

NFNPA 331/10

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 28 JANUARY 2010

NEW FOREST TOUR 2009 REVIEW

Report by: Chris Gregory, Transport and Tourism Officer

1 Summary

The New Forest Tour is an open top bus tour which in 2009 operated for 86 days during the summer season. Along with Hampshire County Council and New Forest District Council, the Authority contributes funding to support the operation of the service.

This report presents Members with a review of the New Forest Tour during 2009 and the situation for 2010.

2 Recommendation

For Members to note the content of this report.

Resources and Corporate Plan

Included in 2009 – 2010 budget

- £15,000 revenue support funding
- £5,000 marketing

Corporate Plan U2: Review strategies and develop proposals to reduce the impact of traffic on the special environment of the National Park and promote alternatives to private car use, working jointly with relevant authorities.

Papers

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Cover Paper
Annex 1: Analysis of customer feedback
New Forest Tour 2009 Update
New Forest Tour 2008 Review
New Forest Tour 2007 Review
New Forest Tour Funding Arrangements

Contact

Chris Gregory
Tel: 01590 646683
Email: chris.gregory@newforestnpa.gov.uk

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The New Forest Tour is an open top bus experience following a circular route within the New Forest National Park. The route includes key settlements and visitor attractions and seeks to provide a diverse New Forest car free experience.
- 1.2 The service is provided as a partnership between the Authority, Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, the local tourism industry and the bus operator Bluestar.
- 1.3 There are clear links between the New Forest Tour and the National Park second purpose, for example for the last three years, over 93% of customer feedback responses stated that the New Forest Tour improved understanding and enjoyment of the National Park. The service also contributes to the first purpose by encouraging people to explore the New Forest without a car.

2 Background

- 2.1 The New Forest Tour was first introduced in 2004, and despite the use of older buses, the service proved popular with the public and received national recognition as a leading car free tourism initiative. The same buses remained for the 2005 season, and patronage continued to grow. However, feedback suggested that customers were becoming increasingly disappointed with the reliability and comfort of the buses used.
- 2.2 A new operating model was developed for 2006, which included securing the use of two nearly new buses, increasing the service frequency to hourly and improvements to the route. Hampshire County Council secured the use of these nearly new buses with a one off capital contribution of £100k. The Authority and New Forest District Council each provided an annual revenue funding contribution of £15k to subsidise the service for a period of 3 years, with the buses being operated by Bluestar.
- 2.3 In February 2009, Hampshire County Council coordinated a tender exercise to identify an operator for the 2009 service. This exercise clearly set out the requirements for the core New Forest Tour operation, but allowed potential tenderers the flexibility to propose alternative formats for the service. Bluestar was selected as the successful tenderer and was offered the contract to operate the New Forest Tour for a period of four years commencing summer 2009.

3 2009 Season Marketing

3.1 The Authority led on the development of a product marketing plan and action plan to ensure a joined up and consistent approach to marketing. The content of the product marketing plan and associated marketing action plan was agreed by partners for implementation.

3.2 Specific marketing actions in 2009 included:-

- Close working with the tourism industry, in particular accommodation providers;
- Improvements to the established, professionally recorded commentary;
- the production of the New Forest Tour Official Guide, which was offered to customers as they boarded the bus and included a written commentary, together with discount vouchers for attractions and other services along the route;
- dedicated [New Forest Tour](#) website, with the ability to offer online ticket sales;
- product leaflet with a print run of 80 000, distributed to over 300 locations in and around the New Forest;
- the promotion of car free tourism opportunities arising from the New Forest Tour, in particular it's ability to carry cycles;
- Free bus travel for New Forest Tour customers travelling from Southampton, Bournemouth and Hythe, to and from the New Forest Tour route;
- Discounts arrangements with attractions, cycle hire providers, and pubs and restaurants en route.

3.3 The effectiveness of the marketing campaign relied on close partnership working between the funding partners and other stakeholders such as accommodation providers and the wider New Forest Tourism Association.

3.4 A steering group was established to oversee the marketing campaign, operation and management of the New Forest Tour during 2009.

4 2009 Season Performance

4.1 In 2009 the service operated for 86 consecutive days between 20 June and 13 September. 15623 passenger journeys were recorded during this period, a rise of 1520 over the previous year, despite a shorter operating season.

4.2 Ticket sales generated £57,199 in revenue in 2009, which demonstrated an increase of £3354 over 2008, again despite a shorter operating season.

4.3 Overall both passenger journey numbers and revenue from ticket sales have experienced growth in each of the last four years.

	2006	2007	2008	2009
Number of passenger journeys	9015	9879	14103	15623
Operating days	100	100	100	86
Level of public subsidy	30000	30000	30000	30000
Total Revenue from ticket sales	£36118	£40582	£53845	£57199
Average revenue from ticket sales per day	£361.18	£405.82	£538.45	£665.10
Subsidy per passenger journey	£3.32	£3.04	£2.13	£1.92
Authority subsidy per passenger journey	£1.66	£1.52	£1.06	96p

4.4 Research undertaken by the University of Central Lancashire in 2006 found that on average, each New Forest Tour customer contributed £28.79 to the local economy. It can be estimated that in 2009 there were approximately 8000 individual New Forest Tour customers which would suggest that the wider economic impact of the product is in the region of 230k.

5 2009 Season Customer Feedback

5.1 The New Forest Tour Official Guide, provided to all customers as they boarded the bus, included a feedback form which customers were encouraged to complete and return. 458 customers completed the form in 2009.

5.2 **Annex 1** provides a detailed analysis of the feedback received, comparing the feedback received in 2009 with that of 2007 and 2008. The key findings for 2009 are as follows:-

- 97% of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the New Forest Tour improved their understanding and enjoyment of the New Forest;
- 80% of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the New Forest Tour will help to reduce the impacts of traffic in the New Forest;
- over half of respondents followed, or planned to follow, one of the four walking or cycle routes offered in the Official Guide;
- 32% of respondents stopped at Beaulieu National Motor Museum or Exbury Gardens and Steam Railway, before continuing their journey on the bus;
- nearly half of all respondents were overnight staying visitors, staying one night or more in accommodation within or near the National Park;
- 48% of respondents did not use the car to access the New Forest Tour.

6 2010 Operation

6.1 The 2009 season represented the first year of a four year funding contract with the bus operator; the contract is dependant on a level of annual revenue support funding from funding partners and the amount of revenue support funding will determine the length of operation of the service. For example, in 2009 a £30k contribution delivered an 86 day operation. However, a lower level of revenue support funding would have delivered a reduced operation. For example; in 2009 a contribution of £25k would have delivered a 72 day operation.

- 6.2 These costs and service levels are likely to be broadly similar in 2010. It is not the intention to retender for the service until the end of the current contract in 2012.
- 6.3 If funding partners are unable to raise sufficient revenue support funding, the bus operator has stated that it will not operate the New Forest Tour.
- 6.4 It is likely that New Forest District Council will reduce its funding subsidy for the New Forest Tour in 2010 to £10k. This will be followed by a further reduction in 2011 to £5k. From 2012 onwards New Forest District Council will not contribute to the funding of the service.
- 6.5 Consequently in order to maintain the same level of operation in 2010 and in future years, alternative sources of subsidy funding will need to be identified. Investigations are ongoing to identify new funding partners; key attractions on the route of the New Forest Tour have been approached and are considering sponsoring the New Forest Tour in return for commercial advertising.
- 6.6 It is proposed that the Authority contribution remains at £15k for 2010.

Recommendation

For Members to note the content of this report.