

## **NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

### **AUTHORITY MEETING – 21 October 2021**

#### **NEW FOREST PARTNERSHIP PLAN – RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION AND NEXT STEPS**

**Report by:** Holger Schiller, Partnerships and Community Officer

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 At the Authority meeting in April Members agreed that the Authority would co-ordinate a formal public consultation on behalf of the partnership of statutory bodies on the emerging new Partnership Plan. It was also agreed that the Authority would work with the statutory partner organisations to establish a Partnership Board to oversee the implementation of the new Partnership Plan, an approach adopted in some other English National Parks.
- 1.2 The draft Partnership Plan consultation ran from 23 June to 3 September (10 weeks). A wide range of bodies, organisations and groups were directly notified of the consultation and invited to respond. In addition, a press release and various social media campaigns triggered a large amount of interest, with over 300,000 views on Facebook; 300 views of the video on YouTube and over 6,000 website clicks. This was assisted by the partners' communication teams who also promoted the consultation. Over the summer, officers attended on request two parish council meetings to discuss the draft Plan as well as a CDA meeting. A total of 347 responses from individuals were received during the 10-week consultation. Individual organisations were invited via email to take part and 27 responses were received. They represented a mixture of public bodies, interest groups, sports clubs, and nature conservation charities. Over 1,000 individual free text comments were also submitted.
- 1.3 In April 2021 Members also agreed that the Authority should work with statutory partner organisations to establish a 'Partnership Board' to oversee the implementation of the new Partnership Plan (report AM 590-21). The exact terms of reference of the new Board are still being discussed and it is envisaged that the new Board would come into effect once the new Partnership Plan has been formally adopted (Spring 2022).

#### **2. Consultation results**

- 2.1 The format of the consultation was an online survey on the NPA's website. People had the option to either read more about each individual theme on the website via hyperlinks or download the whole Plan as a pdf. The survey asked if people agreed that each of the five strategic themes is a key challenge for the New Forest and if they agreed with the proposed outcomes. Members will recall that the five strategic themes in the draft Plan are Nature Recovery; Net Zero with Nature; Thriving Forest;

an Inclusive National Park and Team New Forest. Respondents also had the opportunity to provide detailed comments and ideas in the free text boxes. Other sections of the survey included people's location, their age range and other personal data.

2.2 The 'tick box' results, where respondents could choose between five opinions, from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', showed a largely similar picture across the five strategic themes and a strong level of support:

- When asked if the themes identified are a key challenge for the New Forest, over 50% strongly agreed, followed by about 30% who agreed.
- However, this was reversed when asked if people agreed with the respective outcome in the draft Plan, i.e. slightly fewer people agreeing strongly and more people 'only' agreeing.
- A slight shift in the level of agreement to a more 'neither agree nor disagree' opinion could be observed in the 'Inclusive National Park' and 'Team New Forest' themes.

2.3 The consultation was open to people living in the National Park and those visiting it from outside. An analysis of people's responses based on their location showed slightly more people from around the National Park strongly agreed with the key strategic challenges identified and the proposed outcomes than those who live in the National Park. When looking at the reasons why people 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the themes and proposals, the most commonly stated reasons were:

- "leave nature alone, it will sort itself out"
- "more trees are needed, not wetland or heather"
- "overgrazing is damaging nature"
- "any changes in the New Forest will make little difference on a national / global scale"
- "no real alternatives to travelling by car available"

2.4 Survey respondents had the opportunity to provide several comments for their 'tick-box' choices in a free text format. Topics that were mentioned the most were\*:

- Promote better cycling facilities, access and linked cycle paths (16%)
- Overgrazing damaging the Forest (12%)
- Plan is too vague / no details on how to achieve the objectives (11%)
- Promote and introduce better sustainable transport options (11%)
- More affordable housing needed (10%)
- Too many visitors (10%)
- Better enforcement / fines needed (9%)
- Better education needed, e.g. New Forest Code (8%)

*\* Percentage of topic mentioned in relation to total number of survey responses received; more than one topic could be mentioned per respondent.*

There were a further 67 topics that were mentioned by more than one individual.

A key element of the final Partnership Plan will be a detailed annual work programme identifying how the various actions will be delivered. The survey therefore also asked people how they could help putting the proposed objectives into place and if they had any project ideas. There was some overlap between the two questions, however, some people said they are interested in becoming a volunteer or ambassador whilst others declared they are already volunteering or involved in other activities such as litter picking. People were generally keen to help to report irresponsible behaviour such as verge parking. A few respondents offered their technical expertise and to become involved as a consultant. Some organisations said they could help with supporting some of the proposed activities, e.g. visitor education and training courses. In terms of project ideas, many people were keen to help with the re-introduction of species, tree planting, litter picking and similar activities such as monitoring wildlife. All of these suggestions and proposals for action will be considered as part of the annual work programme.

- 2.5 Other survey results related to people's age range and location. Over 80% of respondents were over the age of 55; 41% lived in the National Park and 44% around the National Park, with only a small percentage living further away.
- 2.6 Feedback was received from 27 organisations and was generally much more detailed with some very specific and helpful suggestions for improving the wording, especially regarding the agendas for action. Like many individuals, organisations generally supported the proposed themes and the strategic direction of the draft Partnership Plan, whilst also stressing that the proposals should now be converted into more specific actions/programmes of work.
- 2.7 The feedback received from organisations, individuals and staff has been extremely valuable and appropriate amendments to the draft Partnership Plan are now being worked up alongside the annual work programme. The final, revised version of the Partnership Plan will be presented at a full Authority meeting for formal approval.

### **3. First annual work programme**

- 3.1 As agreed at the Authority meeting in April, the new Partnership Plan will be supported by annual work programmes. It is proposed that the first work programme will be for the first two years and appended to the Partnership Plan. The work programme will include a detailed overview of specific projects with 'SMART' targets, lead partners, timescales and resources. This was always the intention and reflects some of the feedback received during the consultation, where respondents called for more detail on how the objectives would be delivered.
- 3.2 In order to review the feedback received from organisations and staff, meetings with key partners have been set up to discuss and agree each partners' role and responsibility in implementing the Partnership Plan' objectives. The resulting work programme for the first two years are currently being finalised and will shortly be presented, along with the revised Partnership Plan.

- 3.3 It is anticipated that once the Partnership Plan and the associated work programme have formally been agreed by the Authority, all other partners will formally adopt the Plan early next year.

**Recommendation:**

- 1. To note the response to the Partnership Plan consultation and the next steps.**