NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 25 MARCH 2010

CHIEF EXECUTIVE’S REPORT

Report by: Barrie Foley, Interim Chief Executive

Summary:

This report covers the period since the last Authority meeting on 25 February 2010 and the extraordinary Authority meeting held on 16 March 2010, except planning development control and enforcement which covers activity in February.

Recommendation:

To note the report

Paper:

NFNPA 339/10: Cover paper

Contact:

Barrie Foley
Tel: 01590 646633
Email: barrie.foley@newforestnpa.gov.uk
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1 Introduction and overview

- This report covers the period since the last Authority meeting on 25 February 2010 and the extraordinary Authority meeting held on 16 March 2010, except planning development control and enforcement which covers activity in February.

- The introduction of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) launched this period is an excellent example of real partnership working. The Verderers, Forestry Commission and the Commoners Defence will work with the National Park Authority in identifying where funding can be injected into the Forest. The Authority’s knowledge and technical expertise will play an important role in the success of the scheme. The scheme has the potential of injecting over £20 million into the Forest over the next ten years.

- The search for a new Chief Executive has continued during the period with the implementation of a thorough recruitment process. A potential candidate has been identified and presented to Members. It is hoped that following final discussions with the preferred candidate an announcement providing more details can be made at the Authority meeting.

- The Management Plan and Core Strategy (for Inspectorate submission) documents are now available as professionally printed formal documents. The Recreation Management Strategy document will soon be issued to the publishers for final printing.

- The Core Strategy and financial budget have been presented to the Resources and Performance Committee (these will also be separate agenda items). This year’s Core Strategy document illustrates how the Authority will implement its workload over the next year in line with the Management Plan. It identifies key priorities and portrays how the Authority will put more emphasis on community engagement in addition to portraying an efficient and value added service that supports our two purposes.
2 Conservation, Recreation and Sustainable Development

Transport

- Sign Rationalisation Post. The Authority is working with Hampshire County Council to improve the landscape and road safety as part of a one-year pilot project to reduce sign clutter. The Authority is part funding a Hampshire County Council Highways Engineer who will be dedicated to this project for one third of his time. The project will include:

  - finishing work to improve signs on the B3054 and put up new-look animal accident warning signs at either end of the route near Dibden Purlieu and Norleywood;
  - improving signage on the B3078 between Fordingbridge and Brook, the B3079 between Landford and Cadnam and the B3080 between Woodfalls and Bramshaw Telegraph;
  - looking at other roads within the National Park to identify at least four other ‘sign clutter hotspots’ to be improved, but not to the detriment of road user safety.

Funding

- The New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) was launched this month. The scheme has the potential to inject over £20 million of funding into the Forest over the next 10 years. Finance provided by Natural England will be managed via a Board consisting of the National Park, the Verderers and the Forestry Commission, the Commoners Defence Association are also part of the Board as non voting members.

Projects will be allocated funding in five areas:

- Bio Diversity
- Landscape
- Historic Environment
- Resource Protection
- Education and Access

- The Authority has provided funding advice and assistance in developing funding applications to a range of organisations including Sopley Village Hall Committee, Woodgreen Community Shop, Pilley Youth Club, Victoria Rooms Committee, Fordingbridge and St Marks Church, Pennington.

- Officers met with the New Forest Livestock Society and the Forestry Commission to discuss progressing the funding arrangements for the installation of mains water and electricity at Beaulieu Road Sales Yard.
Work continues on developing grant applications in order to fund the following:

- a project to provide building contractors with training in the traditional specialist building skills required to maintain, restore and make alterations to historic buildings;

- a World War Two focussed project which will include a comprehensive survey of the New Forest to ensure all war-time sites are identified, recorded and interpreted. The project will also record and interpret war-time memories of the Forest for future generations;

- a new one-year bursary placement in historic landscape through the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

Access

Working jointly with Hampshire County Council, following a request from Minstead Parish Council, improvement works to a well-used footpath in Minstead have been started. The path leads westwards from the car park at Furzey Gardens linking to the wider network of rights of way and then onto the Crown Lands. Over recent years the path surface has deteriorated due mainly to poor drainage, but not helped by the growth of the overhanging tree canopy. Works will be undertaken to improve the drainage, lay some path gravel in the worst areas, rebuild a bridge and remove some of the overhanging vegetation. It is also hoped that an old and fairly decrepit gate which appears to be no longer required can be removed. Overall these improvements will make the path much more easily accessible, and will be welcomed by local residents and visitors to the area alike. The Authority has enabled these works to take place by providing funding assistance, without which the County Council would only have been able to undertake a much reduced work programme. There is also a possibility that the Authority's own Rangers could assist with some of the practical works.

Landscape Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan

These will be daughter documents to the Management Plan. Work has continued on the development of preliminary drafts in preparation for public consultation later in the year.

New Forest Land Advice Service

The primary aim of the service is to enable landowners and managers to access a range of advice, support, training and grants to promote sustainable land management practices. Work has continued on promotion, strategy, work systems and exploring funding for a small grants scheme. A presentation on the service was given by officers to a meeting of the New Forest Consultative Panel.

Partnership work with the Forestry Commission

The Authority's involvement in SSSI work has continued this month at Queens Meadow and Drivers Nursery. The unit has been classified as unfavourable by
Natural England due to artificial drainage and the watercourse no longer interacts with the floodplain. River restoration works are proposed to return the area to a favourable status. This will complement the works proposed upstream at Fletchers Thorns. The Forestry Commission will produce more detailed plans for final agreement.

- Operation Site Assessments continued in conjunction with the Forestry Commission. These visits allow managers to review the Forest Design Plan prescriptions for work within the Inclosures and plan future work. A number of sites were visited which are due to the subject of work in the next few years.

**Biodiversity data**

- ‘The Wild Gladiolus in Britain, Past Present and Future’ conference organised by the Hampshire Flora Group and Hampshire Wildlife Trust was attended by officers. The wild gladiolus is a rare plant now found only in the New Forest. The day brought together an impressive array of local and national experts. Outputs of the day included agreement that it would be valuable to monitor sites that were the subject of study in the late 1980s again this year and that there was also a need to identify ways of obtaining local climate data to inform biological research. Liaison will continue with partners and to help the implementation of the actions.

- Officers attended the management group of the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre and also met centre staff to agree priorities for botanical survey in the forthcoming season. Last year the Centre undertook 45 days work relating to surveying sites in the New Forest. There are 385 local wildlife sites within the Authority area, a large proportion have not been surveyed for over ten years. It was discussed how the Authority might be able to augment the survey programme.

**Green Businesses**

- Officers attended the inaugural event of the New Forest Sustainable Business Network. The network is co-ordinated by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Sustainable Business Partnership. It aims to provide free support and advice on a wide range of sustainability issues and opportunities specifically to local businesses. It has been developed in partnership and in consultation with a number of organisations including New Forest District Council, Business Link and private sector organisations. In the current economic climate, the value of sustainability activity has never been greater. Businesses can make real and significant bottom-line savings by reducing their energy consumption, cutting waste, responding to customer demands to improve environmental performance and minimising transport impacts, to name but a few examples.

**Sustainable Development Fund**

- Officers attended the All Party Parliamentary Group on National Parks at which the Evaluation of Sustainable Development Funds in English National Parks was presented. The meeting was chaired by Clive Betts MP with Alun Michael MP providing a background and introduction to the Sustainable Development Funds. The methodology and findings of the evaluation along with
recommendations on the future challenges and opportunities for the Sustainable Development Funds were outlined. Members of the All Party Parliamentary Group agreed to sponsor an ‘early day motion’ recognising the achievements of the Fund and supporting the continuation of funding. They also agreed to support discussion with Regional Development Agencies to explore the match funding of Sustainable Development Fund resources.

**Commoning**

- A training session was held for Members on commoning, particularly focusing on the needs of young commoners and the long term viability of the commoning community.

3 **Information and Visitor Services**

**Communications**

- Photographs of guests attending the launch of the Ground-Nesting Birds exhibition were issued to county magazines.

- A press release was issued about the Authority’s Alice in Wonderland audio trail which resulted in an interview on Radio Solent.

- A press release was issued announcing that the statutory consultation period for the core strategy had begun.

- Designing and printing the Management Plan and Core Strategy are complete and the Corporate Plan and RMS are in the design phase.

- The Authority’s email newsletter is gaining new subscribers daily and is issued monthly. The Authority is conducting a survey to see how satisfied users are with the website. The data is being collected across all national parks as part of an annual statistic-gathering exercise.

- Work is underway on planning the Authority’s stand at the New Forest Show and on marketing a ‘Greener Living Show’ at Brockenhurst College in April.

**Visitor and Recreation Services**

- Officers helped in six support and training events during March which attracted some 100 different people including front-of-house staff, visitor information staff, New Forest Tour drivers, New Forest Centre volunteers, accommodation and tourism related businesses. Two indoor sessions, led by the Authority, were designed to help people answer questions about the National Park. Four outdoor sessions, led by New Forest District Council, were for members of the Green Leaf sustainable tourism scheme. Visits to Lymington-Keyhaven Nature Reserve and Hurst Spit and Castle, and the Crown Lands, Bolderwood and a working timber extraction site provided a good introduction to the National Park and the Authority as well as a networking opportunity for those involved in local tourism.
Some 75 people have registered to become volunteers for the Coastal Heritage Project and training sessions are planned for April onwards.

Officers worked with partner organisations to deliver sessions to five local primary schools on the topic of litter as part of the annual Forest Force Spring Clean event. A ‘time-machine’ was used to educate pupils on the short- and longer-term impacts of litter and to encourage responsible behaviour in the Park.

The Authority education team led two Discovery Days at the New Forest Centre over the half-term holiday focusing on the theme of ground-nesting birds to complement the exhibition in the gallery. They included a range of fun, interactive, educational bird-related activities for children and families.

We led a very successful walk and talk at Shatterford for young adults with learning disabilities from the Minstead Training Project. This enabled the group to explore a variety of Forest habitats and to build their experiences in understanding and enjoying the National Park.

Officers are helping Landford Parish Council to develop an area of woodland as a community woodland for informal recreational, providing advice and assistance on aspects of management, funding and community engagement.

4 Planning Policy

The statutory six week period for representations on the soundness of the Authority’s Core Strategy and Development Management Policies DPD started on 25 February and runs until 12 April. Copies of the revised document have been sent to a range of consultees, are available through the Authority’s website and can be inspected at a number of locations in the National Park. Following the end of the six week period, all representations will be considered before the document is submitted to the Government later in the year for independent examination.

The final design work on the approved National Park Management Plan has been completed and the published Management Plan will be widely distributed to interested organisations and individuals within the National Park, regionally and nationally. It will also be available on the National Park Authority website.

The Authority hosted the New Forest Equine Forum meeting at the end of February. The meeting considered draft guidelines relating to the ‘change of use’ of land and ‘pasture management’. The Forum is due to meet again on 22 March.

The Policy and Plans team have represented the Authority at a number of meetings in February and March. These include a meeting with Test Valley Borough Council and others to discuss proposals for a new country park in southern Test Valley that could relieve some of the recreational pressures on the New Forest arising from development proposed in the South East Plan. Officers have also attended the Landford Village Design Statement meeting in mid March and the Hampshire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing meeting.
5 Development Control

During February the Development Management unit carried out the following work:

- 84 planning applications were registered during February and in the same period, 68 applications were determined. As of 28 February (and since 1 April 2009) 81% of householder applications and 69% of minor applications had been determined within the eight week target. The approval rate for the year stands at 70%.

- Seven appeals have been dismissed and two have been allowed. The number of appeals allowed now stands at 35%.

- 53 new enforcement cases were opened and 31 cases were closed. Six enforcement notices have been issued so far this year.

6 Corporate Services

Human Resources

As of 19 March 2010 there are 78 members of staff or 70.36 full-time equivalents, of whom 21 are part-time and ten are on a fixed-term contract. For comparison purposes in May 2009 the Authority had 67.83 full-time equivalents (comparison data for March or April 2009 is not available) and in September 2009 the Authority had 67.63 full-time equivalents.

- On 16 March we welcomed Victoria Rice to the Authority, who commences a two-year fixed-term contract as the part-time Administration Assistant supporting the Performance and Administration team.

ICT

- Management Board approved the next phase of the Corporate File Plan project. Consultants have been selected to review the proposed plan before the pilot project begins. The pilot project is planned for April / May 2010, but this is dependent on the ICT Systems Developer post currently awaiting approval.

- The GIS team have selected a preferred supplier for a new web-based GIS package. This will be used to provide planning searches on line, with plans to utilise the same software to provide online maps for the healthy walks project (and others). Installation of this new software is planned for March / April 2010.

Performance and Administration

- A final draft of the 2010/11 Corporate Plan has been developed, supported by a detailed plan of objectives for the year ahead. A special workshop of the Resources and Performance Committee was held to present these plans to members and gather feedback. The plan was also presented to officers. The final draft Plan will be presented for member approval at Resources and Performance Committee and is the subject of a separate agenda item for this Authority meeting.
• Work to source a pool car for use by staff and members of the Authority is nearing completion. The vehicle, which will be branded with the Authority’s logo, is due to be delivered on the 12 April. Supporting processes and a use policy are being prepared.

**Efficiencies**

• Work continues with other English National Park Authorities to identify potential opportunities for sharing services and making efficiency savings within the group of Parks. The Head of Performance and Administration has been compiling relevant documentation for use in a centralised paper to Defra and has attended a number of meetings with other Parks to develop our approach.

• A review into the provision of financial services to the Authority is underway and meetings have been held with Hampshire County Council and New Forest District Council.

• The Authority’s insurance has been renewed for the next year with a small saving.

7 **Member Services**

• The Member Services section has been involved in providing support to meetings of the Authority and its Committees as well as the New Forest Consultative Panel, and followed up on actions arising from these meetings. Member Services is in the process of suggesting revised logos to the Consultative Panel and updating its branding. The team has provided support to members, answering queries and processing expenses.

• Member Services monitors and assists in responding to requests for information made under the Freedom of Information Act, the Environmental Information Regulations and the Data Protection Act. The team is dealing with an Information Tribunal review of one request and Information Commissioner reviews of three others, liaising with legal services at Hampshire County Council. Arrangements are in progress for the binding of the Authority’s minute books. The section will shortly begin preparing the annual complaints and Freedom of Information request reports and the report on members’ attendance for the Standards and Resources and Performance Committees. The team is working towards the review of members’ allowances by an Independent Remuneration Panel.

8 **Members**

Some members were involved in some or all of the following meetings and events:

• All Party Parliamentary Group meeting about Sustainable Development Funds, 3 March
• New Forest Consultative Panel, 4 March
• Assessment Day for potential candidates for the role of Chief Executive Officer of the Authority, 4 and 5 March
• A Natural England sponsored conference - A Spatial Vision for the Natural Environment of South Hampshire, 9 March
South East Protected Landscapes Chairmens’ meeting, 10 March
Talk to Ringwood Natural History Society, 11 March
Planning Development Control Committee meeting, 16 March
Extraordinary Authority meeting, 16 March
Talk to Beaulieu Residents Association AGM, 19 March
Meeting with Wanda Fojt, Natural England, 22 March
Resources and Performance Committee meeting, 22 March
Hampshire Rural Affordable Housing meeting, 23 March
Talk to Hampshire Higher Education Group, 24 March

Forthcoming activities include:

- Attendance at the official opening of Lyndhurst Community Centre, 26 March
- ENPAA meeting, 31 March
- Pre-meeting with officers from the Improvement and Development Agency about the member roles and responsibilities workshop, 1 April
- Fund-raising launch of the New Forest ‘Mountain Rescue Team’, 1 April
- ANPA workshop on sustainable transport, 14-15 April
- Roles and responsibilities workshop, 19 April
- Hampshire Rural Forum Annual Conference, 20 April
- Planning Development Control Committee meeting, 20 April
- Resources and Performance Committee meeting, 26 April
- Presentation to Godshill Annual Parish meeting, 27 April
- New Forest Consultative Panel, 6 May
- Standards Committee, 10 May
- North Solent Shoreline Management Plan, Elected Members Group meeting, 13 May
- Meeting with Wanda Fojt, Natural England, 14 May
- Planning Development Control Committee meeting, 18 May
- Hampshire Rural Affordable Housing meeting, 18 May

9 Recommendation

To note the report.