
NFNPA RAPC 349/17

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 13 NOVEMBER 2017

NEW FOREST CENTRE AGREEMENT

Report by: Nigel Matthews, Head of Recreation Management and Learning

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' endorsement and involvement to develop a new Agreement between the Ninth Centenary Trust (the Trust) and the New Forest National Park Authority (NPA) for work at the New Forest Centre to deliver aspects of the NPA's Business Plan. The current three-year Agreement follows on from Agreements dating back to July 2007 and finishes at the end of March 2018.
- 1.2 The NPA currently contributes £40,000/year to the Trust, as part of a close and extensive partnership. The benefits to the NPA are discussed and developments that need to be taken into account are outlined.
- 1.3. The paper proposes that NPA Members and officers use the Members' Day at the New Forest Centre on 6 December to develop shared goals for a new Agreement with the Trust, aligned where appropriate with the NPA's emerging Business Plan for 2018-2021. The proposed new Agreement would go to the full Authority meeting on 18 January 2018.

2. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee endorses:

- 1) the development of a new Agreement that lasts for the duration of the NPA's new Business Plan, 2018-2021;**
- 2) the use of the 6 December Members' Day at the New Forest Centre to develop shared goals to inform the Agreement and;**
- 3) that a proposed new Agreement and funding schedule is then brought to the Authority on 18 January 2018.**

Papers

NFNPA RAPC 349/17 - Cover paper

NFNPA RAPC 349/17 - Annex 1 Key benefits of the partnership to the National Park Authority

NFNPA RAPC 349/17 - Annex 2 Current Agreement between the New Forest National Park Authority and the Ninth Centenary Trust

Previous papers

NFNPA 533/17 - New Forest Centre Annual Report 2016-17 - Annex 1

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Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no equality or diversity implications arising directly from this report. The New Forest Centre has an Audience Development Plan and an Access Plan which together address potential equality issues.

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1 Background to the Agreement and the Association

- 1.1 The primary objective of the NPA's association with the Ninth Centenary Trust, as described in the current Agreement, is to *'develop and operate the New Forest Centre as an essential component of the New Forest visitor's experience providing a sustainable, informative and enjoyable opportunity for all users, to increase their understanding and enjoyment of the New Forest focusing on its natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage with fully integrated local and visitor information services'*.
- 1.2 The NPA has signed three previous Agreements with the Trust, starting on 1 July 2007, 1 April 2012 and 1 April 2015. Over this time, the Authority has contributed £488,000 grant funding to the Trust, plus project-specific funding.
- 1.3 The Agreement is one of the NPA's most significant partnerships, with a current programme fund commitment of £40,000 each year. This contribution represents around 9% of the Trust's overall annual running cost of £450,000 and around 13% of the NPA's Programme Fund.
- 1.4. National parks in the UK have different types and models of 'visitor centres'. To varying degrees they all help people understand and enjoy the special qualities of the national parks and in doing so aim to encourage protection of them. Many are run directly by national park authorities, incurring considerable running costs, as well as enabling income to be generated from services at the centres.
- 1.5. The existing partnership with the Trust is a unique model of partnership and has been very successful over the past 10 years in delivering Park purposes, with 200,000+ people passing through its doors each year to find out about the New Forest and what makes it special. The New Forest Centre is an accredited museum, library, shop and exhibition space.
- 1.6 The branding of the Centre strongly reflects that of the National Park and NPA, and its content focusses on the National Park; as a result it is often viewed as a National Park Visitor Centre. There is a real sense that the Centre is an information gateway to the present-day National Park as well as an excellent window on the New Forest's past.
- 1.7 Joint working and funding bids have resulted in updated displays, training for front of house staff, many National Park themed events and exhibitions, project

launches and excellent liaison with regard to formal education work enabling the NPA to reach as wide an audience as possible.

- 1.8 Ever since the original Agreement, both the Trust and the NPA have aspired to greatly increase the number of people entering the Centre's museum (behind the shop and gallery) where most information about the Forest's special qualities is displayed. Entrance to the museum for under 16's was made free from 2007, but the fees from other people provided an important (although declining) source of income to the Trust. In 2016 the Trust decided to trial free entrance to all, resulting in a very significant increase in entrants (rising from 10,813 in 2015/16 to, to 72,623 in 2016/17). This is the most beneficial of all the changes that have happened since 2007. Increased sales and donations since the change have helped to significantly offset the loss of the admissions income and the Trustees are committed to retaining free entry for the foreseeable future
- 1.9 In March 2015, Members resolved *'that a three year agreement be entered into with the New Forest Centre with a contribution of £40,000 per year by the Authority to the Centre for the duration of the agreement and that the Authority commit to review the benefits of the association during this period so that appropriate decisions could be made as to any future extensions following the current agreement period'*.
- 1.10 The review of the Agreement took place at a Members' day in the Centre in November 2015. It was recognised that the list of 'key benefits' should be extended and that some aspects of the Agreement (especially the Centre's Development Plan) were no longer relevant. Furthermore, Members asked that annual reports about the Centre's achievements should be structured according to the NPA's Business Plan. The most recent of these reports was discussed by Members at the Authority meeting on 12 October 2017; for ease of reference, the extended list of benefits from this report is provided in **Annex 1**. The full Agreement which now needs updating is attached for reference as **Annex 2**.

2. Recent developments to be taken into account

- 2.1 Until this year, New Forest District Council staffed a Visitor Information Centre within the Centre, dealing with all kinds of visitor enquiries (face to face, by phone and e-mail) including promoting visitor attractions, booking accommodation and selling New Forest Tour tickets. As part of a wider review of its services and in response to the changing demand and behaviour around visitor information, NFDC closed the VIC in February 2017, and a new café has since opened in the vacated space, operated by a third party.
- 2.2 Centre staff introduced a range of measures for dealing with visitor information enquiries, including a leaflet spinner, a most-asked question and answer sheet and transferring the NPA map table to a prominent position in the museum.

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- 2.3 Following agreement from NPA Members, the Brockenhurst Travel Ambassador Service was extended, for 2017, to include the Centre for the duration of the New Forest Tour season. The Ambassadors sold 15% more tickets than the number sold by the VIC staff in 2016 (when the Tour season was two weeks longer) and they recorded 5,911 meaningful engagements with the public: averaging 95/day over the 64 days of operation. Centre staff recorded that they dealt with 33 face-to-face enquiries/day over the same time-frame, compared to an average of 50 between mid-April and mid-July.
- 2.4 The Trust has recently submitted a Round 1 bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. If successful, the HLF grant will enable the Trust to redisplay of the Museum (the existing museum was created prior to 2005 and any new displays would better interpret the National Park), extend the library facilities and improve education and gallery facilities. Alongside the capital works, an extensive activities programme will achieve greater community involvement and lead towards the establishment of the Centre as a cultural hub for the Forest. A business model that takes free entry to the Museum as a basic premise has been drawn up and the National Park branding and focus would be retained.

3 Delivering for the National Park, and the New Forest Centre's place within the wider visitor experience

- 3.1 A wide range of organisations delivers visitor information and education initiatives across and around the National Park. This includes other museums and attractions, staff (e.g. rangers and education officers), volunteers, Local Information Points (nine, in local businesses and supported by the NPA), on-site fixed information and publications and online information. The NPA helps people to connect with and value the National Park through a multitude of other ways, including communications work, the walking festival, publications, the commentary on the Tour buses, a stand at the New Forest Show, the Brockenhurst Travel Ambassadors, talks etc.
- 3.2 The Centre contributes significantly to this work to provide information, raise awareness and deepen understanding, and in essence, the NPA's investment ensures a very visible National Park presence at the most prominent visitor centre in the New Forest. It supports an existing provider rather than setting up 'in competition' or risking duplication within the busiest New Forest village. The 200,000 people that enter the Centre each year include both visitors and local residents – a very significant audience.

4 Recent financial contributions from the NPA

- 4.1 In 2014-15, when its Government grant was being cut (eventually by 40%) the NPA reduced its annual grant to the Trust from £50,000 to £40,000 – and allocated a one-off contribution of £35,000 from earmarked reserves to facilitate work to improve the visitor experience and the financial sustainability of the Centre. £20,000 of this contribution was spent on retail consultancy advice which resulted in significant improvements in shop performance, and a concept

design for a new layout for the front of house area which will inform developments if the HLF bid is successful.

- 4.2 Options for integrating the front of house through shared staffing arrangements (between the Trust and NFDC) and a central shared sales and information desk proved problematic and too expensive so the remaining £15,000 was not spent.
- 4.3 In 2017 Members agreed that the cost of extending the Travel Ambassador Scheme to Lyndhurst as described above for this year could be taken from these reserves (up to £10,000). Including set-up costs, the net cost of the scheme in 2017 was £7,000, leaving £8,000.

5 Governance, management and monitoring

- 5.1 Until recently, one NPA Member was nominated as a trustee of the Trust. As part of a wider governance review by the Trust and to reduce potential conflicts of interest at Authority and Trust meetings, this was changed to a non-voting Member representative on the Trust's board. This Member receives all relevant papers and is able to participate in all discussions.
- 5.2 The same Member and NPA officers also sit on the Partnership Group which oversees the outworking of the Agreement between the Trust and the NPA. This group used to be called the Executive Management Group; because of their VIC within the building it included representation from NFDC.
- 5.3 It is planned that additional partner organisations will be invited to additional meetings of the Partnership Group. If successful, this will help the Centre work more effectively with organisations such as the Forestry Commission, New Forest Association, New Forest Trust, New Forest Marque and NFDC.
- 5.4 As well as attending the Partnership Group, officers regularly work directly with Centre staff on a range of projects. This ensures collaboration across a wide range of new and ongoing work programmes including education, events, exhibitions and the library collections.

6 Development of a new Agreement

- 6.1 It is proposed that Members and officers use the Members' Day on 6 December at the Centre to discuss the benefits the Agreement brings and how we can progress shared goals over the coming period of the NPA's Business Plan. The work done by Members in November 2015 will provide a useful starting point.
- 6.2. Based on this shared understanding, officers would then recommend a new Agreement to the full Authority at the meeting on 18 January 2018, including recommendations on the annual financial contribution for the period 2018-2021.
- 6.3. Alignment of the NPA's Business Plan and the Agreement gives a measure of stability to the Trust for financial planning for the period. However the NPA is

likely to want to retain the right to amend or change the Agreement at its discretion in the event of new circumstances such as changes to its budget.

- 6.4 Depending on the extent of delivery of the shared objectives, there is a range of options for the level of funding provided by the NPA: it could discontinue funding, provide a smaller annual grant, continue with the current contribution or give more, and any changes could be from 2018-19 or phased to give the Trust time to adapt.

7 Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee endorses:

- 1) the development of a new Agreement that lasts for the duration of the NPA's new Business Plan, 2018-2021;**
- 2) the use of the 6 December Members' Day at the New Forest Centre to develop shared goals to inform the Agreement;**
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