NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 19th August 2014

NEW FOREST PUBLIC BIKE SYSTEM

Report by: John Lynn, Cycling Projects Manager

Summary:

The purpose of this paper is to give Members information about the New Forest Public Bike System for which Government funding is available, so that they can decide if the Authority should go ahead with the project. The recommendation below was unanimously supported by all who attended the final meeting of the Members’ Task and Finish Group set up after the Authority meeting of 26 June.

Recommendation:

The Members’ Task and Finish Group recommends that the National Park Authority does not proceed with the New Forest Public Bike System at this time

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Equality Impact Assessment:
An Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared for this programme of work.
NEW FOREST PUBLIC BIKE SYSTEM

1 Background

1.1 In August 2013 the National Park Authority was awarded £3.57 million by the Department for Transport (DfT) to support family cycling in the National Park. This programme is beginning to deliver projects identified by communities and partners:

- Infrastructure improvements such as the proposed upgrade of the A35 Lyndhurst to Ashurst cycle route (delivery commencing in autumn 2014), improvements to the cycle route adjacent to the A35 at Totton and safety schemes in and around Brockenhurst.
- A grants fund for local communities and businesses to improve their own cycling facilities.
- Wiltshire Council has commissioned Sustrans to establish feasibility and develop implementation plans for a signed cycle route between Salisbury and the New Forest National Park.

1.2 Through this programme we have an opportunity to implement a limited network of bike docking stations in the New Forest to complement existing bike hire services. Initial interest from businesses was good and 11 of the 12 originally contacted indicated they would like to host a docking station on their own land.

1.3 The aim would be to increase connectivity between communities, accommodation and attractions and support key businesses in the Forest. The scheme would also deliver added benefits as part of our work to reduce the impact of traffic on the National Park through the promotion of sustainable transport alternatives, including the New Forest Tour.

2 How the Public Bike System could work

2.1 A feasibility study by Steer Davies Gleave suggested that the self-service bike hire system could comprise bikes for public hire at locations in the south east of the New Forest where there is a concentration of attractions, railway stations and accommodation businesses. Locations would be on private land and could include areas outside of the National Park boundary such as the Waterside communities.

2.2 Whereas current bike hire provision is focussed around a full or half-day cycling experience in the Forest, this scheme would also allow residents and visitors to use bikes for shorter journeys and as a method of local transport since one-way journeys without returning the bike to its place of collection become possible.

2.3 We have to work within the constraints of funding from the DfT which presents us with a number of challenges:

- Funding is capital only and can only be spent on projects which meet the aims of the bid.
- Funding must be spent and works completed by the end of March 2015.
3  Procurement

3.1 An OJEU compliant procurement process was undertaken with the support of Hampshire County Council procurement and legal specialists to determine if there is a suitable and willing supplier who could deliver the project. A programme board including our Chief Finance Officer and the Chair of the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee oversaw the process and identified a preferred supplier if the project were to proceed. The board is confident that the preferred supplier has the experience and capability to set up and operate a system tailored to the New Forest.

3.2 However, there is no obligation on the Authority to award a contract following a tender process as stated in the Instructions for Tendering.

4  Task and Finish Group

4.1 At the Authority meeting on 26 June 2014, Members decided to set up a Members Task and Finish Group to empower Members to make an informed recommendation, without prejudice, about whether to proceed with this project, and award the associated contract.

4.2 The Task & Finish Group met three times, Members asked Officers to complete three pieces of work to support the process and inform their recommendation:

- Officers collected public feedback on local support for the scheme
- All of the businesses who had expressed an interest in hosting a bike docking station were re-contacted to confirm their interest,
- A map was produced showing where the proposed scheme would be located and how it could link settlements, attractions and existing transport links.

4.3 The current tender is valid for 120 days following closing date for submission, which means a decision on the full contract has to be made by 7 September. The minimum implementation period for the project is six months so a final decision about whether or not to award a contract has to be made at the Extraordinary Authority Meeting.

5  Recent Developments

5.1 Since the original feasibility study was done and the invitation to tender was issued, the backdrop to cycling in the New Forest and elsewhere has changed significantly.

5.2 The main sponsor of the London Cycle Hire scheme has indicated it will not be renewing its sponsorship. New schemes have since launched in Liverpool and Reading and are currently operating without a sponsor. The likelihood of any significant sponsorship being available to the New Forest system has therefore markedly reduced.
5.3 In the New Forest a major anti-cycling sentiment has come to the fore in the wake of large-scale cycle sportive events which have impacted on local people. A fresh wave of concern exists about the safety of on-road cycling. Concerns about safety featured prominently in the responses to the recent questionnaire about the proposed scheme, especially amongst those who live and work in the Forest. Members therefore questioned whether the time was right to introduce more cyclists onto New Forest roads.

5.4 These contextual factors are not a result of the procurement, but have emerged in timescales parallel to the running of the procurement process. Both the commercial climate and local opinion of cycling have changed during the lifetime of the procurement cycle.

5.5 In summary, Members were concerned about, the financial viability of the scheme, and the recently emerged sentiment in the Forest towards cycling in the wake of large scale events. Members had insufficient confidence that the project would now be financially sustainable or receive sufficient local support, and therefore be appropriate for the New Forest at this time.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Members’ Task & Finish Group recommends that the National Park Authority does not proceed with the New Forest Public Bike System at this time