

# Recreation Management Memorandum of Understanding for the New Forest



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## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The New Forest is one of England's smallest and most intensely visited national parks. It also has the highest concentration of open access designated wildlife sites<sup>1</sup> of any of the English national parks. As such it faces particular challenges to integrate outdoor recreation with the conservation of its special qualities.
- 1.2 It is likely that more people will want to visit the New Forest so the challenges will probably increase over time.
- 1.3 This Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aims to summarise the desirable outcomes, guiding principles and criteria that underpin the way in which key organisations will work together to improve the management of recreation across the New Forest. It will be used by statutory organisations that have responsibilities for aspects of recreation management in the New Forest: namely the Forestry Commission, Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, Natural England, the Verderers and New Forest National Park Authority<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.4 It is not limited to protected areas (e.g. Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation or grazing land) or to the boundary of the New Forest National Park since recreation needs to be facilitated and managed throughout the wider New Forest area.
- 1.5 The MoU reflects and builds on the agreed Priority Task of the Recreation Management Strategy Steering and Advisory Groups<sup>3</sup>, which is:
- to agree an overall plan for where within and around the National Park we should encourage people to go to enjoy outdoor recreation, and how this should be achieved. The aim would be to both improve the New Forest's recreational experience and enhance the other special qualities (including its rich wildlife, tranquility and commoning tradition) and to avoid inadvertently damaging the special qualities which people come to the New Forest to enjoy.**
- 1.6 It also complements the New Forest National Park Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030, describing how statutory organisations will work together to achieve the Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> 50% of the New Forest National Park is designated as either or both a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and is therefore of European significance for wildlife.

<sup>2</sup> These six organisations agreed to comprise the Recreation Management Strategy Steering Group and through this to take forward recreation management in the New Forest.

<sup>3</sup> The Recreation Management Strategy Advisory Group comprises the six organisations on the RMS Steering Group plus 10 other organisations representing local interests and recreational user groups.

- 1.7 Although intended specifically for the National Park, the National Park purposes provide a useful context for recreation management across the whole area:
- 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.
- 1.8 Section 62 of the 1995 Environment Act requires relevant authorities to take the two purposes into account in any work that may affect the National Park. The relationship between the purposes is commonly known as the Sandford Principle, which states that every effort should be made to reconcile any conflicts between the purposes, but that if such efforts fail the first purpose should take precedence.
- 1.9 The National Park Authority also has a duty, in taking forward the two purposes, to:
- seek to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities.

As with the purposes, this approach is also followed by other local organisations.

## **2 Key desirable outcomes**

- 2.1 Key desirable outcomes for recreation management are summarised in 2.2 and 2.3 below.
- 2.2 Benefits to people, organisations and local businesses through:
- a) positive engagement in outdoor recreation in robust parts of the New Forest and surrounding areas that results in:
    - people actively enjoying outdoor recreation
    - improved health and well-being, especially amongst those with greatest need
    - increased satisfaction levels amongst all recreation user groups
    - greater interest in, understanding of and commitment to care for the things that make the New Forest special
    - reduced interference with or impact on other activities including land management (e.g. commoning or forest operations).
  - b) greater income to the local economy, and more effective use of resources by organisations providing recreation facilities, e.g.:
    - increased income for local businesses catering for people enjoying outdoor recreation
    - more efficient management of recreation infrastructure.

2.3 An overall shift in use of access points and recreational routes (across the whole area) that results in greater protection and enhancement of the New Forest's special qualities, achieved through:

a) reduced use of sensitive areas resulting in, for example:

- less disturbance of rare or threatened wildlife species, both inland and on the coast (primarily breeding, feeding and roosting birds)
- less physical erosion of the more sensitive habitats (e.g. ponds, stream banks, lawns, bogs, mires, chalk streams, coastal mudflats and ancient woodlands)
- reduced erosion of tracks and grazed verges
- tranquil and remote areas being maintained and enhanced (reaching them should take some effort or time)
- reduced interference with land management (e.g. commoning).

b) a relative increase in use of an agreed preferred network of routes and selected sites through, for example:

- better information and advice to users about where the preferred recreation sites and routes are and how to enjoy them without inadvertently causing damage
- provision of, and information about, appropriate and well maintained facilities associated with the route/site (e.g. gates, suitable surfaces, parking, toilets, visitor information, seating, waymarked trails)
- provision of, and information about, key access points close to local pubs, village shops or other visitor facilities including public transport options
- providing a more joined-up network of agreed, appropriately and effectively signed off-road routes for all users, and safer on-road routes for non-motorised users.

c) the development of new or enhanced recreation facilities located away from sensitive areas; including beyond the boundary of the National Park to:

- enable people to enjoy outdoor recreation close to home, without needing to travel long distances
- provide for a variety of activities including more adventurous pursuits
- where appropriate, enable a reduction in similar facilities in nearby sensitive areas.

### **3 Guiding principles for recreation management**

3.1 A range of important guiding principles needs to be taken into account.

a) The aim is both to improve recreational experiences and to enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the New Forest

- b) Although enjoyable and beneficial to participants, all forms of recreation also have the potential to be harmful to these special qualities, especially if done on a large scale or if activity is concentrated.
- c) It is important to look at the whole of the National Park and beyond; e.g. increased impact in one location may be compensated for by reduced impact in another location.
- d) Negative human impact is usually better managed by understanding behaviours and motivations and through this, attracting people to preferred areas rather than trying to prohibit access to sensitive areas.
- e) Ideally, benefits will be maximised at the lowest sustainable cost.

#### **4 Criteria for recreation management**

4.1 The generic criteria in 4.2 and 4.3 below are intended to help guide and evaluate recreation management.

4.2 A recreation facility, route or organised activity might be desirable or suitable to promote if it:

- a) is already popular, well-used, accepted and adequate for demand
- b) is close to a residential area, campsite or public transport access point
- c) is accessed via a good road network
- d) has a short access track or robust surface in good condition
- e) is well-maintained or easy to maintain
- f) has no access limitations (e.g. steps/stiles) and few, if any, gates
- g) already has facilities on site such as tracks, parking, buildings
- h) has nearby services (power, water, phone) if these are needed
- i) already has or is ideal for picnic area
- j) is adjacent to or links with visitor spend opportunity
- k) has toilets, shops, pubs etc. on site or on route
- l) links different parts of the Forest or links settlements to each other or to places of interest or/and follows a natural desire line (resulting in little or no digression)
- m) is within robust habitat (e.g. within a conifer plantation rather than ancient woodland or heathland)
- n) has something of natural, cultural or landscape heritage interest nearby (e.g. view, building, ancient tree, monument, water body)
- o) is screened by trees, scrub or physical features
- p) has dual use for commoning activities (e.g. parking for drift)
- q) has little or no history of anti-social behaviour, theft or vandalism
- r) has security provided by nearby residents
- s) has a long lease or agreement in place
- t) serves a need not replicated nearby.

4.3 A recreation facility, route or organised activity might be undesirable or unsuitable to promote if it:

- a) encourages access to habitats where physical damage is likely (e.g. bog or mire, Forest pond or stream)

- b) is likely to result in significant disturbance to wildlife, especially protected birds (e.g. on vulnerable coastal mudflat and saltmarsh, or open heathland)
- c) causes impacts on rare and threatened species (e.g. wild gladioli, smooth snakes and southern damselflies)
- d) encourages intrusive impact on remote tranquil areas
- e) is inappropriately expensive
- f) has poor accessibility.

## **5 Decisions about specific facilities and locations**

- 5.1 Efforts will be made to gain wide agreement about any significant changes to the management of recreation. This means timely public engagement and consultation about the issues and opportunities.
- 5.2 No changes will be made to the management of recreation that might affect protected areas without appropriate consultation with key stakeholder groups and consenting agencies.
- 5.3 Where public access has the potential to impact on the qualifying features of European Sites, it needs to be delivered in a way that is sustainable and is compatible with a site's conservation objectives. When exercising their functions, all public bodies must therefore take reasonable steps to further the conservation and enhancement of those Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which underpin European Sites (section 28G of the 1981 Wildlife & Countryside Act as amended).
- 5.4 Defra's advice to Section 28G authorities<sup>4</sup> includes the following: 'The nature conservation bodies strongly recommend that recreational proposals which could affect SSSIs are discussed informally before formal notice is submitted. This preliminary discussion allows the measures necessary to conserve the SSSI to be agreed in advance and thus enables the formal procedures to be dealt with much more quickly and simply.'
- 5.5 Together, these measures will ensure that, as much as is possible:
  - a) organisations with the responsibility for decisions are well advised and informed
  - b) recreation facilities are well designed and welcomed by people who use them
  - c) wise judgement is made where criteria conflict with each other (e.g. a car park that is better screened is more likely to suffer from theft and vandalism)
  - d) unintended damage is avoided (e.g. impacts on rare plant species adjacent to a car park)

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<sup>4</sup> Local authorities are Section 28G authorities, as are Natural England, the Forestry Commission, National Park Authorities and the Verderers.