

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 11 DECEMBER 2008

UPDATE ON EUROPARC CHARTER

Report by: Chris Gregory, Transport and Tourism Officer

Summary:

This report considers the progress made on the application for the EUROPARC Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas.

Recommendation:

To advise on the preferred option for the next steps:

Option 1: Continue work with New Forest District Council with a view to submission for the Charter in December 2009.

Option 2: Discontinue work on the submission focusing saved resources on action that makes a difference on the ground.

Resources:

2008 – 2009

- EUR 500 Registration fee (paid)

2009 – 2010

- EUR 5000 Verification fees

Officer time

Corporate Plan:

SE1 Promote sustainable development within the National Park as the basis for the social and economic well-being of local communities

Papers:

**NFNPA 278/08
NFNPA 235/08**

**Cover Paper
Second part of: Arrangements for tourism in the
New Forest and EUROPARC European Charter
for sustainable tourism in protected areas.**

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UPDATE ON EUROPARC CHARTER

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The EUROPARC European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas seeks to recognise national parks which are following best practice in developing and managing sustainable tourism.
- 1.2 At the February 2008 Authority meeting, members voted by a margin of one to progress a New Forest National Park application for the EUROPARC Charter.
- 1.3 This paper considers progress with the Charter application to date, and asks for members' views on the next steps.

2 Background

- 2.1 Following the February Authority meeting, the New Forest National Park was formally registered as a Candidate Park, together with payment of a registration fee of EUR 500.
- 2.2 EUROPARC endorsed a proposal to include the wider New Forest District within the Charter application, as this would allow inclusion of the wider New Forest destination. Under normal circumstances the Charter area is restricted to designated protected landscapes.
- 2.3 A project plan was developed in partnership with New Forest District Council Tourism Service which included agreed milestones leading up to a December 2008 submission.
- 2.4 The judgement about whether to apply for the Charter was described in February as 'finely balanced'. Among the positive benefits listed were:
 - opportunities to use the process to strengthen relationships with tourism stakeholders and influence tourism development at the local level;
 - a higher profile in the European arena as an area devoted to sustainable tourism;
 - public relations and awareness-raising opportunities with visitors and local and national media;
 - an opportunity to work with and learn from other European Charter parks in a network;

- helpful internal and external assessment, leading to new ideas and improvements;
- greater credibility amongst potential funding partners;
- raising the profile and clarifying the protected area's contribution to sustainable tourism.

2.5 Among the disadvantages of the application listed were:

- the resource required to fulfil the Charter application process; liaison with other national parks indicates that some 40 officer days would be required;
- the resource required to implement actions arising from the Charter. This is currently unknown but it is *expected* that this would be manageable through the existing Transport and Tourism Officer post, together with the existing networks and partnerships which already exist in the New Forest to manage tourism;
- the fact that the New Forest is already regarded as being at the forefront of sustainable tourism, and that potentially the Charter could offer little more benefit than a tick-box exercise.

3 Progress to date

- 3.1 One of the most significant and fundamental aspects of acquiring Charter status is the development of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy and five-year Action Plan covering the destination. The EUROPARC Charter guidance sets out a range of detailed criteria which applications must meet, including a substantial diagnosis of the area, research and public consultation.
- 3.2 Given the prominent role which New Forest District Council has in tourism, it was envisaged that through close partnership working, the existing New Forest Sustainable Tourism Strategy would be updated and refined in time to support a December 2008 submission. Since February, the Council has made some progress on updating the existing New Forest Sustainable Tourism Strategy (Our Future Together, 1998), including a specific meeting of the Tourism Community Action Network (CAN) seeking views on the Strategy. However at present it is felt that the Sustainable Tourism Strategy is unlikely to meet the criteria. In particular, the Council's Tourism Service feels strongly that the emerging updated version of the Strategy (Our Future Together II) is sufficient and relevant for what is already a very successful sustainable tourism destination, and that the additional background and strategic information required by the Charter is unnecessary from a local destination-management perspective.
- 3.3 Discussions are on-going therefore as to how a comprehensive package of information could be put together and submitted which would meet the Charter requirements. For example, Authority officers have put significant effort into preparing a set of Annexes covering many of the Charter requirements, which would then link to a further advanced version of the main Strategy.

- 3.4 New Forest District Council Tourism Service remains committed to delivering an updated version of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy, and has offered spring 2009 as a more realistic date for finalising the document. This would allow the Authority to refine and link the Annexes as appropriate, and potentially work towards a December 2009 submission.

4 Further considerations

- 4.1 There are clear links between the emerging Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the New Forest National Park Plan and Recreation Management Strategy. There is perhaps merit in waiting until these documents are further refined and formally adopted so that they may properly inform the Sustainable Tourism Strategy with the aim that they should have consistent objectives.
- 4.2 The submission to EUROPARC attracts a verification fee of EUR 5000. Clearly given this relatively high fee, it is important that there is a degree of confidence that the application will be successful.
- 4.3 A specific requirement of the EUROPARC Charter is that the Sustainable Tourism Strategy is developed in partnership with stakeholders and communities and is subject to a period of public consultation - which has not been possible so far.
- 4.4 A National Park which has been through the Charter process recently reports that there are also substantial continuing requirements after verification.

5 Discussion

- 5.1 At the present time the New Forest National Park remains a candidate Park for the EUROPARC Charter and even though the full application cannot now be made in December 2008, there is an opportunity to submit the application in December 2009, when there may be more confidence in the application being successful.
- 5.2 However, even with the full complement of application materials, there is no guarantee of success. New Forest District Council Tourism Service has questioned the necessity and value of some of the information required to support the Charter application and there remains an option of withdrawing from the Charter process.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 The Authority and New Forest District Council are not ready to apply for the Charter now because the Sustainable Tourism Strategy does not meet the criteria in its present form. The next chance to apply is December 2009.

- 6.2 Completion of the Strategy including consultation and the additional material is required to give a reasonable chance of success which, even then, is not guaranteed. New Forest District Council officers do not think the work is necessary to the success of the Strategy. There is also an additional and significant verification fee.
- 6.3 Given these uncertainties, the Authority needs to decide whether to proceed, or to discontinue the process, concentrating instead on development of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy locally supported by policies in the National Park Plan. Funds could be diverted from the verification fee for use as a more direct contribution to enhancing sustainable tourism in the National Park. The Council would support focusing resources on local action i.e. option 2.

Recommendation

To advise on the preferred option for the next steps:

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Option 2: Discontinue work on the submission focusing saved resources on action that makes a difference on the ground.