



Future Forest

Recreation Management Strategy consultation

Next Steps Report

February 2018



Initial ideas about what will be done in response to what people said through the Future Forest call for views Recreation Management Strategy consultation carried out in summer 2017.



Summary

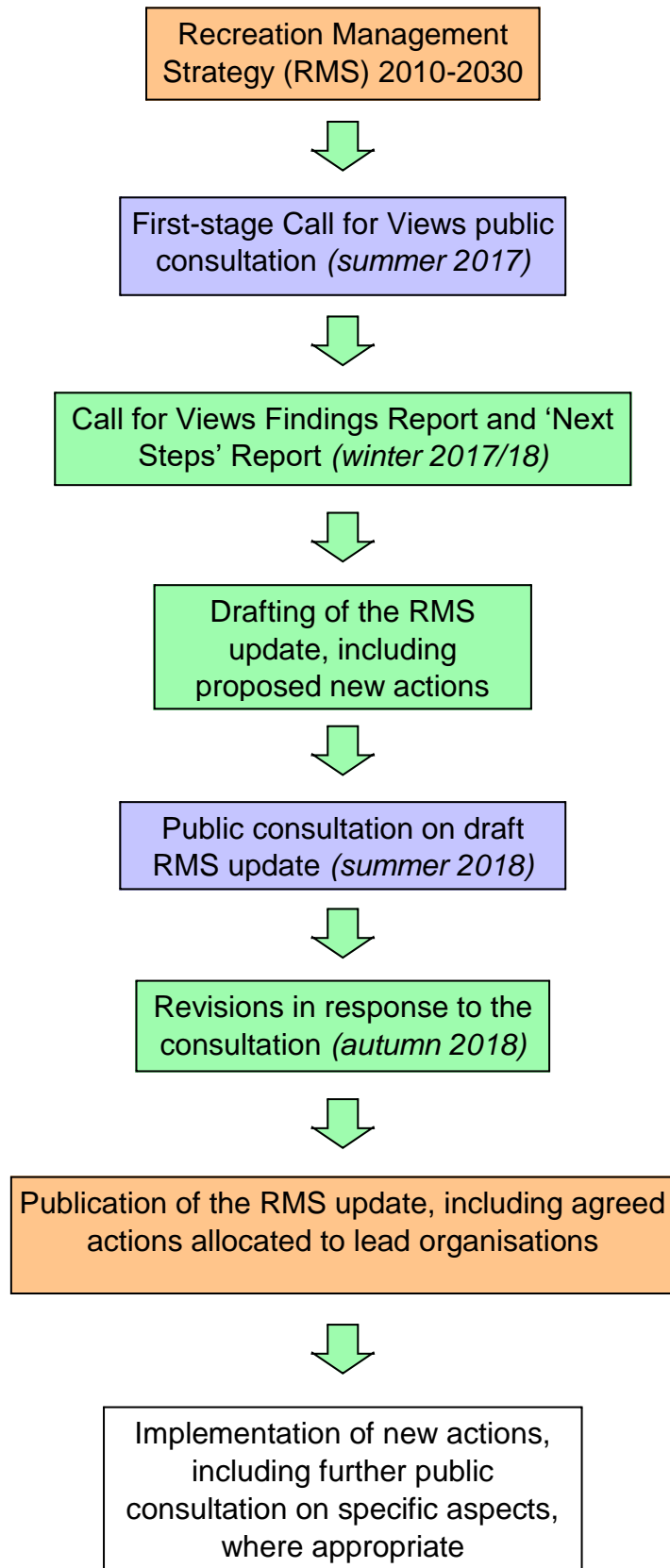
This report has been produced by the New Forest Recreation Management Strategy Steering Group which has representatives from the Forestry Commission, Natural England, Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, Verderers and New Forest National Park Authority. It sets out initial ideas for the production of an update to the New Forest Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030. These ideas have been informed by responses to the Future Forest 'call for views' public consultation held over the summer of 2017.

A separate Findings Report sets out who was consulted, describes how they were consulted and summarises the main findings.

Proposed actions for the update will now be drafted by the Steering Group, including wider liaison about specific initiatives, and will be subject to further public consultation during the summer of 2018.

Agreed actions and named organisations to lead on their delivery will be published when all comments have been considered, either towards the end of 2018 or in 2019.

Next steps in developing an update to the
New Forest National Park Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030



1 Protecting the New Forest National Park

The New Forest is a working landscape with a long and proud history that dates back almost 1,000 years. It is well known for the commoners' animals that graze over 100 square miles in the central area, and much of it is internationally recognised for its wildlife. In recent decades the New Forest has become a very popular place for local people and visitors to enjoy a wide range of outdoor recreation activities.

In 2005, in recognition of its natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage and the opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities, the New Forest National Park was designated, totalling 220 square miles. For many local residents the New Forest stretches even further.

Multiple local organisations are jointly committed to protecting the New Forest, both in its own right and so that people can continue to enjoy and benefit from its special qualities. This commitment is evident in the Partnership Plan for the New Forest National Park (2015-2020) which guides the work of those with a remit for, or an interest in, the National Park. Other key strategic documents include local planning policies, the SAC Management Plan 2001, the New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan 2016, the Government's 8-point Plan (2016-2020) – and the New Forest Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030 (the 2010 Strategy) which provides the main focus for this report.

In 2016 the Forestry Commission, Natural England, Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, Verderers and New Forest National Park Authority (NPA) decided that it is time to produce an update to the 2010 Strategy. These organisations asked the NPA to lead on the consultation on their behalf.

Key drivers for this work are that the New Forest's recreation facilities weren't designed for their current level of use – which looks set to increase even further:

- Around 35,000 people live here
- Sixteen million people now live within a 90 minute drive of the New Forest
- It was estimated in 2005 that we receive over 13 million day visits a year
- In response to housing needs, neighbouring local authorities are currently progressing Local Plans which will provide for around 50,000 extra homes (about 110,000 people) in areas close to the New Forest in the next 15-20 years.

2 Drafting an update to the 2010 strategy

The 2010 recreation strategy was produced following extensive public consultation; it has 61 'priority actions' aimed at managing recreation, grouped under 15 topics.

A new and updated suite of focused actions is now needed so that, across the National Park and beyond we can achieve a net gain for the working and natural landscape and for the recreational experience, by:

- protecting the spectacular, yet fragile, wildlife-rich landscape that people come to see
- managing recreation for local people and our visitors.

We also need to use limited resources wisely.

In developing the new actions, we need to remember that the New Forest should be protected for its own sake as well as for people to enjoy. Any improvements to the recreational experience (e.g. through changes to the network of recreation infrastructure) should contribute to the overall plan to protect and enhance the special qualities.

All this can only be achieved by taking a wide geographical approach to recreation management, stretching from the central areas that have extensive public access and commoning, through the outer areas of the National Park where public access is more restricted (e.g. to rights of way and specific sites) and on into surrounding areas where many people live.

Alongside this, the actions in the update need to recognise the very significant health and wellbeing value of recreation and a quality environment to people, their importance to the local economy – and that, as David Attenborough said: 'No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced'.

Through the 2017 Future Forest consultation, over 1,500 respondents commented on the topics within the 2010 strategy. This provided a wealth of suggestions and a really useful insight to what many people now think.

The range of responses showed that managing recreation across the New Forest and beyond is complex. For example, different types of recreational activities cannot necessarily be simply defined as good or bad – it may depend on where and when they happen or how many people are involved. Different 'types' of people (e.g. people on holiday, day visitors or locals) may or may not have greater or different impacts, and of course tourism provides jobs for many local people and helps maintain the viability of many local businesses. In addition, different people and organisations often have different and passionately held viewpoints.

This complexity underlines the importance of the strong partnership approach to agreeing and then implementing the update to the 2010 Strategy. It also highlights the need to engage with the public; each of us can play our own part in protecting the New Forest for future generations to enjoy.

All consultation feedback will be considered as the update to the 2010 strategy is developed, alongside other information, including engagement with user groups and forums, available data and evidence, and assessments of existing work programmes, policies and regulations. At this early stage, some of the recurring themes that are evident in the responses could help simplify and give a fresh focus to the update. In particular, the new suite of actions could be grouped under two main headings (A and B below). The third heading (C) was raised in some responses and is essential if actions are to be realistic and deliverable, and if the expectations of many respondents are to be managed. More specific suggestions can also be considered as the strategy is implemented in the coming years.

A. Raising awareness and understanding

This would be a plan for improved communication and engagement that increases understanding about the potential impacts of different types of recreation and thereby protects the National Park. It would include creative ways to help people understand just how special the New Forest is and to encourage responsible recreation that nurtures a caring attitude towards the New Forest, backed by enforcement where and when appropriate.

B. Managing recreation

This section would commit to developing a 'spatial approach' for where recreation is best enabled and encouraged within and beyond the National Park. It would aim to encourage activities in places that are more robust and suitable to accommodate a higher footfall and include ways to discourage recreation that could harm the most sensitive areas. Topics could include improving sustainable transport and off-road routes for walking and cycling, car parking, camping, and improving recreation sites close to where people live.

C. Finding resources

This would recognise the need for joint efforts to identify how the above actions will be funded. Options include investment by local authorities, businesses and landowners where future savings or income will result, grant applications and targeted fundraising for specific projects, partnership working with youth or health-care organisations, a coordinated approach to the use of developer contributions aimed at mitigating the impacts of new housing on protected areas and ways through which those who benefit from recreation facilities can contribute towards their maintenance and the good of the wider New Forest.

3 How will the consultation comments about different topics be used?

The sections below give examples of how the comments received about each of the topics in the 2010 strategy (and the additional comments) could fit within the three headings described above. The process of defining the actions in the update is ongoing, so these are early thoughts that will be discussed over the coming months.

3.1 Raising awareness and understanding

The volume and breadth of comments about this topic is one of the reasons why raising awareness and understanding is being proposed as a key heading in the update. A wide range of opportunities and issues could be included: learning about what makes the New Forest so special, encouraging greater mutual understanding and respect between user groups, animal accidents and the feeding commoners' animals, litter, aspects of dog walking and cycling etc.

There are, in fact, many good examples of past and current work to achieve greater awareness and understanding. Many organisations (local, national and even international) play a role, and in the New Forest there are forums that aim to ensure consistent messages are conveyed to a wide range of audiences. However, the challenge is to become more effective in changing behaviour, so that we can see more progress – and this may need new approaches and greater resources.

3.2 Sustainable transport

Actions about this topic would fit mostly under the heading of 'managing recreation' (especially the routes used) and 'finding resources' (because of the high costs involved). However, some of the issues highlighted in responses are arguably more to do with local community services, broader traffic issues and highways management than recreation.

Operating costs of public transport need somehow to be recovered, either from paying customers or through Government funding and in recent years the business case for bus operators has not been evident and further reductions in passenger transport subsidies are likely. Providing more or cheaper buses or an economically viable park-and-ride system would therefore be a challenge. The New Forest Tour runs as a leisure service in the peak of summer when visitor numbers are highest and is currently the closest the New Forest has to a park-and-ride service.

Improving the connectivity and safety of routes for cyclists clearly requires further consideration and resources, including high-risk crossing points (for walkers, horse riders and cyclists).

These challenges mean that we will need to be creative in considering and planning for viable sustainable transport options for the future.

3.3 On and off-road cycling

This topic prompted many comments and suggestions which could be addressed by actions under both 'managing recreation' and 'raising awareness and

understanding'. Key to this will be the degree to which it is possible to address the current fragmented 'network' of permitted off-road routes across the Forest – and at the same time ensure there is no net harm to wildlife, tranquillity and the other special qualities of the New Forest. Comments under the 'sustainable transport' and 'improving access' topics also confirmed the need for better cycle links between villages and other places of interest, including addressing safety on roads.

None of the statutory organisations involved have legal powers to regulate cycle sportive events but much effort has recently been put into addressing concerns. Such events did not feature in the 2010 strategy (those that were in existence caused few issues) but they should be considered in the update.

3.4 Providing sustainable services and facilities

This topic would sit well within 'managing recreation'. The distribution of car parks as access points for recreation is a major factor in determining where people go to enjoy activities throughout the National Park and beyond – and consequently influences where impacts of recreation may occur. We need an appropriate plan for car parking and associated facilities, ideally linked with an improved network of off-road recreational routes.

Judgements about the location and scale of facilities and about which sites are promoted (whether on the open Forest, elsewhere in the National Park or further afield) would be easier to make if there was a set of agreed criteria which can be used to judge alternatives consistently. People could then be encouraged to go to robust places with appropriate facilities and thereby avoid causing inadvertent harm to more sensitive sites.

As some people suggested, a carefully considered charging regime for car parking where it is currently free could be considered (under 'finding resources'). This could provide a new source of funding to improve car park maintenance and for additional initiatives that benefit the New Forest environment as well as the recreational experience. There are some current initiatives aimed at reducing the incidence of people parking in inappropriate places (e.g. protected verges) but these could be strengthened with extra resources.

3.5 Walking

As with cycling, opportunities to encourage walking and reduce inadvertent harm could be addressed by actions under both 'managing recreation' and 'raising awareness and understanding'.

The New Forest is a popular place to walk and people have the right to walk throughout about half of the National Park. In the right places, walking has few impacts on the environment or other people. However, there are risks in sensitive areas, or if dogs chase or disturb stock or wildlife, so there is work to do to raise awareness of potential issues and to encourage use of less sensitive routes.

A programme of selective improvements to signage and surfaces on agreed existing rights of way would encourage people to use them, and it should be possible to identify locations where conditions could be improved for people with disabilities.

It is not easy to create new routes on private land. However, land owners might be encouraged to allow access if there are clear benefits to themselves (e.g. through post-Brexit grants) and/or nearby open Forest areas – and to people using the routes.

3.6 Improving access

Improving access fits well under the heading of ‘managing recreation’. Improving (or in some cases maintaining) access to draw people to sites and along routes that provide a good recreational experience while at the same time reducing potential impacts elsewhere, is fundamental to recreation management. If a New Forest-wide recreation map can be agreed, plans for individual locations could be made at least in part in the light of this.

Comments demonstrated that there is a lot of support for the development of a better network of agreed off-road routes (for walking, cycling and horse riding) to avoid dangerous roads and even reduce the amount of traffic on the roads.

Many traffic problems are arguably largely caused by factors other than recreation (i.e. local commuter traffic, seasonal tourism and limited road capacity) and solutions may not be entirely within the gift of a revised recreation strategy.

3.7 Coastal access

The consultation responses suggest that there is wide public support for the England Coast Path, for which legislation is already in place.

Natural England staff have recently been looking at options for the route of the New Forest stretch of the path, using the process that operates throughout the country. All affected landowners have been involved and many factors have been taken into account including potential impacts on sensitive features and habitats. The final route will be confirmed by the Secretary of State, after an eight-week consultation and after all representations and objections have been fully considered. Only then will the project reach the implementation stage (possibly 2018 onwards) – funded by Natural England.

Once in place, public access will be possible along parts of the New Forest coast which have until now have been inaccessible. Within the update, the topic could fit well under the heading of ‘managing recreation’.

3.8 Healthy lifestyles and opportunities

Consultation comments frequently confirmed that inspiring the next generation to understand, value and care for the New Forest is clearly important both for the young people and for the future of the Forest. Work to address this opportunity would sit within ‘raising awareness and understanding’.

Given the proven and well-known benefits of outdoor experiences and exercise to physical and mental health, it would be good to develop carefully planned and targeted programmes of engagement, so that those who need it most can benefit (especially local people).

3.9 Climate change and sustainability

This topic prompted comments about some very diverse and challenging issues ranging from climate change (at a global level), the overall volume of people who use the New Forest as a venue for recreation (driven by both local and regional factors) and the need to assess and address impacts of recreation on local wildlife.

Some of these challenges relate to how people reach and travel around the National Park, and impacts at specific sites sometimes relate to the location of parking or other visitor facilities. In these cases, 'managing recreation' would focus attention on encouraging the use of sustainable transport and the provision of facilities to attract people to sites best suited for recreation.

3.10 Influencing recreational provision beyond the boundaries of the National Park

The development of attractive recreation sites close to where people live, should be an important component of the update and it sits well under the heading of 'managing recreation'. Such sites could be within, close to or even some distance away from the National Park; they have the potential to provide improved recreation opportunities for at least some people who would otherwise choose to drive some distance into the heart of the National Park.

Planning policies of local authorities already include the provision of suitable recreational opportunities for people moving into new homes, but the greatest opportunities (i.e. big new sites) would require significant resources and political commitment across a range of local authorities or significant investment from businesses and/or private land owners. A boost to the work could come from joint working on the use of developer contributions for habitat mitigation schemes, and through the newly formed Green Halo Partnership which is encouraging joint work to enrich the wildlife and 'natural capital' of sites, some of which could provide very enjoyable recreational experiences.

3.11 Camping and caravanning

Many of the people who camp and caravan in the New Forest do so because it enables them to experience and learn about the special qualities of the area. As some of the comments confirmed, camping and caravanning provide an important source of income for landowners and local communities. However, there are negative impacts (e.g. on the habitat quality) arising from some sites.

Planning policies restrict the development of new sites that would be harmful and provide a clear framework for judging the merits of any site improvements that

require planning permission. Actions related to recreation could be included within the update to the 2010 recreation strategy under 'managing recreation'.

3.12 Horse riding

Horse riding is very much part of the local history and culture of the New Forest, with integral links to commoning. Horse riders enjoy the same unlimited access rights as walkers across the open Forest and carriage driving, under licence, is popular with some.

Some of the issues raised through the consultation could be addressed through 'managing recreation' (e.g. access improvements and road safety at specific locations). Other issues would be dealt with under 'raising awareness and understanding' (e.g. the need for better understanding between user groups)

The management of associated land and facilities is referenced in planning policies and liaison has been much improved through the Equine Forum and New Forest Land Advice Service.

3.13 Water-based recreation

There was a low volume of responses about this topic. However, water-based recreation on the coast is a significant economic driver for the area – and some water-based recreation activities, both on the coast and inland (e.g. in streams and ponds) have the potential to impact on wildlife species and habitats, and on the enjoyment of other people.

Within the update location-specific topics could be referenced under 'managing recreation'. More generic opportunities and impacts would sit under 'raising awareness and understanding' probably in part through the newly-formed Bird Aware Solent project that is addressing impacts of new housing on coastal wildlife.

3.14 Golf

Although relatively few respondents chose golf among their priority topics those that did showed that there is an ongoing need for liaison between site managers, landowners, golfers, Natural England and commoners. Work to build mutual understanding and ensure the courses and facilities are well managed for both the environment and people would include aspects of both 'managing recreation' and 'raising awareness and understanding'.

3.15 Cricket

Cricket is a popular part of the Forest's cultural heritage but received fewest comments through the consultation. As for golf, responses about cricket confirmed that there is an ongoing need for liaison between site managers, landowners, cricketers, Natural England and commoners. Again, to work to build mutual understanding and ensure the pitches and facilities are well managed for both the environment and people would include aspects of both 'managing recreation' and 'raising awareness and understanding'.

3.16 Additional comments

The analysis of additional comments highlights the recurring themes and the very different recreation management options that could be dealt with under the headings of 'managing recreation' and 'raising awareness and understanding'. In summary, respondents suggested that both 'carrots' and 'sticks' should be used.

These additional comments also highlighted that many of the suggestions elsewhere within the responses could be costly to implement. This is borne out by the experience of the organisations jointly reviewing the 2010 Strategy, so it seems wise to include actions within the update under the heading of 'finding resources'.

3.17 Next steps

- As illustrated in the flow chart of 'next steps' on page 2, the Recreation Management Strategy Steering Group will now start the process of drafting the update to the New Forest Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030.
- Feedback received during the Future Forest call for views consultation will continue to be used during this time.
- There will be a focus on actions in the three key areas identified through the consultation: raising awareness and understanding, managing recreation and finding resources.
- The draft update will then be made available for another public consultation during the summer of 2018.

