

## AM 567-20

### NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

### AUTHORITY MEETING – 15 OCTOBER 2020

### CORONAVIRUS UPDATE REPORT – END OF SEPTEMBER 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 since the last update at your meeting in July. Officers will of course be available at the meeting to cover the very latest positions and answer more specific points which Members may wish to raise. A similar update was given to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee on 7 September.

The report is again split into three sections – covering the wider national/regional picture, that within the Forest / our Authority and finally a brief financial overview.

#### **1 Wider Pandemic Response & Green Recovery Update**

- 1.1 Firstly it should be noted that the period since July has not been quite as frenetic or frequently changing as the period from the start of the pandemic up until the early Summer. Having said that, we are now clearly moving into a period of increased transmission, the ‘second wave’.
- 1.2 We have continued to work nationally, particularly through Defra, National Parks England and the National Park Recovery Planning Group, to highlight the pandemic impacts on protected landscapes. The key reference point is our increased significance and usage at this time and the resources now required to balance this with the protection of their uniqueness and special qualities. National green recovery funds are beginning to come on stream and officers are liaising with colleagues nationally to consider larger partnership bids where possible to go alongside each of our individual organisational requirements or bids.
- 1.3 Regionally, the green recovery agenda continues to be developed at pace though our high-level engagement, and in many cases green-leadership, within forums such as the Local Resilience Forum, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Wildlife Roundtable and Green Halo Partnership. All this work will ultimately feed into our new Partnership Plan for the Forest which will be finalised over the next six months.

## **2 New Forest and Authority-Specific Updates**

- 2.1 The Authority has continued to hold virtual Planning and Resources Committee meetings throughout the summer period. Rangers have continued their engagement and campaigns out in the Forest with partners throughout this time and further staff, including Pedals, have also restarted their outdoor work since July (all such work is kept under constant review given the changing pandemic circumstances and guidance).
- 2.2 Planning application numbers continue to mirror those seen in years prior to the pandemic, the Authority is still delivering a high quality planning service within the overall constraints of the pandemic and will look to further develop its new ways of working over the coming months.
- 2.3 Discussion has taken place about supporting local businesses, either directly or through other established forums, determining how best the Authority can continue/expand on its support to the New Forest Marque scheme and go further on other areas where possible.
- 2.4 Internally, the Strategic Leadership Team have continued to meet virtually at least every two weeks, we have held All-Staff meetings every six weeks and increased the frequency of our Health & Safety Forum from every six months to around once every six weeks.
- 2.5 During September we held an official consultation with staff, the H&S Forum and the Union on our Risk Assessment and Guidance regarding the use of the Town Hall offices. This ensures that everyone is aware and comfortable with the covid-secure measures we have put in place such as limits on overall numbers (20), team rota's, one-way systems and clear procedures for any known or suspected C19 cases. We had already made evident during this process that use of the offices would require a strong business need and therefore the latest announcements about 'working from home where you can' will not have a material effect on this limited-use plan.
- 2.6 Members will be aware we conducted a survey of staff in June/July to see how they were initially coping with the pandemic and the new ways of working with the results being very positive – this is shortly to be repeated to gain further insight and ideas from staff as we move into the winter months and potentially more longer-term, permanent changes to our ways of working.
- 2.7 Prior to the initial lockdown in March we had arranged and successfully completed some mental health awareness sessions with all managers and with a select group of staff who volunteered to become our Mental Health First Aiders. The next stage of that programme was to arrange 3-hour sessions for all staff about looking after their own mental health and to gain awareness in regard to those around them. Unfortunately this was delayed, but the sessions are now happening virtually in October. We have also

recently held some virtual Discovery Days (where staff learn about what other staff/teams' jobs involve in a fun format) and our Wellbeing Group will no doubt be planning other such events in the coming months.

### **3 Financial Impact Update**

- 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. Some national recovery funding streams are starting to be made available as highlighted in 1.2 above, the most recent being the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) and the Kickstart scheme.
- 3.2 The Authority made an ambitious partnership expression of interest to the GRCF but unfortunately this was not successful in getting through to the full application stage. However, a wider YHA bid to the same fund, bringing together all English National Parks to further resource our educational aspects to aid green recovery, was successful in getting to the next stage of the process. The Authority is likely to make an application to the Kickstart scheme for a small number of young people to undertake some six-month placements within our Recreation Management and Learning Team and further thought is being given to offering similar opportunities through the scheme in other teams.
- 3.3 In respect of the overall Authority finances, our 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 continue to be 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.
- 3.4 Our budgetary control reporting to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee concludes that these risks are manageable, and that the Authority can safely get through the 2020/21 financial year up until March 2021. There have been some corresponding savings during the lockdown (through travel costs, events, delayed works/projects) and there is potential, if necessary, to use/repurpose some emergency reserves in the short-term - Members will of course be updated should this position change/worsen. The forward financial position was already uncertain but is still primarily dependant on the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review due in November rather than the impacts of Covid-19.

## **4 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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