Consultative panel questions received on 1 June meeting with replies:

Op Mountie, what is the long-term goal, how long will the project continue, and can we provide statistics on 'outsiders versus locals' who get caught?!

Operation Mountie began in 2021. It is a police-led multi-agency operation with support from Forestry England, The New Forest National Park Authority, New Forest Road Awareness, The Commoners Defence Association, The Verderers of the New Forest, New Forest District Council plus a number of very committed volunteers.

Over the last two years, the operation has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of animal accidents and fatalities.

The operation is informed by evidence provided by the Animal Accident Group – led by the Verderers – which each year produces a report on the numbers and location of incidents. This evidence, together with ongoing analysis of current incidents, informs the Operation Mountie team. They use this to identify key accident hot-spots location, and the highest risks in terms of times of the day/night, days of the week and times of the year. For example, evidence suggests that November – December are the highest risk period for animal accidents, and that drivers commuting too or from work at early light and dusk are most at risk.

The Operation Mountie team have engaged with several hundreds of drivers and take a limited amount of information including the location drivers travelled from. The team plan to collate this information and use this to help inform next steps for the project. This information will be shared in due course.

The project is dependent on ongoing police support and engagement of all partners.

Crows – Are we managing them and if so, is it effective, as concerns over GNB this time of year?

The New Forest Keeper team are engaged in predator control and this includes the main generalist predators such as foxes and crows during the ground nesting bird season.

Addressing the decline in ground-nesting birds is a complex issue and predator control is only one part of this.

We also focus on reducing recreational disturbance through a high-profile publicity campaign encouraging the public to support the birds by avoiding key locations and staying on the main tracks during the nesting season. This campaign is well supported by a range of local agencies and community groups.

The other main element of our work is to support better research into the factors affecting the breeding rates of ground nesting birds. Several research organisations, supported by our New Forest Keeper team are engaged in this long-term study work using monitoring, nest cams, and hidden cameras to build a clearer picture of the pressures on these birds. We, and others will be able to use the outcome of this work to inform the measures we take here in the New Forest including the level of predator control required.

Donation boards – Are the funds pooled centrally or do they get put back into New Forest funds for the upkeep of our infrastructure?

Many people don't realise the scale and costs of looking after this special place, the infrastructure, and its wildlife. The funds generated by donations are reinvested back into the New Forest. We currently spend over £5million a year caring for the New Forest and only about 18% of Forestry England's national income comes from government, the rest is generated in part through people going to our Visitor Centres, membership, and fundraising for support alongside our sustainable timber sales across the country.

HLS – Picket Bottom mire restoration. What is planned here and can we provide more detail?

Since 2010, the HLS scheme has delivered dozens of successful projects across the New Forest, totalling 20 miles of restoration to watercourses and approximately 5,000 hectares (more than 7,000 football pitches) of SSSI wetland habitats being improved and protected.

This July, Forestry England staff and contractors will be working at Picket Bottom, to restore the mire to its original meandering flow path, so it can reconnect with the natural forest floodplain.

Why it's a problem?
Work was previously carried out at Picket Bottom in 2015 on a stretch of watercourse to the north that runs into Little Linford Inclosure. The bed levels were raised, and restoration of remnant stream meanders reinstated to restore a shallower meandering channel to better connect with the floodplain. The SSSI unit was assessed by Natural England in 2020 as being in unfavourable - recovering condition due to an area in the southernmost point, which was not part of the previous restoration. Significant headward erosion has developed along the northern ditch that runs alongside the old Inclosure, which is over 2m deep at its southern end. This is having a negative impact on the mire, causing the adjacent mire habitat to dry out. Therefore, it's a priority to prevent further loss of internationally protected mire habitat.

What needs to be done to restore it?
This restoration work involves infilling the channel and eroding sections of the mire using hoggin, down to the point at which it joins the Inclosure, to stabilise the mire. Work will then continue within the ditch along the northern edge of the Inclosure to bed level raise the channel ending at SU1907 0640, where the watercourse naturally stabilises. This will help prevent further damage and erosion to the ditch and bank heritage feature.

We intend to minimise disruption for local walkers and horse riders by using carefully planned routes and the timing of the restoration works will be Monday to Friday, allowing regular access for visitors during peak times, such as weekends and evenings. Work vehicles will access the site using a forest track and materials will be stored at Ellingham Cricket Pitch Pavilion parking area.

The work will be undertaken by highly skilled, experienced contractors, and we'd like to reassure you that our local team will be regularly checking on the contractors that are carrying out the work and, our wildlife experts have already assessed the area for any ground nesting birds and other protected species.

This is a small project and is expected to be completed within two weeks of starting, depending on the weather and ground conditions.