

New Forest Centre Annual Report for 2016-17

Prepared for New Forest National Park Authority Resources, Audit and Performance Committee by Hilary Marshall, Centre Manager

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises activities at the New Forest Centre during the year (April 2016 to March 2017) that are of benefit to the National Park Authority (NPA). They reflect the NPA's purposes and duty, the priorities set in the NPA's Business Plan (2015-18) and the NPA's work programme for 2016-17.
- 1.2 At the NPA Members' workshop in November 2015 it was agreed that the following key assets and benefits summarise the ways in which the partnership supports the work of the NPA. The table in section 4 gives details of achievements during 2016-17 against NPA Business Plan priorities.

2 Three key assets of the New Forest Centre in relation to the Authority

- 2.1 Prominent, multifaceted 'NPA-branded' centre in the centre of Lyndhurst (the 'capital' of the New Forest)
- 2.2 Aims closely aligned to those of the NPA so that a high level of content relates to the National Park
- 2.3 Visitor information inside the building enabling partnership activity to include sustainable transport and tourism

3 Key benefits of the partnership to the NPA (text in *italics* is from the signed Agreement)

- 3.1 Key National Park messages conveyed by multiple means to over 200,000 visitors/year
- 3.2 *An annual events and exhibitions programme that features National Park themes including joint events, a special event for National Parks' Week and Authority curated exhibitions*
- 3.3 *Continued development of museum content that reflects National Park purposes; a natural venue for the delivery of a wide range of interpretive projects and an ideal partner in funding bids such as Our Past Our Future*
- 3.4 Extensive collection of books, maps and other historical documents being catalogued and digitised in preparation for an online information resource. Archives made available through the Christopher Tower Reference Library
- 3.5 Accredited museum status ensuring the library and collection artefacts are conserved and documented to recognised standards

- 3.6 *An education programme that includes joint education sessions with visible National Park themes; a strong commitment to joint working, ensuring education staff play to the strengths of their respective organisations (e.g. NF Centre: commoning; NPA: tourism and recreation impacts)*
- 3.7 *Agreement to co-operate in developing and running mutually beneficial income generation schemes such as retail of a small range of National Park branded items and assisting in the trial of new initiatives*
- 3.8 Free venue for training, workshops and VIP visits
- 3.9 Skilled staff and volunteers to provide all of the above
- 3.10 Access to external sources of funding not otherwise available to the NPA

4 2016-17 achievements

- 4.1 The table below summarises the ways in which the NPA's priorities were delivered through the Centre in the last financial year.

NPA Priorities for Protect	New Forest Centre 2016-17 contribution
a) Enhancing the New Forest's landscapes and habitats	<p>The New Forest's special landscapes and habitats are documented and celebrated, strengthening the rationale for current enhancement strategies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Displays highlight the Forest's landscape, habitats and past/present management ▪ Reference library with 20,000 items of printed material including over 6,000 historic maps that are in the process of being catalogued by volunteers ▪ Venue for inaugural 'Our Past, our Future' (OPOF) exhibition
b) Ensuring new development is sympathetic and in keeping with its surroundings	<p>As above, traditional buildings are celebrated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Visitors can walk through a cob cottage near the museum entrance
c) Conserving the historic environment and local way of life	<p>Largest source of historical information about the New Forest available for research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accredited museum with 2000 natural and social history objects ▪ Commoning features strongly in museum displays ▪ NPA-procured WWI permanent display ▪ NPA curated WW1 temporary exhibition in Feb to May 2016. ▪ The Ecademy (OPOF project) commenced in January 2016 and has successfully digitised over 5,000 items (target for year was 3,000 items). The project is therefore ahead of schedule.

NPA Priorities for Enjoy	New Forest Centre 2016-17 contribution
<p>a) Enabling high quality experiences of the National Park</p>	<p>Provision of visitor information about different venues and routes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Following the closure of the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) in January 2017, a number of visitor information services have been put in place. <p>Volunteering opportunities within the Centre Number of volunteers rose by one from 35 in 2015/16 to 36 in 2016/17 (not including trustees) contributing equivalent of 3 x FT posts.</p> <p>Venue for engaging with under-represented groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Easy access from village car park ▪ 149 groups used the museum and education facilities in 2016/17, including some from areas of social deprivation and some with special needs.
<p>b) Improving understanding of the National Park</p>	<p>Information and experience (exhibitions, museum, library, books, maps etc.) promoting understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Free entry to the Museum introduced in February 2016, resulted in visitor figures rising from 27,628 in 2015/16 to, to 72,623 in 2016/17. This significant increase in visitors has enabled many more people to gain an understanding of the National Park and to take part in informal family activities. ▪ Installation of new museum panels marked the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Forest Charter and the formation of the New Forest Association. ▪ Visitor numbers to the Library rose from 216 in 2015/16, to 351 in 2016/17, due to many more people accessing the Library as a result of free entry into the Museum and the Ecademy project (OPOF) that has helped raise awareness of the Library and its collections. ▪ Inaugural Ecademy Conference staged that attracted nearly 160 delegates. ▪ Range of local history books (many by local authors), comprehensive range of

	<p>maps and other Forest-related publications available</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Programme of temporary exhibitions with free entrance (each 2-3 months long). 'Curiouser and Curiouser' linked to the New Forest Arts Festival (OPOF). Numbers of visitors to the Gallery rose from 56,594 visitors 2015/16, to 59,861 in 2016/17. Exhibitions included the 4th annual Open Art exhibition sponsored by ExxonMobil. <p>Public events and talks reach a range of audiences</p> <p>In 2016/17 8,719 participants took part in family school holiday activities, compared to 4,900 participants in 2015/16. This is due to the effect of free entry into the Museum.</p> <p>Education and group bookings programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 3,392 school children and group participants visited the museum or took part in education team led visits in 2016/17 compared to 3,800 2015/16. The drop is largely due to the changes in the curriculum. <p>Venue for interpretation projects and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E.g. in connections with OPOF and exhibitions in gallery and front of house (FOH) training
<p>c) Managing recreation to benefit the National Park</p>	<p>Encouraging people to go to agreed robust areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NPA and FC publications available ▪ Since closure of the VIC, FOH staff trained in-house to handle routine enquiries.
<p>NPA Priorities for Prosper</p>	<p>New Forest Centre 2016-17 contribution</p>
<p>a) Supporting a distinctive and prosperous local economy</p>	<p>Venue for promoting sustainable tourism and Brand New Forest campaign</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leaflets promoting local visitor attractions made available to visitors through a leaflet distribution company spinner. <p>New Forest Marque promotion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The New Forest Museum Trading Co. is a member of New Forest Marque

	<p>New Forest Open Art</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Annual Open Art competition encourages creative industries
b) Promoting Sustainable Transport	<p>Promotion of sustainable transport through VIC in summer 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Venue for training workshops <p>Interception of New Forest Tour routes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bus stop adjacent to the Centre ▪ Information about the New Forest Centre is included in the commentary <p>Film show at entrance to museum promotes sustainable transport</p>
c) Encouraging Sustainable communities	<p>Best practice use of renewable fuel technologies through continued benefit of solar panels.</p>
Achieving Excellence	
New Forest Centre 2016-17 contribution	
a) Providing the highest quality of service	<p>High standards of customer care without need for direct NPA staff involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Open every day except Christmas and Boxing Days, and for annual stocktaking
b) Achieving maximum benefits for the National Park	<p>Partnership to deliver range of work programmes, including increasing knowledge of the Forest and inspiring others to care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most funding bids usefully include elements to be delivered through the Centre (e.g. WWI and OPOF). ▪ Centre benefitted from an HLF Transition grant in 2016-17 that resulted in visitor and market analysis, audience development, interpretation strategy and planning for a sustainable future. NPA officers engaged with consultants and took part in workshops.
c) Using available resources effectively and efficiently	<p>Cost-effective use of facilities and joint working between staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NPA staff regularly use meeting room facilities at no charge. In 2016/17, the NPA benefitted from the equivalent of £790 of commercial room hire as well as £3,264 in connection with OPOF related meetings. Hosted partner organisation visits.

4.2 2016/17 saw an enormous increase in visitors to the Centre and was another busy year in terms of activities that provided clear benefits to the National Park. Many

of these have been detailed in the table above but additional information is recorded below:

- 4.3 During 2016/17, 204,061 visitors came through the door: a slight fall from 208,904 in 2015/16. During 2016/17, the VIC was closed for the final two months which may account for the slight drop. Despite this overall drop, the percentage of those visitors, then entering the Museum rose from 13% in 2015/16, to 36% in 2016/17. The temporary exhibition Gallery saw another increase in visitors during the year; this appears to endorse the staging of fewer, better quality and longer term exhibitions.
- 4.4 Of the 87 formal education groups sessions conducted by the Centre's Education Team, 17 were run in conjunction with the NPA Education Team. Approximately a quarter of the total number of education sessions run were to schools located within the National Park.
- 4.5 In 2016-17 59,861 visitors enjoyed the 6 main exhibitions held in the Gallery, an increase of over 3,000 on the previous year. Each exhibition lasted for two to three months and topics included 'The New Forest Remembers WW1', curated by the NPA; 'Curiouser and Curiouser' that reflected on the life of Alice Liddell and looked at the human inspiration for some of the famous Alice characters; the 4th 'New Forest Open Art' Exhibition, staged in partnership with the NPA; 'Our Past, Our Future' the first of four planned OPOF exhibitions curated by the NPA; 'Colin Merrin and Nicky', two artists whose work is inspired by the New Forest; and 'Creative Forest' a group art exhibition staged in partnership with Creative Coverage.
- 4.6 Discovery Days continued to attract increasing numbers of families. Of the 28 Discovery Days run in 2016 at the Centre, 12 were supported by the Education Team at the NPA.
- 4.7 In the Museum, new panels about the 1217 Forest Charter and the formation of the New Forest Association which celebrated its 150th anniversary in this year, are on display throughout 2017.
- 4.8 The Marketing Officer has continued to work closely with the NPA's Communications Team and the number of social media subscribers rose from 19,955 in 2015/16 to 28,690 in 2016/17.
- 4.9 The number of volunteer hours rose in 2016/17 to 5,900, nearly double the figure for 2015/16. This is a reflection of the continued and increased interest in the OPOF Ecademy project as well as the ongoing effect of the annual volunteer day held at Lyndhurst Community Centre.
- 4.10 In the Library, volunteer support has enabled the Library to open to the public every Wednesday and Friday morning. The number of people using the Library rose by over 62% in 2016/17 in comparison to 2015/16. Alongside the digitisation of images as detailed in the table above, work has commenced on digitising large scale maps. The Digitisation Officer has been utilising the scanning facilities at the NPA in Lyminster and has so far managed to digitise just over 500 maps (this

represents just under 10% of the Centre's total map collection). Work has continued on developing the online information portal, 'New Forest Knowledge' that is due to be launched this autumn.

- 4.11 Over the year, the Centre has been pleased to take part in a number of visits to the New Forest by Government ministers and other interested parties and organisations. Government ministers included Rory Stewart MP and Caroline Nokes MP and more recently, representatives from the Heart of England Forest toured the Centre as part of a day-long itinerary.

5 Plans for 2017-18 (including work already carried out in the period April to July 2017)

- 5.1 In February 2017, the VIC closed its doors and the Centre team alongside staff at the NPA began to develop a strategy for dealing with face to face enquiries (from mid-April to mid-July these exceeded an average of 50/day). A range of measures was introduced, including a leaflet spinner, a most-asked question and answer sheet and transferring the NPA table map to a prominent position in the Museum. Following support by NPA Members for 2017, the Travel Ambassador Service was extended to include a post at the Centre for the duration of the New Forest Tour season. Tour tickets and walking packs are being actively promoted and it is proving to be an invaluable addition to the Centre's service provision. At the same time a new café has opened in the space previously occupied by the VIC and the earlier opening time of 9am adopted for the summer months has enabled visitors to access Tour tickets and information before the first bus leaves at 10am as well as visit the Gallery and Museum.
- 5.2 The HLF Transition project resulted in a strong recommendation that the Trust apply to HLF again for a heritage grant to re-display the Museum, extend and enhance the Library and re-orientate the ground floor (including shop and gallery). A business model that takes free entry to the Museum as a basic premise has been drawn up and a Round 1 bid is due to be submitted to HLF in August 2017. The strong need to re-design the Centre interior as a result of free entry and increased visitor enquiries has, we hope, created a compelling case for HLF investment.
- 5.3 In 2017 the Centre staged an exhibition in connection with the New Forest Arts Festival, entitled 'All Trees are Clocks'. The exhibition linked art and science though combining scientific information, video, experimental music and B&W photography. The New Forest Centre and the NPA co-planned the 5th Open Art Competition and Exhibition and will stage the second OPOF exhibition in the final exhibition slot. Third and fourth OPOF exhibitions are planned for 2018 and 2019.
- 5.4 The Centre will continue to play a leading role in delivering content for the New Forest Arts Festival. Arts based exhibitions for the future years of OPOF are planned to coincide with the Arts Festival and activities based around the exhibitions will form part of the Festival's programme of events.

- 5.5 A second and expanded (two day) Ecademy Conference will be staged in October 2017. This year's theme will be community archaeology. The extended links with universities and other academic institutions through the Ecademy project has opened and strengthened channels of communication and paved the way for future debate and informed planning.
- 5.6 Activities to mark the 800th anniversary of the Forest Charter and launching of the Woodland Trust's Charter for Trees, Woods and People are being planned in collaboration with the Centre and other partners and a permanent 'totem' is to be installed opposite the Centre entrance as part of the November celebrations.
- 5.7 The Common Thread project, a one year community arts OPOF project, is due to commence in early 2018. The project will focus on the New Forest Embroidery and use it as a device to engage with isolated and more deprived communities both within, and on the edges of the Forest.

Hilary Marshall
New Forest Centre Manager