

AM 648/23

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 23 MARCH 2023

STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ON PLANNING MATTERS – UPDATE

Report by: David Illsley, Policy & Conservation Manager

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Engaging local communities is core to the work of the National Park Authority. This includes the delivery of our statutory planning functions (e.g. development control, plan-making, enforcement), as well as our wider work as part of 'Team New Forest', the delivery of the National Park Partnership Plan, and on promoting an inclusive National Park (e.g. the work of our education officers, communications team, rangers and other specialists). The New Forest National Park Partnership Plan 2022 – 2027 includes a series of objectives around helping a range of diverse audiences connect with nature, discover why the New Forest National Park is special and how to care for it.
- 1.2 Our statutory planning function is delivered within a national framework that includes certain legal requirements for involving stakeholders, consultees and the public in our work. As part of this, all planning authorities must prepare a 'Statement of Community Involvement' (SCI) setting out how and when they will involve the community and other interested people in the preparation of their planning policies and guidelines; and how the community can be involved in decisions on planning applications.
- 1.3 The National Park Authority's first SCI was adopted in 2007 and guided consultation on our first Core Strategy (adopted 2010). The SCI was revised in 2013 and this updated version similarly guided consultation on our updated Local Plan (adopted 2019). With various changes in national policy in recent years it is an appropriate time to revise our SCI in advance of work commencing on a review of our local planning policies.

2. Our wider work on engaging communities in the work of the Authority

- 2.1 As set out in Chapter 11 of the revised draft SCI (Annex 1), the requirement to produce (and keep up-to-date) a Statement of Community Involvement derives from the relevant planning regulations and national planning policy. Chapter 11 of the revised draft SCI also summarises the approach to engaging people in the Authority's wider work outside our planning functions. This is delivered under the objectives of the adopted National Park Partnership Plan and through working with partners through 'Team New Forest'. In due course we will be preparing a fuller strategy for engagement with a broad range of people and communities on our wider work and the SCI update consequently has a narrower focus on our statutory planning work.

3. Review of the Authority's adopted Statement of Community Involvement

- 3.1 The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) resource on 'Plan Making' confirms, 'It is important that Statements of Community Involvement are kept up-to-date to ensure effective community involvement at all stages of the planning process. Therefore, a local planning authority should regularly review and update their Statement of Community Involvement to reflect any changes to engagement.'

- 3.2 Our current SCI was adopted in 2013 and guided consultation on our adopted Local Plan (2019) and the various Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) that followed (including the revised Habitat Mitigation Scheme SPD and Design Guide SPD). In the decade since our SCI was last reviewed there have been several important changes nationally that warrant an update, including:
- The National Planning Policy Framework was revised in 2018, 2019 and 2021. The NPPF includes chapters on ‘Plan-making’ and ‘Decision-making’ and is supported by the NPPG guidance on ‘Consultation and pre-decision matters’, ‘Determining a planning application’ and ‘Plan-making’ – all of which are relevant to the SCI update.
 - Various regulations have been published since 2013 to support the neighbourhood planning process. The Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 places various obligations on the National Park Authority in supporting the production of Neighbourhood Plans. Chapter 9 of the revised draft SCI addresses these requirements.
 - Changes were introduced to the plan-making process for both Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans in response to the coronavirus (Covid 19) pandemic, several of which have been retained. Planning authorities are increasingly encouraged to use online engagement methods to their full potential, including virtual exhibitions, digital consultations, video conferencing, social media and providing documents for inspection on a public website.
- 3.3 National regulations set out minimum requirements for consultation and engagement in our planning work. The SCI allows us to put a local flavour onto these national regulations - setting out what they mean in the New Forest National Park - and for us to go further than the minimum requirements where appropriate. For example, national regulations require four weeks of public consultation on draft supplementary planning documents but we have always committed to six weeks to provide a fuller opportunity to engage (and to better reflect the meeting timetables of local town and parish councils).
- 3.4 The revised draft SCI set out in Annex 1 incorporates the updates required due to changes in national policy and regulations over the last decade as well as changes in local practices. For example, the Authority still offers a free duty planning officer service, but the timings of this service have changed since 2013. It should be highlighted that the SCI sets out the Authority’s minimum commitments to consult and engage local communities. As with our 2007 and 2013 SCIs, it is likely we will go further than the requirements set out in the SCI itself, but it is important that what we commit to in the revised SCI is achievable and realistic.

4. Consultation on the revised Statement of Community Involvement

- 4.1 The NPPG resource on ‘Plan Making’ confirms, ‘There is no requirement for local planning authorities to consult when reviewing and updating their Statement of Community Involvement.’ Despite this, it is felt that an update to the document setting out how we engage communities in our planning work should be subject to consultation.
- 4.2 The intention is to share the document in Annex 1 with a wide range of statutory and general consultees for a six-week period and to invite representations. It is envisaged this consultation will take place over the next three months and a final designed version of the revised SCI will be presented at the full Authority meeting in July 2023 for adoption. Beyond this, future minor amendments or factual updates (such as updating references to Government regulations or guidance) will not be subject to consultation.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 With work on the review of the adopted local planning policies covering the National Park due to pick up in 2023/24, now is an appropriate time to ensure our commitments to engaging local communities and others in our statutory planning work are up to date.
- 5.2 The revised Statement of Community Involvement set out in Annex 1 has been updated in line with current national guidance and regulations. It commits the Authority to a level of engagement that accords with our legal obligations and it will remain an option for the Authority to go beyond these minimum requirements where resources allow. A conscious decision has been made to narrow the scope of the document to our statutory planning work, with details of our wider work engaging communities, stakeholders and partners through 'Team New Forest' under the objectives of the National Park Partnership Plan due to be set out in a separate engagement strategy.
- 5.3 Members are therefore recommended to approve the revised draft document in Annex 1 for the purposes of public consultation. The final designed version and a summary of the main consultation comments received will be presented to members at a full Authority meeting later this year for formal adoption. The intention is to make the adopted document available online as an electronic version, rather than printing a significant number of paper copies.

Recommendations:

Members:

- (i) **approve the revised draft Statement of Community Involvement (Annex 1) for a period of public consultation; and**
- (ii) **note that the final designed version of the Statement of Community Involvement will be considered at a full Authority meeting for formal adoption following consideration of the consultation responses received on the draft document.**

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Papers:

AM 648/23 – cover paper

Annex 1 – Revised draft New Forest National Park Authority Statement of Community Involvement

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.