

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 25 MARCH 2021

CARE FOR THE FOREST, CARE FOR EACH OTHER – MANAGING VISITOR PRESSURES AS LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS EASE

Report by: Steve Avery, Executive Director

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A Members' Day was held on 10 February 2021 to consider what practical measures could be put in place in the immediate short term to better manage the expected increased visitor pressures on the National Park as lockdown restrictions begin to ease from 29 March 2021.
- 1.2 Since then, we have continued to work closely with our partner organisations, in particular New Forest District Council, Forestry England, the Verderers and Go New Forest to put together a joint action plan. The plan aims to ensure that the New Forest can play an active role in helping people to recover in the great outdoors from the toll taken by the lockdown, but not at the expense of this special area which they have come to enjoy. The plan also aims to work closely with and support residents and the local business community.
- 1.3 The Government published its four-step roadmap to ease restrictions across England on 22 February 2021, a summary of which is attached as Annex 1.

2. Lessons from 2020

- 2.1 Last year was exceptional in many ways and saw greater numbers of people spending time in the countryside as outdoor space and exercise became critical. While the majority respected these landscapes, the New Forest, like many other places around the country also experienced a rise in anti-social behaviour and resulting damage. Local businesses and communities experienced challenges and concerns about the long-term impact of the pandemic on the area.
- 2.2 Forest organisations, emergency services and communities worked to address these issues. Much was learned through this experience and progress made in several areas including: increasing the impact of patrols by pooling resources, gaining the support of over 50 local retailers to ban disposable BBQs, recruiting over 400 New Forest Ambassadors to help support the Forest, a co-ordinated campaign by local landowners in stickering cars to discourage verge parking and gateway blocking, and jointly communicating messages about caring for the Forest to over 6 million people.

3. 2021 Action Plan

- 3.1 2021, the year of the staycation, is set to be another challenging year with large numbers of visitors expected. An action plan has been created to support the landscape and local community during this time and encourage greater care and respect for the area among all those spending time here. The plan has been developed jointly by ourselves, Forestry England, New Forest District Council, and Go New Forest with

support from The Verderers, Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, and Hampshire Constabulary – in consultation with Parish representatives.

- 3.2 Its focus is on all these organisations sharing resources in a concerted effort to be well prepared for and able to meet critical recreational pressure. It aims to ensure that the area can play an active role in helping people to enjoy and recover in the great outdoors but not at the expense of this special area they have come to enjoy.
- 3.3 The Action Plan is set out under five headings:
- **Commoning** – the CDA, Verderers and commoners know that they are supported as much as possible, so that the working Forest can continue to operate with as little disruption as possible.
 - **Community** – residents feel safe to go out, confident that there is a joint plan to manage visitors and help local businesses recover – and enabled to play their part.
 - **Capacity** – strong, visible and coordinated approach to managing demand and distribution of visitors, especially car parking and camping.
 - **New Forest Code** – the nine most important topics are conveyed in consistent and clear ways by organisations, businesses, volunteers and individuals.
 - **Cooperation** – all local organisations are supporting each other, working collaboratively together and sharing resources to achieve the best outcomes for the Forest, residents, local businesses and visitors.
- 3.4 Key aspects of the plan include:
- 3.5 Increased patrols & focus on visitor hotspots
- 3.6 Greater numbers of staff across all organisations – increased numbers of rangers and wardens to be made available for patrol duties with joint patrols focused on key locations and visitor hotspots, especially the busiest car parks. This highly visible and coordinated approach will make the best use of finite resources by focusing on managing demand and distribution of visitors at these key pressure points.
- 3.7 When the easing of restrictions allows, these staff will also be boosted by Forestry England’s team of Volunteer Rangers. New Forest Ambassadors, led by the National Park Authority and parish councils, will be helping with litter picking, reporting parking issues and creating a greater awareness of the New Forest Code.
- 3.8 Joined-up communication
- 3.9 A joint visitor communications campaign, targeting visitors to the area is being rolled out with tourism body, Go New Forest and its membership of tourism providers. This will provide information for visitors to be aware of both before and during their visit and how they can help care for the Forest whilst also caring for each other.
- 3.10 Core to the campaign will be The New Forest Code – a clear set of actions and guidance on how to care for the Forest. Communications may also draw on national campaigns where relevant including the refreshed Countryside Code and Defra’s Protect the Outdoors Campaign.

- 3.11 The 10 Camping in the Forest sites are planning to open this year, in line with government guidance and timetables and the visitor messages. These locations together with other key visitor campsites and accommodation providers will be targeted with this information and patrols.
- 3.12 More messages about caring for the special qualities of the New Forest have also been included in the New Forest Essential Guide available at several New Forest car parks and at a wide range of tourism outlets across the area.
- 3.13 Increased and more prominent signage
- 3.14 The campaign will include prominent signage and targeted communications to all those spending time in the Forest. These will be visible in car park signage and at key gateways to the New Forest, which could include temporary and mobile digital signage.
- 3.15 Signage at all Forestry England's car parks and thresholds is currently being updated to clearly mark the Crown lands boundary, which is a Special Site of Scientific Interest. This signage can be easily adapted to reflect seasonal and priority messages.
- 3.16 Fire Safety – BBQ & fire ban
- 3.17 Last year saw a significant rise in the number of BBQs being used irresponsibly, presenting a major risk of wildfire with potentially devastating effects. In just one weekend rangers working with the fire service extinguished over 60 unsafe BBQs.
- 3.18 Our campaign to encourage retailers to ban the sale of disposable BBQs saw 50 retailers taking part, and a social media reach of 655,000 impressions and 65,000 engagements. The campaign will be continued this year with the aim of recruiting more outlets to support it
- 3.19 To help reduce the risks, the New Forest Crown Lands will be declared a complete no BBQ and fire zone. These are no longer permitted in car parks or areas of the forest managed by Forestry England. In line with this, all BBQ facilities at Forestry England sites have already been removed. Highly visible signage is in place at all these sites, and no BBQ messages placed on signage at entrance ways to car parks.
- 3.20 The ban will be widely communicated, and an ongoing public fire safety campaign carried out throughout the year with particular focus during good weather and when the fire alert risk is at its highest.
- 3.21 Supporting the working forest
- 3.22 Greater support will be provided to the commoning community so that the working Forest can continue to operate with as little disruption as possible. This will include providing additional patrol resources around key events such as drifts, and targeted information to discourage the feeding and petting of livestock, and animal safety.
- 3.23 Working together
- 3.24 The 'Care for the Forest, Care for each other' message conveys the spirit of how the Forest's organisations want to work with each other and our visitors.

4. Next steps

4.1 We are encouraging others to 'Care for the Forest, Care for each other' in a number of ways including:

- **Support & Share the New Forest Code** - Sharing the key steps we can all take to care for the New Forest and its wildlife is a great way to support the campaign. Copies of the code, posters and other communications materials are available including a downloadable exhibition for use in community spaces. These can be downloaded and ordered here www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/news/new-forest-code/
- **How your community can get involved** - Those wanting to get involved in actively supporting the Forest could consider becoming a New Forest Ambassador you can find out more here www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/communities/get-involved/what-you-can-do-the-new-forest-ambassador-scheme/
- Another practical way to get involved is to encourage a greater number of local retailers to support the ban on disposable BBQs. Information on the campaign can be found here www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/communities/get-involved/ban-on-bbqs/
- **Reporting/ Sharing Information** - Local organisations and individuals can help us identify issues and hotspots across the area by sharing their observations. Details on where to report key issues can be found here www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/communities/get-involved/report-a-problem/

5. Recommendation:

That Members note and support the 'Care for the Forest, Care for each other' action plan as detailed above.

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