

## AM 563/20

### NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

#### AUTHORITY MEETING – 9 JULY 2020

#### CORONAVIRUS UPDATE REPORT – END OF JUNE 2020

**Report by:** Alison Barnes, Chief Executive & Nigel Stone, Head of Resources

**Purpose:**

This report is to provide Members with a brief overview of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic to date – from the point of view of both the Authority directly and the wider New Forest / national impact(s). It begins with a timeline of some key events/changes that have occurred since the outbreak began in February, moves on to detail some of the responses to date and finally the emerging ideas under which recovery can take place at the appropriate time. An earlier version of the report was taken to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee on 1 June.

### 1 Pandemic Timeline

1.1 Some of the key events within the timeline for the pandemic are:

#### March

- 2 'Cobra' meeting held on virus
- 5 First death within the UK confirmed
- 6 Prime Minister announces likely 'substantial period of disruption'
- 9 Stock markets begin to react – FTSE daily fall of 8%
- 11 Virus officially confirmed as a pandemic
- 11/19 Bank of England cuts interest rates (0.75% to 0.25% to 0.1%)
- 16 UK warned against all 'non-essential travel and contact with others'
- 20 Schools/pubs/restaurants closed; furlough scheme announced
- 23 'Lockdown' announced by PM
- 28 Letter sent to all UK households

#### April

- 5 The Queen makes a broadcast to the nation
- 16 Further 3 weeks extension to lockdown announced
- 30 PM announces the UK is 'past the peak'

#### May

- 10 UK govt message updated to "*stay alert, control the virus, save lives*". Plan for future easing of lockdown released
- 13 Some lockdown measures eased, including number of instances and distance to travel for outdoor exercise and recreation

- 24/25 PM announces a limited number of year groups will return to school from June. All non-essential shops to re-open from 15 June
- 28 NHS Test and Trace system goes live in England. Groups of up to six people can meet in gardens and outdoors.
- 29 Furlough scheme extended until the end of October but with some employer contributions required in stages (c9 million workers)

### June

- 4 Face coverings to become mandatory on public transport from June 15
- 10 PM announces further easing of lockdown from June 13 including 'support bubbles' for those in single adult households
- 18 Bank of England plans to inject £100bn into the UK economy
- 19 Covid-19 Alert Level reduced from 4 (severe risk, high transmission) to 3 (substantial risk, general circulation)
- 22 Announcement that shielding will be eased from 6 July and end on 1 August
- 23 Social distancing guidance changed to 'require 1m but advise 2m'. Confirmed that pubs, hotels and restaurants can reopen from 4 July

## **2 Pandemic Response**

- 2.1 From the Authority point of view, we quickly established a C-19 working group under the leadership of the Executive Director and Head of Resources, invoking the guidance within our Business Continuity Plan.
- 2.2 This group was initially tasked with sending a formal update to all staff (completed on 2 March) and reviewing our Pandemic Policy in light of the emerging situation (completed and sent to all staff on 6 March). Work quickly then progressed to the capability to change our 'ways of working' with emphasis on staff being able to work remotely from home. Following an incredible effort by the ICT team and other staff, when the government announcement came, we were able to immediately require all staff to work from home as of 17 March. Over the following days, most staff were able to access some or all their systems from home and this capability increased rapidly.
- 2.3 Virtual meetings of the Strategic Leadership Team were held initially on a daily basis and have since spaced out to two or three times a week. Following strict health and safety procedures, one or two staff were latterly able to return to the office periodically to collect/sort post, check servers and other roles not able to be performed remotely, but we have kept numbers and timings to an absolute minimum. All urgent delegated decisions have been carefully notarised and are detailed in a separate paper to this meeting.

- 2.4 We have since held a number of virtual Planning Committee meetings, a Resources Committee meeting and two All-Staff meetings (alongside regular staff newsletters). We have reviewed, and circulated to staff and members, our updated work programme for the coming months ensuring key strategic aims are still met whilst the immediate requirements of assistance / impacts related to the pandemic are covered too.
- 2.5 Following the partial lifting of the lockdown in May, following strict procedures established after significant consultation (with staff, health & safety experts and the union), rangers began to go out into the Forest to engage with the visiting public on a trial basis Friday 15 – Sunday 17 May. Following a full review of the trial, and subsequent reviews approximately every two weeks by the Strategic Leadership Team, they have continued to do so ever since.
- 2.6 Given the further decreases in Covid cases and easing of lockdown measures, it is hoped that other staff will be able to resume further work outdoors from early July (following procedures which will have also gone through a rigorous consultation process). The next phase would then be to consider any group activities such as those involving volunteers or Pedall - these are still limited to a maximum group of six at present, but it is hoped that over the coming weeks some progress can still be made within this overall constraint.
- 2.7 Plans for a partial return to the offices are underway, likely to be a small number of staff coming in for a day or two of their working week, where being in the office is preferable due to their role or circumstances. We will follow all the government guidance to make the building 'Covid-secure', including a full risk assessment and additional staff guidance – these will be drafted, consulted upon, agreed by the Strategic Leadership Team and then published. No specific dates / deadlines have been set at present to allow this work to be undertaken at its own pace and without pressure.
- 2.8 As members may have seen in the bulletin, a summary of other work / priorities completed under lockdown included:
- Running a full planning service (which involves over half our staff), including dealing with general enquiries, planning applications, tree work applications, investigating reported breaches of planning control and updating related policy and guidance. This has notably included the current consideration of the Fawley site application.
  - Planned and delivered communications with our partners to ensure key messages are widely disseminated to the public during the pandemic lockdown, key topics have included the New Forest Code, BBQs and parking. Our social media reach on these communications is 2m+.
  - Worked with Hampshire Authority Leaders to ask for support for small businesses, writing to Secretaries of State for Local Government and Business

- Taken an active role in the Hampshire Local Resilience Forum environment and infrastructure planning; ensuring green recovery aspects are included throughout the emerging documentation.
- Regularly briefed Government, in particular Defra, about the situation in the New Forest and ensured our local issues are informing the National response, working alongside colleagues from across the wider National Park Family.
- Promoted and supported the New Forest Marque businesses, signposting people to these 160 small rural businesses, highlighting their products and showcasing how some of them have adapted to such difficult times by providing deliveries and services to their local communities
- Deployed our Rangers and other staff to help with deliveries of New Forest Marque produce and meals to local people who are vulnerable or in need
- Assisted commoners with their annual Basic Payment Scheme claims through the New Forest Land Advice Service, helping them to overcome issues with IT and to make claims to the scheme by remote means
- Provided online resources and activities for young people and families during lockdown, including through a 'Shared Forest' education toolkit – created to inspire children to connect with nature, learn about the Forest and explore the traditions of New Forest commoning through fun and creative activities.
- Continued the work of our internal 'Fundraising Group' to ensure we accurately identify those areas of our work, and that in partnership with others, which needs further support and resources in the coming months/years and where that can potentially be found
- Continued to refine our work programme to deliver government priorities on nature recovery, responding to climate change and connection of people to nature, as set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan and Environment Bill. In particular, through the Partnership Plan process, there is clearly an opportunity to bring this work together and to set out a recovery plan for the National Park, its communities, its businesses and its wildlife (this is the subject of the next paper on the agenda).

### **3 Financial Impacts**

- 3.1 Many organisations, charities and businesses throughout the Forest have seen huge, in some cases devastating, impacts financially due to the pandemic and we as an Authority must look to do our part to assist their recovery moving forward.
- 3.2 In respect of the Authority, our financial position remains stable (as we are funded primarily by government grant) and we have fully reviewed that position in recent weeks and months alongside Defra; it is now kept under constant review. The largest financial risks to the Authority are potential reductions or losses of income streams, namely the National Park Grant, planning fees, those related to tourism activity (e.g. New Forest Tour), external income (e.g. England Coast Path) and falling returns on our investments / pension scheme assets.

- 3.3 Our initial conclusions are that these risks are manageable, and that the Authority can safely get through the 2020/21 financial year up until March 2021. There is potential to use/repurpose some emergency reserves in the short-term if necessary and Members will of course be updated should this position change/worsen. The financial position after this time was already uncertain and is still primarily dependant on the Comprehensive Spending Review due later in 2020.

## **4 Recovery**

- 4.1 We have also been discussing the 'recovery' as lockdown continues to ease and how national parks (via the National Park Recovery Planning Group) can play a key role in this both nationally and locally. This will likely be focused in three key areas of 'People', 'Place' and 'Business/Economy'.
- 4.2 On a local basis, we are hoping much of this work can now be taken forward, in discussion with stakeholders, within the New Forest Partnership Plan, which is helpfully already in the pipeline for 2020.
- 4.3 The Wildlife Roundtable and Green Halo Partnership Steering Group have continued to meet virtually, examining opportunities for nature recovery in the National Park and considering how we can help ensure that the post-C19 recovery will have positive outcomes for the environment and access to nature. Discussion has also taken place about supporting local businesses and taking a more flexible approach where we can, such as temporarily extending the holiday season for established holiday sites which were forced to close for a lengthy period of time in peak season.
- 4.4 Internally we ran a staff survey to capture positive and negative thoughts on the current homeworking arrangements as well as seeking opinions on how we can maintain any benefits seen. The response rate was over 95%. The benefits identified included potential savings from the future requirement for less office space, much reduced commuting time / costs / environmental impacts, staff feeling valued / supported and moving to online / paperless working methods. The results will be fed into our future workplans, our office plans (the Town Hall is currently leased until November 2026) and our actions to achieve Net Zero as an organisation by 2030 at the latest.
- 4.5 We will update Members further at the meeting with the latest updates on the recovery position.

## **5 Recommendation**

### **It is recommended that Members**

#### **1 Consider and note the report**

#### **Equality and Diversity Implications:**

There are no specific equality or diversity implications arising out of this report, however a full review of all our equality and diversity considerations, entitled “New Forest Voices”, will be undertaken over the coming year.

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