

NFNPA 517/17

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 19 JANUARY 2017

ENGAGEMENT WITH VISITORS IN THE NEW FOREST CENTRE

Report by: Nigel Matthews, Head of Recreation Management and Learning, and Mark Holroyd, Transport, Access and Sustainable Tourism Manager

Summary

This report proposes how we should work with the Ninth Centenary Trust to provide a visitor interface following the decision by New Forest District Council to close the Visitor Information Centre within the New Forest Centre at the end of January 2017.

Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no equality or diversity implications arising directly from this report. Work to engage with visitors will not affect one type of group more than another and should help a wide range of people appreciate and enjoy the New Forest.

Recommendation:

To support the proposal to extend the Brockenhurst Travel Concierge into Lyndhurst for the 2017 summer season.

Contact

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1 Closure of the Visitor Information Centre

- 1.1 NFDC has run a Visitor Information Centre (VIC) within the New Forest Centre (the Centre) for many years. They have rented a room, and staffed an information desk for the same hours as the Centre is open; helping newly arrived visitors to find accommodation, promoting visitor attractions (included the New Forest Tour) and answering questions from the public about the New Forest. Since the designation of the National Park, they have also been willing partners in NPA educational campaigns and in raising awareness of the things that make the National Park special.
- 1.2 NFDC have recently made the decision to close the VIC at the end of January 2017. A significant volume of New Forest Tour 'off-bus' ticket sales were generated in the VIC in 2016.
- 1.3 Unless something new is done, there will be no dedicated personnel within the Centre who can sell New Forest Tour tickets. Failure to have proactive face-to-face promotion of the Tour in Lyndhurst would have potentially serious knock-on impacts on the New Forest Tour's overall performance.
- 1.4 The New Forest Centre are considering if and how visitor engagement will take place within the Centre in the long-term. There is currently at least a short-term visitor engagement challenge to overcome. Therefore, we have discussed how we can continue Tour ticket sales in 2017 and assist as a result in helping the centre to provide engagement with and information to visitors.

2 Our visitor engagement activity

- 2.1 The NPA currently engages with the visiting public in many ways, including through our rangers, communications activity, interpretation, Local Information Points, behaviour change campaigns and transport products. In 2017/18, we planning a review of the methods and locations where our key messages are presented to the public in order to ensure these are most effective and fit for future needs.
- 2.2 Officers are discussing with all partners, including the Ninth Centenary Trust, how we could work to achieve the best possible outcome for the Centre, visitors, local people – and the National Park. A number of long-term scenarios are possible, but extending the NPA Travel Concierge service for 2017 has emerged as something that has the support of the Trust and seems practicable for this summer. It provides a 'stepping-stone' to a longer term solution.

3. Proposal to extend the NPA Travel Concierge service to Lyndhurst

- 3.1 The NPA currently provides a seasonal information service at Brockenhurst station, supported by South West Trains (through an annual grant) and the New Forest Tour (through a proportion of the overall income by agreement with the bus operator). Currently the service operates with 2 FTE seasonal staff, employed for the duration of the Tour season. There is scope to achieve

economies of scale by operating the service between both Brockenhurst and Lyndhurst, with 3 FTE staff for four months of the year.

- 3.2 The proposal is that the Travel Concierge would provide a face-to-face service from a small, but high profile 'plan your day area' within the front of house area in the New Forest Centre. They would welcome visitors to the National Park, promote the New Forest Tour – alongside key 'caring for the National Park' messages and things to do, such as walks and bike rides. They would not deal with accommodation queries or answer e-mails and phone enquiries from the public.
- 3.3 The main challenge is the increased cost to the NPA of running the extended Concierge service: estimated between £7000 and £10,000.
- 3.4 The NPA is currently committed to providing an annual grant of £40,000 to the Trust, as detailed in the report to the Authority meeting in July 2016. We also have £15,000 in reserves, originally set aside to part-fund changes to the front of house area aimed at improving the financial viability of the Centre (e.g. bringing the shop and VIC desks together and opening up the entrance into the museum). The July report, supported by the Authority, said that these funds would only be released to fund something that would result in clear additional benefits to the National Park and NPA – i.e. over and above that for which the main grant is intended.
- 3.5 The NPA could cover the net cost of the extended Concierge from core funds by using some of the £15,000 set aside in our reserves for the Centre.
- 3.6 After one seasons operation all parties will have an improved understanding of the options for the long-term provision of New Forest Tour ticket sales and visitor engagement within Lyndhurst and we can consider options in our 2018-19 work planning.

Recommendation

To support the proposal to extend the Brockenhurst Travel Concierge into Lyndhurst for the 2017 summer season.