

RAPC 424/20

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE – 1 JUNE 2020

CORONAVIRUS UPDATE REPORT – MAY 2020

Report by: Steve Avery, Executive Director & 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.

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 " <i>stay alert, control the virus, save lives</i> ". 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.

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.
- 2.4 We have since held two virtual Planning Committee meetings and an all-staff meeting. 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, again following strict procedures established after significant consultation (with staff, health & safety experts and the union), some rangers went out into the Forest to engage with the visiting public on a trial basis Friday 15 – Sunday 17 May. Following a full review, they will do so again for the May Bank Holiday weekend and following week (23-31 May) which includes the school half term holiday and the start of 'English Tourism Week 2020'.
- 2.6 As members may have seen in the bulletin, a summary of the early work completed under lockdown also 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
 - Planned and delivered communications with our partners to ensure key messages are widely disseminated to the public during the pandemic lockdown, including on social distancing (the #StayHome online campaign with Hampshire Police and landowners such as Forestry England, Hampshire County Council and the National Trust); on antisocial behaviour

- including fly tipping and bonfires and on the Amber fire risk during the dry weather. Our social media reach on these communications is c650,000
- 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.
 - 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 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, working with partners to agree how we should update the National Park Partnership Plan and to prepare the groundwork for public consultation and engagement later this year

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 alongside Defra; it is now kept under constant review. The largest risks to the Authority are potential losses of income streams, namely 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 first six months of the 2020/21 financial year. There is potential to use some emergency reserves if necessary, and that it is very likely this position could extend for the remainder of the financial year too, provided there are no significant changes in the meantime, i.e. up until March 2021. Members will of course be updated should this position change/worsen.
- 3.4 Discussions have been had with Internal Audit for them to add pandemic-related risks specifically to their programme for the year and any updated plan will be brought to the next Committee meeting.

4 Recovery

- 4.1 We have also been discussing the 'recovery' after lockdown 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 are currently closed and likely to remain so for a little while longer.
- 4.4 Significant further work on our recovery plans and feeding into / combining with those of others as necessary, will be taking place in the coming weeks and we will update Members further at the meeting. This should include the opportunity to consider what long term changes to our working practices might result from this extraordinary time. The environmental benefits of remote working and reduced carbon emissions from greatly reduced car journeys can help inform our plans to reach Net Zero by 2030.
- 4.5 As noted at the start of the report perhaps the greatest impact of C19 to date has been the move from an office-based organisation to one that works largely from home. It is not yet known when and how it will be safe to return to work in the office. The physical and mental wellbeing of the staff remains a key priority and we will keep working arrangements under constant review.

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.

Contact:

Steve Avery
Executive Director – Strategy & Planning
Tel: 01590 646659
Email: steve.avery@newforestnpa.gov.uk