

NFNPA 535/17

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 12 OCTOBER 2017

VERGE PROTECTION IN THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK

Report by: David Illsley, Policy Manager

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The damage being caused to the verges of the New Forest is an important issue and addressing it involves working in partnership. This paper summarises the work being undertaken to address the issue, focusing initially on the work taking place in the Western Escarpment Conservation Area in the north west of the New Forest; before highlighting the other measures and approaches underway across the rest of the National Park.
- 1.2 The Western Escarpment Conservation Area was formally designated by the Authority in March 2008. At approximately 14 kilometres long and 2.5 kilometres at its widest point, the Western Escarpment is the largest Conservation Area in the National Park and includes land within the parishes of Hale, Woodgreen, Godshill, Hyde, Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley, Fordingbridge and Ringwood.
- 1.3 The National Park Authority has a duty to ensure that the character of the Conservation Area is preserved or enhanced when considering applications for development. Importantly, Conservation Areas are designated due to the character of the area, not just the individual buildings. The Western Escarpment Conservation Area Character Appraisal (March 2009) provides a detailed assessment of the area and the features that make it worthy of additional protection.
- 1.4 Following the designation of the Conservation Area in 2008, a Steering Group was established made up of representatives of the seven town and parish councils with land within the Conservation Area, supported by Authority officers. The Steering Group have worked proactively to enhance the character of the Conservation Area and this has been framed around the Western Escarpment Conservation Area Action Plan 2012 – 2017, endorsed by the Authority in June 2012 following extensive public consultation. The Action Plan sets out an overall vision for the area, identifying major issues and focuses attention on maintaining the area as a distinctive place for future generations to enjoy.

2. Verge protection in the Western Escarpment Conservation Area

- 2.1 The grass verges of the Western Escarpment are an important part of the rural landscape and character of the area. In addition, many are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which means they are legally protected against damage; and they also provide important feeding areas for commoners' livestock.

- 2.2 The Conservation Area Character Appraisal highlights their importance and this was echoed in the local community responses that fed into the preparation of the Conservation Area Action Plan in 2012. This Plan identified a specific action to '*work with parish councils to identify specific problems of parking on verges within the Conservation Area and notify the necessary authorities and agree the most appropriate solutions.*'
- 2.3 The town and parish councils represented on the Steering Group have worked over an extended period to map verge damage for the whole Conservation Area, highlighting over 12 kilometres of verges that have been damaged by vehicle over-running and parking. This information has been shared with a range of statutory bodies in the New Forest and it is acknowledged that the issue can only be addressed by working in partnership.
- 2.4 The Steering Group recognises that verge protection requires a range of complementary approaches, including hard engineering, public awareness raising and enforcement. As part of this - and following meetings with statutory bodies - the Steering Group produced their '*Verges within the Western Escarpment Conservation Area*' leaflet – Annex 1. The leaflet aims to raise awareness of the landscape and ecological value of the grass verges in the area and the protection they should be afforded. Over the last 18 months over 5,000 copies have been produced by the Authority and distributed via parish newsletters, local information points, posted to residents and placed on vehicles that are parked on verges.

3. Work with the statutory bodies in the New Forest National Park

- 3.1 The Western Escarpment verge protection leaflet was produced following liaison and agreement with the National Park Authority, the Commoners' Defence Association, Natural England, the Verderers of the New Forest, Hampshire County Council, the Forestry Commission and the National Trust. Between them these groups represent a range of interests in the New Forest and also manage significant areas of land within the Conservation Area including the Open Forest, Hale Purlieu and Rockford Common.
- 3.2 The role of the verge protection leaflet in raising local awareness supports related work being undertaken on the issue by the statutory bodies in the area. This includes:
- The use of appropriate planning conditions by the National Park Authority to prevent the storage of materials and parking on adjacent protected verges when planning consent is issued.
 - The physical works undertaken by the Forestry Commission (funded through the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme) to prevent vehicle over-running and parking on the fringes of the Open Forest. This has included the placement of dragon's teeth and ditch-and-banking where appropriate (e.g. Woodgreen, Nomansland).
 - The Forestry Commission has also recently appointed a Verge Restoration Officer to engage with local communities, stakeholders and parish councils on the issue.
 - The Heritage Lottery funded New Forest *Our Past Our Future* project on conserving the Forest fringe. The Forestry Commission is the lead organisation for this project and the Commission has produced guidance on access, boundaries and building work on properties surrounded by Crown Land which is available to local communities.
 - Hampshire County Council identifies Road Verges of Ecological Importance where the cutting regime respects the flowering and seeding seasons of the plants.

4. Co-ordinated work across the rest of the National Park

- 4.1 The Western Escarpment Conservation Area verge protection leaflet was intentionally designed to be easily adapted for other parts of the Forest. The wording and messages in the leaflet are applicable across wide areas of the National Park and the Steering Group recognises that verge damage is not restricted to the north west of the Park. The issue has been raised by communities elsewhere in the New Forest, including at the Parish Quadrant meetings, and is reflected in Action LH6 in the New Forest National Park Partnership Plan 2015 – 2020 which sets out an action to *‘Take forward a project to protect the grazed verges of the Open Forest from damage and erosion, both by parked cars and traffic overrun.’* The Verderers of the New Forest, the National Park Authority and other partners are listed as the key organisations for this action.
- 4.2 With the messages in the leaflet already endorsed by a range of statutory bodies and land managers in the Forest, the leaflet could be updated and used more widely to support the work of the National Park Authority, Verderers of the New Forest, Forestry Commission and others where appropriate. To date the design and printing costs have been borne by the Authority and if the leaflet is to be extended to the rest of the Park it is recommended that other statutory bodies are asked to contribute financially to its production.
- 4.3 A revised Park-wide leaflet could be used by rangers working for the National Park Authority, National Trust and Forestry Commission to support the work being undertaken on the ground to conserve the rural character and habitats of the New Forest. It could also complement the work of the Forestry Commission’s newly appointed Verge Restoration Officer; the physical measures being implemented on Crown lands through the Higher Level Stewardship scheme; and the Lottery-funded Our Past Our Future Forest fringe project. This range of projects highlights the measures underway to address the damage being caused to the verges of the National Park and the importance of the statutory bodies in the New Forest continuing to work together on the issue.

RECOMMENDATION

Members note the progress to date on verge protection measures in the National Park and support the on-going partnership work with statutory bodies and local communities to address the issue.

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Papers: **NFNPA 535/17**
Annex 1 – Verges within the Western Escarpment Conservation Area (February 2016)

Equality Impact Assessment: **There are no equality or diversity implications arising directly from this report**

