-2007 to exclude the Fawley Power Station and a small tract of land in the south west around Hinton. A profile of the New Forest National Park appears in **Appendix 1**.

The National Park's special qualities

The New Forest National Park's landscape is unique; it is a 'living' and working remnant of medieval England with an overwhelming sense of continuity, tradition, and history. It is the survival of not just one special quality but a whole range of features that brings a sense of completeness and integrity.

These features include:

- the New Forest's outstanding natural beauty: the sights, sounds and smells of ancient woodland with veteran trees, heathland, bog, autumn colour and an unspoilt coastline with views of the Solent and Isle of Wight
- an extraordinary diversity of plants and animals of international importance
- a unique historic, cultural and archaeological heritage from royal hunting ground to ship-building, salt making and 500 years of military coastal defence
- an historic commoning system that maintains so much of what people know and love as 'the New Forest' forming the heart of a working landscape based on farming and forestry
- the iconic New Forest Pony together with donkeys, pigs and cattle roaming free
- tranquillity in the midst of the busy, built up south of England
- wonderful opportunities for quiet recreation, learning and discovery in one of the last extensive, gentle landscapes in the south including unmatched open access on foot and horseback
- a healthy environment: fresh air, clean water, local produce and a sense of 'wildness'
- strong and distinctive local communities with real pride in and sense of identity with their local area

The New Forest National Park Authority

Legal framework and remit

The National Park Authority's role is to ensure that the two purposes of national park designation are achieved, in other words to act as the National Park's guardian. These purposes, common to all national parks, are:

- to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park; and
- to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the Park's special qualities by the public.

In doing this, the Authority is also required to:

- seek to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities within the National Park.

The National Park Authority was formally established on 1 April 2005 and took on its full statutory powers and responsibilities on 1 April 2006 as the:

- local planning authority, responsible for spatial planning, minerals and waste planning, development control and enforcement and other related regulatory functions within the National Park;
- access authority and relevant authority for the National Park under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, dealing for example, with applications for restrictions and closures. The Authority has also taken on joint responsibility for the New Forest Access Forum, in partnership with Hampshire County Council.

It is required to:

- produce a Management Plan for the National Park; and
- administer a Sustainable Development Fund.

Apart from its statutory functions, the National Park Authority has wide powers to take forward the twin purposes of the National Park.

Organisation and funding

The Authority's 22 members have overall responsibility for making decisions, setting the strategic direction, policies and priorities for the National Park and ensuring efficient and effective use of resources. They act in the interests the National Park as a whole, reflecting both national and local perspectives. The membership, staff and Committee structure are summarised in **Appendix 2**.

As a relative newcomer in the history of the New Forest, the organisation of the Authority and the way it works differs slightly from that of other national park authorities. It has relatively fewer staff because its role will focus on developing the strategic and policy framework for the National Park and advising on and facilitating the work of existing organisations, such as the Forestry Commission, to deliver the national park purposes. Project work and action on the ground aims to support the work of partners who contribute to delivering national park purposes, to fill gaps in the coverage of existing providers and in so doing to avoid duplication.

The Authority's funding comes from central government (Defra) rather than local taxpayers. This reflects the fact that unlike local councils its responsibilities extend well beyond its boundaries as it is working with others to look after the National Park for the whole nation.

The Authority's strategies and plans

The Strategy for the New Forest was drawn up by the New Forest Committee in partnership with stakeholders in 2003. It was adopted by the National Park Authority as the **interim New Forest National Park Management Plan** and provides the policy framework that guides the work of the National Park Authority and partner organisations until the new Management Plan is agreed. The Strategy for the New Forest can be viewed in local libraries and on the publications section of the Authority website www.newforestnpa.gov.uk

Work on drawing up the new Management Plan, which will be combined with the Local Development Framework Core Strategy and called the **New Forest National Park Plan**, is well under way. The aim is to issue a first draft for consultation in summer 2008 and complete it early in 2009. Building on the excellent input that has already been provided by stakeholders in the 'New Forest, New Chapter' workshops all those with an interest in the National Park will continue to be given opportunities to comment on the emerging National Park Plan before it is formally adopted by the Authority.

The New Forest National Park Plan is for the National Park as a whole and for all those with a stake in it, not just for the National Park Authority. It is intended to provide the long-term strategic policy framework for the National Park and to guide the work of the Authority and all the other organisations that contribute to the delivery of the national park purposes. The Authority, in taking forward these purposes, is working with a wide range of partners and stakeholders.

Each year, the Authority publishes a **Corporate Plan** which sets out its own work programme for the coming year, how the Authority will achieve its objectives and how it has measured up to the targets it set itself the previous year. The Plan focuses largely on specific projects and action to achieve priority objectives, it does not cover 'routine' work other than its work as the local planning authority. The relationship between the interim National Park Plan, the Corporate Plan, other strategies and plans, and government policy is illustrated in the diagram on the next page.

Our priorities

The Authority's aim

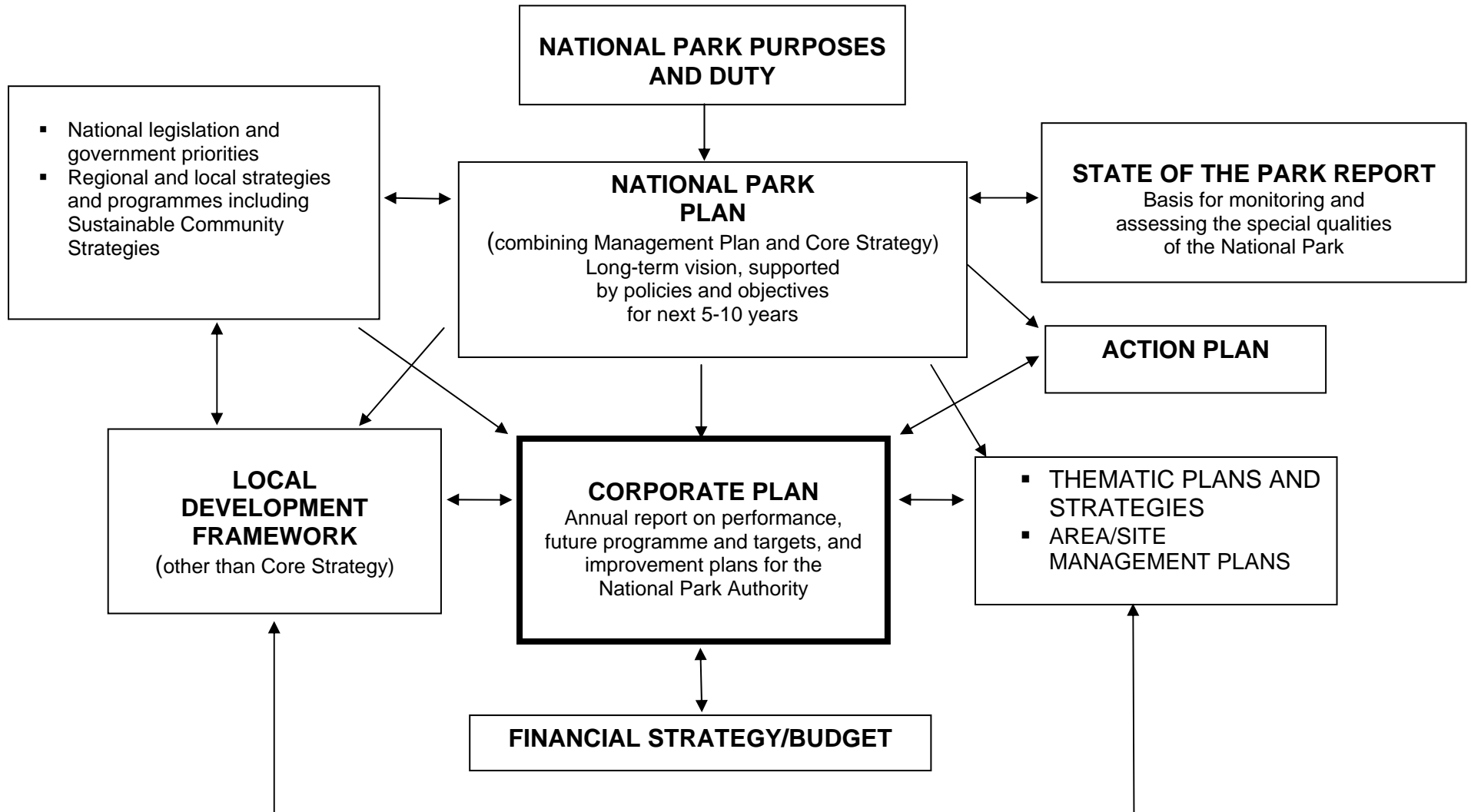
The Vision for the New Forest in Chapter 1 of the interim Management Plan describes what the New Forest will be like in fifty years if the Authority and others are successful in achieving their responsibility as its guardians. The National Park Authority will take a leading role in ensuring the vision is achieved. In 2006 it therefore set itself the following aim to underpin its mission statement:

The New Forest National Park Authority will champion the New Forest National Park, working in partnership through co-ordinated and innovative policies and actions, which:

- conserve and enhance the unique environment of the New Forest National Park, and in particular the special qualities of its landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage;
- encourage everyone to understand and enjoy the New Forest National Park's special qualities, while ensuring that its character is not harmed; and
- support the social and economic well-being of local communities in ways that sustain the National Park's special character.

Priorities from the interim National Park Management Plan

After the Strategy was published in 2003, all those who had helped to produce it were sent a questionnaire asking them which proposals they thought were the most important and urgent. The responses to the questionnaire were used to score each proposal and the highest-scoring proposals were used as the basis of much of the Authority's work on selecting its priorities.



Defra's priorities

The Government also sets out its expectations of National Parks, in consultation with Natural England and the National Park Authorities. These highlight the areas on which the Government particularly expects progress to be made in the period 2008-2009 to 2011-2012. These are taken into account when the Authority considers its own priorities and include:

The Authority's *statutory duties* in:

- delivering access to the countryside through rights of way, the right to roam and, potentially, access to the coast
- promoting appropriate recreational opportunities within the Parks
- fostering the cultural heritage of the Parks; and

Defra's current *policy priorities*, often enshrined in Public Service Agreements (PSAs) such as:

- promoting the principles of sustainable development
- contributing to Defra's targets of bringing 95% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest into favourable condition by 2010, and reversing the decline of farmland birds
- putting in place climate change adaptation measures
- contributing to the delivery of the Natural Environment PSA (retaining local landscape character, promoting landscape restoration and sustainable tourism, supporting implementation of the Water Framework Directive, delivery of agri-environment scheme outcomes, and biodiversity outcomes).

The National Park Authorities are also expected to support a wide range of *other policies* by, for example:

- promoting greater use of National Parks by people with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities, the inner cities and young people
- supporting sustainable rural development projects
- developing other sources of funding to support National Park purposes
- contributing to the development of relevant Government policies, such as affordable rural housing or climate change (for example by acting as exemplars or running pilots)
- securing the same improvements in planning performance as in the rest of local government
- contributing to strong rural communities, especially by facilitating an adequate supply of affordable housing.

Setting the Authority's priorities

In the autumn of 2005 Authority members attended a series of workshops at which they considered their overall priorities for the National Park and some possible proposals for action in 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. The workshops took the interim Management Plan as their starting point. The output from the workshops was synthesised into summaries for each of the proposals that were voted by members as among their top priorities. After consideration by the full Authority in November 2005, the priorities were used as the basis for consultation with stakeholders.

Early in 2006 members developed the actions to underpin the proposals and scored them, taking into account each proposal's contribution to:

- the National Park purposes and duty
- the priorities from the interim Management Plan
- the Defra priorities; and
- other proposals and initiatives

as well as the:

- level of stakeholder support
- impact on public perception of the National Park
- level of urgency/risk if the work was not undertaken;

and

- added value and value for money.

At the end of this process, the Authority had refined its priorities and proposals – the latter thus becoming its priority objectives for its work over the next two years. These were grouped under the four components of the Authority's aim and are shown on the next two pages. Each set of objectives, other than the corporate ones, is ranked in line with the members' scores.

Since then some of the objectives have been merged or removed: C4 (local cultural traditions) has been included in C1; SE3 (encourage businesses and community services) has been included in SE1; and U7 (improve public access) is now regarded as a mainstream activity, and has been removed. Members considered the option of reviewing fully the priorities for this Corporate Plan but concluded that it would be more appropriate to carry out a full review in autumn 2008 to reflect progress in finalising the policies and actions in the new National Park Plan following consultation. Members did recognise that, in the light of two years in operation, the following changes in emphasis were emerging:

- work on both mitigating and adapting to climate change would become a much higher priority
- work on development control, enforcement and spatial planning was crucial to the Authority's success in safeguarding the Park
- a great deal has been achieved on support for commoning so while the continuation of commoning would remain fundamental to the conservation of the Forest activity in this area over the next year would be of a different nature.

Priority objectives for the Authority's work in 2008-2009 and beyond

A Champion the New Forest National Park, working in partnership through co-ordinated and innovative policies and actions

A1 Developing the Authority

A2 Work with and through partners to achieve the Vision for the National Park and national park purposes

A3 Provide a clear, up-to-date framework for the management of the National Park through a new strategic plan (the New Forest National Park Plan) by working with partners to review and replace the interim Management Plan and parts of the Development Plan

A4 Develops spatial planning policies to support the deliver of the national park purposes and duty, working jointly with constituent and adjacent authorities

A5 Provide a development control service and consultation process that helps to conserve and enhance the special qualities of the National Park, while supporting appropriate opportunities for economic and community development

A6 Ensure that statutory and other relevant bodies' Section 62 responsibilities are fully recognised and delivered in both the South East and relevant parts of the South West region

C Conserve and enhance the unique environment of the New Forest National Park and in particular the special qualities of its landscape and cultural heritage

C1 Develop strategies and support schemes to help sustain agriculture and promote thriving commoning activity that is in keeping with the New Forest National Park

C2 Conserve, restore or recreate landscapes, and their component parts, which reflect the special qualities of the National Park

C3 Conserve and enhance the nature conservation value of the New Forest National Park

C5 Work with relevant authorities to minimise the impacts of air, noise, water and light pollution on the special qualities of the National Park

C6 Strengthen protection, understanding and management of the historic, archaeological and cultural aspects of the National Park's landscape

C7 Support high quality building and open space design in village and town centres, reflecting the distinctive character of the built environment

C8 Co-ordinate a review of the likely impacts of climate change on the whole of the National Park and develop long-term strategies and any short-term actions to address these impacts

U Encourage everyone to understand and enjoy the National Park's special qualities, while ensuring that its character is not harmed

- U1** Produce a recreation and visitor management strategy to cover the National Park and surrounding areas
-
- U2** Review strategies and develop proposals to reduce the impact of traffic on the special qualities of the National Park and promote alternatives to private car use, working jointly with relevant authorities,
-
- U3** Improve everyone's understanding and awareness of the New Forest National Park, in particular hard-to-reach groups
-
- U4** Prepare and implement a co-ordinated programme for education about the National Park, which emphasises environmental and sustainability issues
-
- U5** Develop a co-ordinated National Park ranger service, working with relevant partner organisations to build on existing services
-
- U6** Enhance opportunities for walking, cycling and horse riding, including developing an integrated network of accessible, safe and attractive footpath and cycle routes, and promote their use to local people and visitors
-

SE Support the social and economic well-being of local communities in ways that sustain the New Forest National Park's special character

- SE1** Promote sustainable development within the National Park as the basis for the social and economic well-being of local communities
-
- SE2** Protect the existing affordable housing stock, and help increase the number of affordable houses for rent and shared ownership
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Improving our services

As a young organisation it is very important that we review how effectively we are delivering our services so that we can improve both their quality and cost-effectiveness.

We successfully implemented the review of our Development Control administration and went on to review our planning enforcement arrangements, leading to the appointment of a planning Compliance Officer in February 2008. A review of our tree regulatory work is under way.

We achieved worthwhile savings in the running costs of the corporate centre, which have contributed to a significant reduction in the centre's share of total cost.

In the past year we have put in place a performance monitoring framework, within which we assess our performance quarterly against the indicators which are listed in Appendix 4, and take action as necessary to achieve improvements. We also assess our progress in delivering the objectives and actions against the quarterly milestones in the Plan.

We have kept our corporate risks under continuous review, and implemented a risk management strategy which will guide us in future years.

We have sustained our strong performance in meeting two of the three targets for Development Control set by government (notwithstanding a significant increase in the number of applications received in the last

quarter), in paying invoices promptly, and maintaining a motivated workforce with a remarkably low level of sickness absence.

We have made progress towards the target of achieving Investors in People accreditation for 2009 and developed a wide range of Human Resources policies.

We have received customer feedback on our ICT and member services, and will commission a customer survey of our Development Control services.

Delays in some aspects of the Authority's development led to the postponement of the peer review of our effectiveness scheduled for September 2007. It will now take place in summer 2008, using relevant parts of a set of key questions for external inspections developed jointly with and for other National Park Authorities.

The Authority has not awarded any individual contracts during the year that involve a transfer of staff.

Involving others

Ensuring the delivery of national park objectives is crucially dependent on the Authority working successfully through and influencing others. For this reason partnership working is set out as a specific objective in this Plan.

The extensive range of partnership working we set in train in 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 is set out mainly in Sections A2 and A3 of the Performance Section of this Plan. We will build on this in 2008-2009.

Performance

Financial Summary

The Authority's main source of funding is an annual grant from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). For 2008-2009 the grant is set at £4,121,000 which includes £200,000 for the Sustainable Development Fund. The Authority also expects to receive around £300,000 in fees for planning and related applications, £200,000 in grant-aid from Natural England towards work in bringing Sites of Special Scientific Interest into good condition, and £120,000 in interest on its reserves. The total funds available to the Authority are expected to be around £5,280,000 including a transfer of £460,000 from the general reserve. This excludes sums which it handles on behalf of other organisations such as the delegated LEADER+ scheme.

Planned activity for the year is expected to cost some £4,848,000 net of non-Defra income sources. This is in line with the Authority's financial strategy for the period 2008-2009 to 2010-2011, which endorses the use of the Authority's general and specific reserves to complete development of IT functionality and to develop further its activity on national park purposes.

The chart on this page illustrates the breakdown of planned expenditure between the main service activities in 2008-2009. The Authority's approved budget, using headings required by Defra is shown in **Appendix 3**.

