

AM 647/23

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 23 MARCH 2023

RESPONDING TO RECREATIONAL PRESSURES – AN UPDATE ON THE RECREATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY (RMS) ACTIONS

Report by: Steve Avery, Executive Director

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In 2019, an extensive consultation known as ‘Future Forest’ debated and sought views on recreation in the National Park and surrounding area. Through this work the Authority and its partners agreed a series of actions to manage recreation across the New Forest.
- 1.2 These actions were grouped into three categories:
 - (i) actions that continue and expand on existing work to help people understand how special the New Forest is, avoid negative impacts and benefit from spending time outside
 - (ii) actions relating to specific sites and routes that will help reduce impacts and improve the recreational experience
 - (iii) actions aimed at increasing the level of funding available for recreation management, developing an evidence-based approach and keeping the strategy ‘live’.
- 1.3 In all, 22 actions were agreed and this report updates Members on the progress being made to take these actions forward.

2. Incorporating the agreed actions in the new Partnership Plan

- 2.1 At the time (2019), it was acknowledged that the most significant actions required a strong partnership approach and that these should be reflected in, and delivered through, the new Partnership Plan, rather than updating the earlier stand-alone Recreation Management Strategy (2010). The most significant actions were identified as:
 - a. developing a spatial plan for where recreation should be encouraged across the New Forest and surrounding areas
 - b. agreeing a strategy to facilitate changes to the location and capacity of car parking on the open Forest and adjacent commons
 - c. developing a strategic approach to mitigate the potential impacts associated with increasing recreational pressures arising from planned new housing and visitor accommodation development on the internationally designated habitats
 - d. increasing the level of funding available for recreation management so that it is sufficient to address both existing and future needs
 - e. using appropriate and proportionate enforcement strategies to deter illegal use of the Forest.

- f. actions that continue and expand on existing work to help people understand how special the New Forest is, avoid negative impacts and benefit from spending time outside
 - g. actions relating to specific sites and routes that will help reduce impacts and improve the recreational experience
 - h. actions aimed at increasing the level of funding available for recreation management, developing an evidence-based approach and keeping the strategy 'live'
- 2.2 These have all been incorporated into the new Partnership Plan – which identifies recreational pressures as one of the major issues for the New Forest National Park. Attached as Annex 1 is a table which maps the 'RMS' actions against the Partnership Plan Themes and Action Plan, using the 'traffic light system' to record progress to date. This information has recently been shared with both the RMS Advisory Group and the RMS Steering Group and is available to view on our website via this [link](#).
- 2.3 As a result, the earlier Recreation Management Strategy (2010) – which was drawn up in parallel with the first National Park Management Plan - has now been superseded by the new Partnership Plan.
- 2.4 The progress on some of the more significant actions are also set out below.
- 3.0 **Developing a spatial plan for where recreation should be encouraged across the New Forest and surrounding areas**
- 3.1 With significant levels of new housing proposed in the areas surrounding the National Park and demands for greater access to green spaces, the Partnership Plan recognises the need for a fundamental review of an increasingly outdated and fragmented infrastructure that includes campsites, car parks and the waymarked off road cycle routes – much of which was put in place more than 50 years ago.
- 3.2 An infrastructure audit has already been completed on the Crown Lands by Forestry England, taking account of the earlier Footprint Ecology Survey, the New Forest Design Plan and Wetland Restoration Plans. At the recent RMS Steering Group meeting, partners acknowledged the need to urgently progress this work and engage the public over the coming months.
- 3.3 The spatial plan will need to have regard to and be part of the evolving nature recovery strategies, emerging Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans and how the recreational use of (and provision in) the surrounding areas, outside the Crown Lands, can help deflect pressures away from the designated sites. Any work that looks at the location and distribution of car parks, campsites and cycle routes is likely to be contentious and a clear rationale and engagement plan is to be agreed between the partners, building on the evidence of the earlier 'Forest Future' work and the recent experience of the pandemic – which saw ever greater numbers of people visiting the Forest. The support and input of Natural England will be another critical component.
- 3.4 The Cycle Working Group recently made a presentment to the Verderers Court (last November) regarding improving the off-road cycle network, and since then there has been a constructive dialogue about how to work together to develop the network and the management of cycling on the Crown Lands.

- 4.0 **Agreeing a strategy to facilitate changes to the location and capacity of car parking on the open Forest and adjacent commons**
- 4.1 Of the ‘tools’ available for managing recreation, influencing access through the provision of car parks is arguably the most powerful. This was recognised in the former Recreation Management Strategy (2010) which included a specific action (5.6.3) to manage car parking in the National Park and the associated impacts on the most sensitive areas, by enabling “landowners to manage the size, capacity and location of car parks for the benefit of the Forest and users”.
- 4.2 At the same time as Members endorsed the 22 actions (2019), it was also agreed that the Authority would investigate the feasibility of making a ‘Local Development Order’ (LDO) to facilitate small scale changes to the distribution and capacity of car parking on the open Forest and adjacent commons. This work was commenced in earnest by ourselves and Forestry England but it soon became clear that a LDO could not progress in advance of the wider spatial plan and associated assessment under the Habitat Regulations – so the spatial plan has become even more of an imperative.
- 4.3 The success of any car park strategy will also be dependent on having clear and enforceable deterrents in place to prohibit verge parking.
- 4.4 To help take this work forward Forestry England have recently appointed a Project Manager to progress a New Forest Car Park Strategy, who attended the last RMS Steering Group.
- 5.0 **Developing a strategic approach to mitigate the potential impacts associated with increasing recreational pressures arising from planned new housing and visitor accommodation development on the internationally designated habitats**
- 5.1 The Footprint Ecology research reports (2020) provide robust evidence on the increase in recreational visits arising from planned development around the New Forest’s internationally designated sites. The majority of neighbouring planning authorities (including New Forest District Council, Test Valley Borough Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council and Wiltshire Council) now have mitigation schemes in place to address recreational pressures arising from new development within the identified 13.8km ‘zone of influence’ of the designated sites. These schemes have helped to fund new ranger provision and significant new greenspace provision in areas surrounding the National Park.
- 5.2 A steering group made up of nine planning authorities¹, Natural England and Forestry England has recently commissioned further work from Footprint Ecology on the options for delivering ‘strategic access management and monitoring measures’ within the New Forest’s designated sites. This work will complement the new greenspace provision and rights of way enhancements taking place in neighbouring planning authority areas as part of a wider package of mitigation measures. The work will consider examples from other strategic mitigation schemes (including Bird Aware Solent) and is supported by Natural England. A report is expected by summer 2023.
- 5.3 Separate to this, the Authority adopted a revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme SPD in 2020 and includes an increased level of financial contribution towards mitigating the recreational impacts of new development within the National Park; and also seeks

¹ BCP Council, Dorset Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, New Forest District Council, New Forest NPA, Southampton City Council, Test Valley Borough Council and Wiltshire Council

contributions for a wider range of development. The level of financial contribution is updated annually in accordance with national inflation figures.

- 5.4 The introduction of the new Article 4 Direction and application of the Habitat Regulations in relation to pop-up campsites are further evidence of adopting new approaches to mitigating recreational impacts – although Members will be aware of the current government consultation to introduce a new 60 day permitted development right for tented sites.
- 5.5 The National Park Authority is also an active member of the Bird Aware Solent partnership – see [Home - Bird Aware Solent](#). The partnership covers 15 planning authorities and other partners including Natural England, the RSPB and the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. Developer contributions sought from new developments within the 5.6km ‘zone of influence’ – which covers areas of the New Forest National Park – are pooled to deliver a suite of agreed mitigation measures. The scheme also has funding available for site specific projects and the Authority was successful in bids for two projects on the New Forest coast in 2022.

6.0 Using appropriate and proportionate enforcement strategies to deter illegal use of the Forest

- 6.1 As reported to the last meeting, work is progressing well to introduce two Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) to prohibit (i) the lighting of fires and the use of barbeques and (ii) the feeding and petting of ponies, horses, mules and donkeys. The District Council intend to take a report to their Cabinet meeting on 5 April 2023 to confirm the PSPOs.
- 6.2 Since the last meeting, and working through the RMS Steering Group (RMSSG), the PSPO signage has now been agreed and partners are working to agree the location of the signs.



- 6.3 Together with Forestry England and the Verderers, we have notified the District Council of our ‘authorised’ persons (26 staff in all) who will be responsible for enforcing the PSPOs with the first staff training session scheduled for the end of April. The RMSSG discussed at its last meeting the need for a consistent approach amongst partners to enforcing the PSPOs based on the four ‘E’s of Engage; Educate; Encourage; Enforce. It is now expected that the PSPOs will come into force on 1 July 2023.
- 6.4 The work on the PSPOs is a major first step in designing and agreeing new enforcement strategies to tackle inappropriate behaviour in the National Park. If successful, and subject to meeting evidence requirements, it is hoped that verge parking might be addressed through a similar mechanism in the future.
- 7.0 **Actions that continue and expand on existing work to help people understand how special the New Forest is, avoid negative impacts and benefit from spending time outside**
- 7.1 A huge amount of joint working has been undertaken since 2019 to promote responsible behaviours, not least through the New Forest Code and the New Forest Ambassador Scheme. The joint ‘Care for the Forest, Care for Each Other’ campaigns have now evolved into a New Forest Code campaign that is updated and renewed each Spring.



- 7.2 The Inclusive National Park theme in the Partnership Plan guides our collective work to enable those who face additional challenges to benefit from the health and wellbeing opportunities afforded by the National Park. PEDALL inclusive cycling continues to develop as a flagship partnership, offering people to engage with nature in the National Park. Other initiatives include creative projects inspired by the New Forest, such as the ‘Artist in Residence’ programmes and a three-year joint ‘Culture in Common’ project to develop awareness and engagement with the arts. Additional

DEFRA grants have provided new bikes for PEDALL, accessible walking infrastructure and a new suite of accessible self guided walks.

- 7.3 National Park Authority rangers continue to engage with user groups, businesses, and local communities to communicate key messages to help people enjoy the New Forest responsibly and help protect it for the future. This year's diary is filling up with local events and opportunities for our mobile information unit as well as joint planning with partner organisations for coordinated patrols and campaigns such as livestock feeding & petting and dog walker engagement sessions.
- 7.4 Recruitment is under way for a 3-year Assistant Ranger post amalgamating a winter and summer seasonal position to rationalise resources and ensure knowledge retention within the Authority. A six-month seasonal ranger will also start in mid-April. Both positions will assist our work to help reduce the negative impacts of recreation, with an emphasis on disturbance to ground nesting birds. During the summer holidays the new recruits will work on Camping New Forest sites to increase understanding and add value to the experience of visitors.
- 7.5 To further strengthen the 'Team New Forest' approach and relationship with other New Forest rangers, some 26 representatives from seven organisations met earlier in the year to relaunch the 'New Forest Ranger Forum'; three Forum meetings are now scheduled throughout the year.

8.0 Conclusions

- 8.1 As acknowledged in this report and in the attached annex, there have been delays in progressing the 'set pieces' such as the spatial plan, car park strategy and LCWIP but there is now an opportunity to seize upon the renewed momentum of the Partnership Plan and PSPOs to take this work forward.

Recommendations:

That Members note the report.

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Papers: **NFNPA 577/19**
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Annex 1 – RMS Actions mapped against Partnership Plan Themes and Action Plan

Equality Impact Assessment: No impacts have been identified. National planning regulations set out minimum requirements on how planning authorities must engage communities and other stakeholders in their work and the revised draft document in Annex 1 meets these requirements.