

**NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

**AUTHORITY MEETING – 28 FEBRUARY 2008**

**PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FUND  
PANEL**

**Report by:** Claire Gingell, Sustainable Development Fund Officer

**Summary:**

This paper sets out the proposed changes to the membership of the Sustainable Development Fund Panel.

**Recommendation:**

**To approve the proposed changes to the Sustainable Development Fund Panel.**

**Resources and Corporate Plan:**

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

SE3 – Support existing and encourage new businesses and community services which enhance the New Forest environment while providing economic and community benefits.

No additional resources.

**Paper:**

**NFNPA 236/08:** Cover paper

**Background papers:**

**NFNPA 188/07:** Sustainable Development Fund – Annual Progress Report

**NFNPA 129/06:** Sustainable Development Fund – 6 Month Report

**NFNPA 62/06:** Sustainable Development Fund Panel

**NFNPA 31/05:** Sustainable Development Fund

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**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Since April 2006 the Sustainable Development Fund (the Fund) has awarded grants totalling almost £400,000 to 42 projects that further National Park purposes and deliver environmental, economic and community benefits to the New Forest.
- 1.2 In accordance with Defra guidance and as approved by the Authority in January 2006, a Sustainable Development Fund Panel (the Panel) was established to appraise applications to the Fund. Although the funding decisions lie with the Panel the Authority has the power to 'call in' any application which does not meet the eligibility criteria, is clearly in conflict with National Park purposes or where there is a clear risk of financial mismanagement of the project.

**2. The current Panel**

- 2.1 The current Panel comprises fifteen members, including two Authority members, of which one is Panel Chair, a position that is reviewed on an annual basis.
- 2.2 Membership of the Panel was originally drawn mainly from the New Forest LEADER+ Local Action Group, members of which had a well developed capacity to appraise projects against funding criteria. This gave coverage of the main areas of knowledge and expertise required for the Fund (environment, community and economy) with the exception of young people, for which an additional Panel member was appointed, drawn from the local community.
- 2.3 With the exception of the Chair and the appointed member, Panel members attend meetings on rotation with around six Local Action Group members at each meeting. Panel members are selected to attend meetings to ensure a balanced representation of interests at each meeting.

### **3. Informal evaluation of the Panel's operation after two years**

- 3.1 Several aspects of the way the Fund is managed are currently being evaluated informally by Authority officers prior to the next year's funding commencing, drawing on the experiences of successfully running the Fund for two years and having received feedback from applicants. This provides an excellent opportunity to identify where further improvements can be made to ensure that the Fund continues to reflect both the range of projects coming forward and the needs of New Forest communities.
- 3.2 The review has highlighted a number of areas where improvements could be made to the structure of the Panel to ensure that it remains as effective and relevant as possible. These are:
- continuity in appraisal of applications
  - knowledge base of Panel members
  - overlap with the allocation of other funds within the New Forest
  - representation of young people.
- 3.3 These areas are explained further in section four of this paper, along with proposed changes to the Panel that are aimed at making improvements and ensuring that the Fund continues to operate in accordance with national guidance and in a similar manner to those in other National Parks.
- 3.4 It is invaluable that although the Panel remains closely linked to the Authority it retains a degree of independence. It is essential that Panel members represent specific areas of knowledge and expertise, possess strong project development and management skills and the ability objectively to appraise applications against funding criteria. Membership of the Panel should reflect a wide range of experience and background as this enables the Fund to fulfil its original intention of providing a grass roots level of support and promoting partnership working within the community.

### **4. Proposed changes to the Panel**

#### *Ensuring continuity in appraisal of applications.*

- 4.1 A fixed rather than rolling Panel will ensure a greater continuity in the appraisal of applications to the Fund, especially with regard to applicants needing to re-submit applications or seek approval for variations to their project. It is proposed to establish a fixed Panel of nine members plus a Chair.
- 4.2 The Panel Chairman, who must be an Authority member, will be elected by the Authority on an annual basis. Vacancies for other Panel members will be publicised and members selected from open competition by the Panel Chairman and Authority officers to reflect an

appropriate mix of areas of expertise, community sector, gender and age relevant to the criteria and priorities of the Fund.

*Widening the knowledge base of the Panel*

4.3 Based on previous experience and in order better to appraise the varied range of projects that are submitted to the Fund it is proposed to widen the areas of knowledge and expertise within the Panel by selecting Panel members to represent the following areas:

- conservation and wildlife (one member)
- wider environmental and sustainability issues (one member)
- local business and economy (one member)
- sustainable tourism (one member)
- agriculture and commoning (one member)
- wider community interests (two members).

*Reducing overlap with other funding allocation*

4.4 The current Panel is drawn from an experienced panel of appraisers who sit on the New Forest Local Action Group, which was set up to deliver the New Forest LEADER+ Programme. If the New Forest is successful in securing future LEADER funding, this will place a significant time demand on these individuals. It would be good practice more widely to spread the responsibility for allocation of both sources of funding to a broader range of individuals, by separating the Panel from the Local Action Group.

4.5 It is therefore proposed to establish a Panel that has a much lower percentage of members who are involved in both programmes. This will ensure that there is a greater spread of responsibility for allocation of the potentially considerable sums of money available under the Fund and LEADER programmes, while at the same time maintaining the connection between the two funding streams to avoid unnecessary overlap in allocation of monies.

*Representing young people*

4.6 Supporting projects that involve young people is one of the priorities of the Fund and it is therefore important that young people are represented on the Panel. To date this has been achieved by the appointment of a Panel member with relevant experience of working with and connections to young people, which has been extremely useful in ensuring the Fund is relevant to young people. It is proposed to build on this and improve the representation of young people by adopting the practice used in many other National Parks of selecting two young people to sit on the Panel. The Sustainable Development Fund Officer and Panel Chairman will work in association with the Authority's Education Officer to recruit two appropriate young people from colleges and schools within the National Park.

## **5 Proposed timetable**

- 5.1 Subject to the approval of the Authority, the new arrangements will take effect at the start of the new financial year in April 2008.
- 5.2 The recruitment process for new panel members will begin in March.
- 5.3 The appointment of the Chairman will be made at the next Authority meeting in March 2008.

## **Recommendation**

**To approve the proposed changes to the Sustainable Development Fund Panel.**