

## NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

### RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE – 5 September 2022

#### Team New Forest - Authority partnership working and delivery in relation to freshwater habitats and water issues

**Report by:** Paul Walton, Head of Environment and Rural Economy

#### 1 Summary

- 1.1 The Re: New Forest Partnership Plan highlights the need for a culture of collaboration to deliver key policies and measures to enhance the National Park landscape, economy and communities. The Authority has a number of existing partnerships in place that illustrate the Team New Forest approach. This paper is the first in a series to look at those partnerships, starting with the Authority's partnership work around the freshwater environment. Future papers will focus on PEDALL, the New Forest Marque, the New Forest Land Advice Service and our current SLA arrangements.
- 1.2 This report provides a briefing on the New Forest Catchment Partnership, our work with the Freshwater Habitats Trust and, briefly, the involvement of the Authority with other stakeholders in the wider water environment.

#### Recommendation:

Members to note the report

#### 2 Background

- 2.1 The exceptional quality of the New Forest's freshwater habitats is driven by the relatively low levels of pollution, a context where natural processes can predominate, and land management such as extensive grazing provided by historic practices such as commoning. Whilst these combine to make the New Forest possibly the most important area for freshwater biodiversity in England, there is still room for improvement and nature recovery, as evidenced by the fact 69% of the New Forest catchment's rivers are failing to meet good ecological status when measured by the Environment Agency's Water Framework Directive standards. Nationally only 14% of rivers are considered to be at good and none meet chemical standards.
- 2.2 Such measures do however underestimate the value of the core upstream catchments. Currently of the 18 waterbodies in the New Forest catchment, whilst 1 is failing, 14 are considered moderate and 3 good. The countrywide challenges to the water environment are exemplified by the fact that Authority supported action has recently moved a waterbody (the Hartford Stream/Beaulieu Abbey stream ) from moderate to good, the only such change to take place recently in southern England.

2.3 The key pressures that cause water bodies to fail to achieve good ecological status include the physical modification of rivers and streams, agricultural pollution, sewage and wastewater and run off from urban areas and transport/highways. Improving the quality of the freshwater environments of the New Forest involves a number of partners.

### **3 New Forest Catchment Partnership and Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT)**

3.1 Over ten years ago, the Authority recognised the value to the New Forest of emerging government approaches to facilitating and delivering action for the freshwater environments through a local 'Catchment Based Approach'. This utilised local facilitators or 'hosts' to bring together stakeholders, agree priorities and work collaboratively to improve the water environment on a catchment scale.

3.2 The Authority joined with The Freshwater Habitats Trust a national charity and experts on the local area, to co-host the New Forest Catchment Partnership as part of a wider Defra pilot, the success of which contributed to the national adoption of the Catchment Based Approach by the government. The Partnership holds an annual New Forest Water Forum for local partners and stakeholders, normally attended by around 100 people and this spring saw the event celebrate the tenth year of successful partnership operation.

3.3 Officers including the Authority's Ecologist lead a collaborative partnership with FHT to facilitate hosting of the Catchment Partnership, as well as coordinating a range of other freshwater delivery. Support is also provided by other Authority staff including those in the Policy team, Engagement team and New Forest Land Advice Service.

### **4 Costs and benefits of partnership working**

4.1 The Authority contributes £12,000pa (22/23) to assist facilitation of the Partnership, events, training, and delivery of practical projects. The contribution each year is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding which sets out the Authority's objectives and targets for joint working in the period, as well as the matching resources and activity contributed by FHT. Day-to-day management and implementation of the MoU and work programme is achieved by close working relationships between FHT and the Authority officers.

4.2 By partnering with FHT, the Authority is able to draw down financial resources for the National Park not available directly to government bodies. The involvement of FHT has been fundamental to securing investment from Environment Agency and Natural England grant schemes. These have been instrumental in providing essential match funding for Heritage Lottery bids (Our Past, Our Future Landscape Partnership and Green Recovery Challenge Fund) as well as supporting the work of the New Forest Land Advice Service and delivering a range of practical projects.

Recent highlights of the work achieved through this collaborative working include:

- Working with 5 plant and horticultural nurseries in the New Forest to provide water resource advice, resolve diffuse pollution sources and safeguard water resources through delivery of solutions such as rainwater harvesting. This delivered over £97,000 of investment from Defra grant schemes and support in kind as well as

landowner contributions. Amongst other benefits this increased water storage capacity by 448,000 litres (as much water as 4 small household use over a year) and enhanced the quality of over 1.6Km of watercourse.

- Working with over 25 landowners and businesses within the Bartley and Fletchwood Tributary catchment between 2019-2022 and delivering a suite of measures to help address diffuse pollution including solutions for yard runoff and manure storage and technical review of issues and solutions, enhancing the quality of nearly 5 Km of watercourse. This was enabled through Defra & HLF funding, contributions in kind from FHT, as well as landowner contributions, the total representing over £177,000 investment in the New Forest.

## **5. Current freshwater delivery (i.e. 2022/23) and scoped projects with FHT**

- 5.1 As well as undertaking joint facilitation of the New Forest Catchment Partnership, this year the FHT are leading delivery of two projects as part of the multi-partner Green and Blue Horizons. These include 'Wilder for Water' – a project to raise awareness of the special qualities of the New Forest waterscape and to champion a best practice clean water solutions for camping and recreation, and 'Woodlands and Wetlands' - a project facilitating opportunities to expand the outstanding habitats and species of the New Forest's freshwater landscape.
- 5.2 Working with FHT and other partners, the Authority is aiming to secure future external funding from sources such as the Environment Agency to extend delivery of Wilder for Water and Woodlands and Wetlands after 2023. Scoped projects relating to septic tanks, investigation of impacts of highway infrastructure and working with equine land managers around good practice for water have also been costed and included in medium term partnership planning.

## **6 Wider Partnership working**

- 6.1 Management of the water environment is a complex area with a number of key stakeholders. Officers are involved with a range of partners, the main ones are set out below

### **Environment Agency (EA)**

The EA is the statutory agency for ensuring the quality rivers and waterways, promoting their conservation, control of pollution and management of main river flooding. The EA work with water companies, farmers and NGOs and are a key source of funding e.g., the Water Environment Improvement Fund (WEIF). The EA is a signatory to the Partnership Plan.

### **Water companies**

The New Forest National Park is served by two water companies – Southern Water and Bournemouth Water. Southern Water is responsible for all the wastewater treatment works in the National Park. NPA officers provide input to the Southern Water stakeholder forum, the Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan consultation process and Test & Itchen Drought Order group.

## **New Forest Freshwater and Wetland Restoration Forum**

In 2018 a series of workshops attended by a wide range of interest groups developed a strategy for New Forest freshwater and wetlands habitat restoration. The forum was established as one of the actions identified to deliver the strategy and is a consultative and advisory body seeking to achieve consensus and guide action. The Authority secures input via member as well as officer representation.

## **Partnership for South Hampshire (PfSH) and Solent nitrates**

The Solent area, like several other water catchments in England, is suffering from excess nutrient pollution, which is having adverse impacts on our internationally important wildlife habitats. This has led to challenges for new housing development as Natural England has advised that such developments should demonstrate ‘nutrient neutrality’. Officers within Policy as well as Environment and Rural Economy teams provide ongoing input to the processes that are being established by PfSH to provide strategic solutions. The Authority also has member representation as part of the PfSH Joint committee.

## **7. Monitoring and reporting**

- 7.1 The Environment Agency undertake monitoring of main rivers within the National Park as part of their regulatory functions. The results of these are available online via their Catchment Data Explorer website and headline figures from such monitoring feature in the key performance indicators reported to this Committee.
- 7.2 The New Forest Catchment Partnership has sought to address shortfalls in Agency monitoring by citizen science initiatives, as well as its own expert catchment walkovers via FHT. These are more effective at identifying sources of pollution and guiding action to improve waterbodies. The Catchment Partnership aims to repeat the Forest wide ‘Waterblitz’ of water quality testing, last carried out in 2016 in 2022/2023. The Environment Agency is increasingly working with local partners to include such data to supplement its own assessments.

## **8 Conclusion**

- 8.1 As referred to above, management of the water environment is complex and has been demonstrated this summer, increasingly an area of national and local stakeholder concern. Our involvement with the New Forest Catchment Partnership has enabled scarce financial resources to draw in significant additional funding and deliver projects that are making a difference to the quality of the freshwater and coastal habitats in the New Forest. The staff time and member involvement invested in the wider partnership working enables the Authority to influence the work of others. Together these provide a good example of “Team New Forest” in action and a sound platform from which to try and ensure resources deliver the best for the Forest.

## **Recommendation**

Members are requested to note the content of the report

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