

AM 668/24






**NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
AUTHORITY MEETING – 25 JANUARY 2024**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

Report by: Alison Barnes, Chief Executive

Summary:

This report covers the period since the Authority meeting on 19 October 2023. The report has been formatted to accord with our statutory purposes and duty; these are delivered by the Re:New Forest themes of 'Climate, Nature, People, Place, Partnership and Achieving Excellence' from our newly agreed Business Plan, summarised as follows:

 Re:New Climate	 Re:New Nature	 Re:New People	 Re:New Place	 Re:New Partnership
Establishing data and evidence baseline and implementing nature-based climate solutions.	Making space for nature and mitigating recreational pressures.	Increasing green skills and jobs - supporting New Forest business / green tourism. Sustainable land management and securing the future of commoning.	Promoting health and wellbeing through contact with nature.	Establishing stronger partnerships within the boundary.
Building a New Forest coalition for a Net Zero economy.	Enhancing natural capital.	Increasing the National Park's resilience to the effects of climate change.	Connecting people with nature and landscape.	Leading the green agenda beyond the New Forest.
Activating communities and increasing sustainable travel.	Supporting nature recovery through Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS).	Increasing the availability of affordable housing.	Safeguarding cultural heritage.	Developing a centre of excellence of insights and innovation for the New Forest.
Re:New Organisation: Achieving Excellence				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering high-quality services through a capable and motivated staff team • Maximising resources and using them efficiently and effectively • Modernising our use of the office space and our wider ways of working 				

Recommendation:

To note the report.

Contact: Alison Barnes
Tel: 01590 646633,
Email: alison.barnes@newforestnpa.gov.uk

Equality and Diversity

The Equality Act 2010 provides protection from discrimination in respect of certain protected characteristics and places us under a duty to have due regard to the advancement of equality in the exercise of our functions. We aim to eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity throughout all aspects of our work. More details regarding our projects and initiatives, such as PEDALL, are set out in the relevant reports and Equality Impact Assessments.

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The final months of 2023 saw a number of announcements and legislative changes affecting the work of National Parks. We continue to assess the implications for us, especially in respect of our planning service.

One of the most significant and widely welcomed changes was the strengthening of the legal duty placed on relevant authorities to have regard to our statutory purposes in making decisions that could affect National Parks. The new wording states, '...in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in any National Park in England a relevant authority must seek to further the purposes...' This means that when making decisions that could affect the protected landscapes, all public bodies and utility companies must 'seek to further' the purposes of National Parks. Our shared Partnership Plan represents a good example of putting this into practice and the Partnership Plan Leader's Panel met in December to shape a joint work programme for the year ahead for the key statutory bodies operating in the Forest.

Other imminent reforms in focus this quarter include the introduction of biodiversity net gain (BNG) which requires developers to deliver a biodiversity net gain of 10% resulting in more or better-quality natural habitat than there was before development.

We have also been inputting to the Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) being developed by Hampshire and Wiltshire councils – the strategies will identify the places and habitats that are most beneficial for nature. Developers will be incentivised to choose to mitigate the impacts of their development by improving priority habitats earmarked in the LNRS.

We supported the launch in December of the public survey to guide the Hampshire LNRS. We are also helping to shape the Wiltshire Council LNRS and liaising with neighbouring Dorset Council around its strategy. We will be ensuring the strategies reflect the nature recovery priorities identified in our Re:New Nature programme launched last July.

The work of our tree team has been very important as we dealt with the impacts of a number of named storms this quarter and there have been 183 tree works applications issued between 1 October and 31 December 2023. The storms and heavy rain have resulted in an increase in tree failures and exempt tree work notifications as residents

looks to repair or remove any damaged or dangerous trees.

The Foxlease site in Lyndhurst which is up for sale accounted for many of the 12 recent Tree Protection Orders issued by the tree team. The team also received widespread media and online coverage about its successful work with the landowner to retain the ancient but dead Kings Oak at Moyles Court as a wildlife habitat. Officers also worked with the communications team to promote National Tree Week and add new content on tree species to our website, as well as coping with an increased workload because of several storms.

We were pleased to be able to launch of the Green Health Hub to support our health and wellbeing work this period. The new website developed with partners is a directory of activities in and around the New Forest for wellbeing in the outdoors. It includes inspirational stories and case studies about how connecting with the natural world has benefited different people. Find out more at: www.greenhealthhub.org.uk.

Our joint Team New Forest work with partners to mitigate the effects of recreation on the protected habitats was demonstrated in the publication of an infographic highlighting some of the successes of the joint work over the summer. Points to note include over 7,000 hours of patrols; a 50% drop in thefts from vehicles and 700 conversations about the Public Service Protection Order issues of lighting fires and feeding/petting of ponies. No fines needed to be issued as people complied with the educational approach and Hampshire Fire and Rescue recorded a 30% drop in reported outdoor fires over the summer. This autumn our rangers recorded 1,099 conversations with members of the public promoting the New Forest Code and responsible dog walking messages.

A wide range of groups have learnt more about the New Forest and experienced the outdoors with the team. This included 400 people taking part in experiences guided by experts during the Walking and Cycling Festival; university masters students studying environmental management and law; and local school children who had never been to the beach before visiting the coast.

The team have been focused on getting YouCAN – the £1.4m Youth for Climate and Nature lottery partnership scheme which we are leading – up and running with partners. Projects which we are leading include setting up a Youth Board, a full Junior Rangers programme following a successful pilot last year and youth volunteering opportunities for the first time from summer 2024.

We were delighted to end 2023 with our volunteers contributing an impressive 1,254 hours over 200 volunteer days during the year. This year's programme begins with the 2024 New Forest National Park Volunteer Fair on Sunday 28 January, where organisations offering volunteering across the Forest will gather, recruit new volunteers

and network. The event at Brockenhurst Village Hall is fully booked with over 40 exhibitors and will have a youth focus including workshops as part of the YouCAN project. Alongside YouCAN, the fair is the first of many opportunities to support communities and organisations to work together as 'Team New Forest' into 2024 and we are excited about the opportunities ahead.

DELIVERY OF NATIONAL PARK PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS

The report has been formatted to accord with the statutory purposes and duty, which we often refer to as Protect, Enjoy and Prosper. These are delivered through our Re:New 'Climate, Nature, People, Place, Partnership, Achieving Excellence' objectives from the newly agreed Business Plan, a summary of which is set out on the first page.

Our Business Plan is delivered through annual Work Programmes, progress on which is set out in these reports alongside the formal quarterly reporting under the six themes to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee; at the end of each year we produce an Annual Review document.

The final section of this report lists the Members', our Chair's and the Chief Executive's activities and events.

1 First Purpose: Protect

Re:New Nature

In November, the government published its response to the Landscapes Review. This included putting National Parks at the heart of England's '30 by 30 commitment' i.e. 30% of the country's land effectively protected and managed for biodiversity conservation by 2030. Protected sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) count towards the 30 by 30 target and 56% of the National Park is designated as protected sites. Our Partnership Plan priority to make more space for nature aligns with the ambition of the 30 by 30 target and will be taken forward with stakeholders through the Re:New Nature Partnership.

Work has begun on developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) for Hampshire and Wiltshire. Hampshire County Council and Wiltshire Council are the responsible bodies for producing the LNRS and we have a formal role as a supporting authority. We will be ensuring that the priorities for nature recovery in the New Forest set out in the Partnership Plan and Re:New Nature Challenge are fully reflected in the final LNR Strategies.

We have also begun a project considering the impact of climate change and sea level rise on the coastline from Lymington to Calshot. Working in partnership with the Countryside Education Trust (CET) and using Environment Agency funding, the short-term project to March 2024, will engage landowners on how climate change will impact their long-term decision-making and develop climate-related resources for use in the Fort Climate Centre at CET in Beaulieu.

November also saw the launch of the Hampshire Hedge Project, led by CPRE Hampshire. A focal point of the project is to plant a hedge across the county to link the

South Downs and New Forest National Parks. This will complement the support for hedgerow planting that we have provided through both the Green Blue Horizons project and the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme. An added point of interest to the CPRE project is that the project officer leading the project is Ellie Banks, one of our first intake of Apprentice Rangers.

The Land Advice Service team continues to manage the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme with over 75% of the Year 3 budget committed on projects that deliver on the key themes of climate, nature, people and place. The largest project supported to date - £106,000 over two years – was agreed by the Local Assessment Panel in October. The project supports a group of 46 landowners in the north of the National Park and SE Wiltshire addressing concerns of the impact of large deer numbers on woodland regeneration and crop management.

Development Management

133 applications were received in the period 1 October to 31 December 2023. In the same period 148 applications were determined with an approval rate of 91%.

During this same period, seven appeal decisions were received. Of these, three were allowed and four were dismissed.

The planning permission for the site allocation at Church Lane in Sway (46 dwellings) was issued on 21 December following completion of the legal agreement.

The annual planning tour of development sites was held for Members on 10 October. A wide range of sites illustrating a variety of planning matters were visited, including past Building Design Award winners.

Planning reforms continue apace, and the team has been preparing for the introduction of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). At the same time, we have reviewed the level of information that needs to accompany planning applications. The updated list of these 'local requirements' was agreed by the Planning Committee last month and this will now be the subject of a six-week consultation.

Nationally set planning application fees were increased by Government last month – the fee for a householder application (e.g. extension) is now £258 and the fee for a single dwellinghouse is now £578. Major application fees have risen by 35%. This is the first time that planning application fees have been raised since 2016. We shall now review our pre-application charges in light of these uplifts.

We applied to Government for extra funding through the [Planning Skills Delivery Fund](#) which is part of a £29 million Fund providing support to local authorities to help clear backlogs of planning applications and address skills gaps. Unfortunately, we were not successful but will apply again when the next round opens this spring.

Helen David left the planning team after 14 years of service for the Authority in October. Ethan Townsend and Claire Woolf have also left the Authority to pursue planning roles elsewhere. We wish them all every success. We were pleased to welcome Charlotte Manton on 2 January as our new administrative assistant.

Trees

There have been 183 tree works applications issued between 1 October and 31 December 2023. With more storms and heavy rain recently, the most significant being storm Henk, we have experienced numerous tree failures and exempt tree work notifications to repair or remove any damaged or dangerous trees.

Some 12 new Tree Preservation Orders were made throughout 2023 to protect amenity trees and woodlands which were under threat from potential loss or damage. The largest and most recent of these being Foxlease in Lyndhurst which is currently on the market and has a good population of veteran trees and important amenity woodland. This 65-acre estate is currently owned by Girlguiding UK and used for various outdoor activities.

We were pleased with the recent successful negotiation to retain the King Oak at Moyles Court as a monolith and natural wildlife habitat. Following safety concerns with the retention of this ancient tree which had died this year after many years in decline, a natural looking trunk was retained. A press release issued by our Comms Team received a good level of national coverage.

Planning Enforcement

In December the enforcement team welcomed Jane Sharples as our new Planning Enforcement Officer. The team has dealt with 32 new cases and closed a total of 43 between October and December. The average number of cases sits at around 140 in addition to the monitoring lists; minerals and waste sites; agricultural occupancy properties and campsites, which we monitor and address on a periodic basis.

The team continues to receive a range of different and complex cases requiring investigation including breaches of condition, changes of use and most frequently allegations of the independent residential use of buildings. To assist the investigations, we issued four planning contravention notices (PCNs) in respect of the independent residential use of buildings and one enforcement notice relating to the use of land as a private single gypsy or traveller pitch. We are currently awaiting the outcome of five enforcement appeals.

Policy

The Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023 received royal assent on 26 October 2023. The Act contains a wide range of provisions around town and country planning, nutrient pollution standards, nationally protected landscapes and other matters. Of particular

relevance to the work of the National Park Authority are the following sections:

- The Act makes provision for 'street votes', which allow qualifying groups to issue a 'street vote development order' granting planning permission for specific forms of development. Section 61 of the Act confirms that the provision for 'street votes' to essentially grant planning permission does not apply within National Parks.
- Section 168 of the Act covers nutrient pollution standards, which is relevant to the River Avon and Solent catchments. In affected catchments the Act requires sewerage undertakers to upgrade their treatment works to the nutrient (nitrogen or phosphorus) pollution standard by 2030. This requirement does not apply to treatment works with a capacity of less than a population equivalent of 2,000 people. The Government is due to publish a list of the wastewater treatment works that will be legally required to upgrade on 26 January 2024. Natural England will update their River Avon and Solent nutrient budget calculators once the works due to be upgrade have been confirmed.
- Section 245 of the Act amends section 11(A) of the National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act 1949 to strengthen the legal duty placed on relevant authorities to have regard to the statutory purposes in making decisions that could affect National Parks. The new wording states, '...in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in any National Park in England a relevant authority must seek to further the purposes...' This is a strengthening of the previous legal 'duty of regard' and has been welcomed nationally by protected landscapes.
- Section 245 of the Act states that the Secretary of State may by regulations make provision requiring a relevant authority to contribute to the preparation, implementation or review of a National Park Management Plan.

At the December 2023 Planning Committee meeting members approved the Regulation 19 Submission draft Hampshire Minerals & Waste Plan for a final period of public consultation and then submission to the Secretary of State for independent examination. The final eight-week consultation runs from 8 January 2024 and all of the representations received during this final consultation period will be submitted to the Secretary of State for consideration. Further details of the consultation are available on our website and copies of the relevant information are available for inspection at Lymington Town Hall.

On 19 December 2023 the Government published its revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and various other related documents. The revised Framework wording on National Parks (now paragraphs 182 and 183) are unaltered and National Park designation continues to be recognised as a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan-area (paragraph 11 and footnote 7). The Framework continue to cross-refer to the extant National Parks Circular (footnote 63), which is welcomed. The Framework and supporting guidance provide further

information on the review of adopted development plans and we will carefully consider this as we move towards a review of the adopted New Forest National Park Local Plan.

The team continues to support communities in preparing their neighbourhood plans. The final public consultation on both the draft Ringwood and Wellow neighbourhood plans has concluded and both councils have now appointed an independent assessor to review their draft plans, the supportive evidence base and the representations received.

At the end of December, we said goodbye to Tony Spence, who retired after more than 17 years at the National Park Authority as a Policy Officer. Tony started with us in summer 2006 and contributed to the preparation of two sound local plans, as well as leading work on our habitat mitigation scheme. We wish Tony all the best in his retirement.

Archaeology

During this reporting period the Archaeology Team has consulted on 27 New Forest District Council and 20 Authority planning applications and given comments and recommendations on several other ongoing planning cases and enquiries. We've also made four site monitoring visits to NFDC sites, to review the archaeological work being conducted.

On 30 October we arranged a site visit for the NFDC / NPA planning teams to attend the excavation of a Bronze Age barrow near Ringwood to help planning officers understand more about the archaeological process. Feedback was very positive and has triggered more discussion regarding the advice and information we provide the planning officers.

We continue to provide archaeological advice and services across Forestry England's entire Southern District (a service level agreement). The work includes archaeological advice, desk-based assessment, site surveys, site-specific Heritage Impact Assessments (Data Packs) and site mark-ups, where we mark heritage features before ground works begin.

During this reporting period the Archaeology Team received six new requests for Heritage Impact Assessments (Data Packs) and site mark-ups ahead of forestry work, progressed 12 ongoing cases and made over six visits to sites across the southern district.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

During this reporting period the team provided eight Heritage Impact Assessments (data packs), received five new requests for data packs and site mark-ups ahead of ground works for ridge, furrow and stump removal, trees and scrub clearance, stream/wetland restoration and lost lawns. The team also made three site visits and conducted a watching brief of ground works at Turf Hill.

Building Design and Conservation

Our December 2023 Planning Committee meeting considered the latest 22 nominations from local communities and parish councils for addition to the New Forest National Park 'Local List'. Nominated assets included a historic well, old corn mill workings and two finger posts in the parish of Boldre; the lychgate to the parish church, a millennium stone and a trig point on the open forest in the parish of Hyde; an Arts and Crafts country house in Woodlands, a public air raid shelter in South Gorley, a former barn in Burley and a cottage in Copythorne. The assets have now been added to the Local List, which recognises their particular character and positive contribution to the distinctiveness of the New Forest National Park.

We are continuing to work with Copythorne Parish Council and Netley Marsh Parish Council on the review of the Forest North East Conservation Area Character Appraisal. This is the first of three Conservation Area Character Appraisals scheduled for review since the Conservation Areas were designated over a decade ago.

On 9 January 2024 we were notified that Historic England has decided not to nationally list the former New Forest Union Workhouse building at Ashurst Hospital or the former chapel. Members will recall that the site is allocated in the adopted New Forest National Park Local Plan (2019) for redevelopment following independent examination. Our September 2023 Planning Committee meeting resolved that subject to the completion of a legal agreement, the Executive Director of Strategy and Planning be authorised to grant planning permission for the redevelopment of the Ashurst Hospital site. Historic England's decision on the national listing enables this redevelopment project to progress.

At the end of the December, Emily Carter moved onto a new role working for the Diocese of Salisbury. Emily made a positive contribution to our building design and conservation work over her four years at the Authority and we wish her all the best in her new role.

2 Second Purpose: Enjoy

Education and Youth

During the winter months the education and youth team has been able to engage with 621 children, students and young professionals groups on a variety of bespoke topics including Masters degree students from Middlesex university studying environmental management and law, a young curators group from St Barbe Museum, and PACE students (pathways to apprenticeships, college and employment) at Brockenhurst College designing a new work experience programme. We've attended careers fairs, visited the coast with local school children who had never been to the beach before and run sessions in school and in the Forest on everything from litter to wellbeing.

Course Coordinator - Middlesex University: 'We valued the ability of the Education team to adapt the message to our students' needs and interests, the space for questions, the

opportunity to meet some of the NPA members. This was the first time for many of our predominantly overseas student cohort to visit outside London. They gained not just knowledge but also an experience that they will not forget for a while.'

Year R class teacher, Foxhills Infants School: 'The visit was really well planned, well resourced and really engaged our children. The opportunities to pause and discuss other things on our walk, such as the footprints were really valuable and made sure that we really took every advantage to engage the children. The hands-on sessions were creative, varied and really good fun.'

Planning and preparation stages have been underway for the launch of the Youth for Climate and Nature (YouCAN) project which represents a significant expansion of our work in 2024. This included calling upon the skills and time of two youth innovation project groups from Southampton University which have researched and presented some innovative and practical proposals for setting up a Youth Board. We're also putting plans and procedures in place for a full Junior Rangers programme throughout 2024 and youth volunteering opportunities for the first time from summer 2024.

Our travel grant scheme for 2023-24 financial year has been fully allocated and will enable 2,470 pupils to have days of learning at venues across the New Forest National Park. Schools find the grant invaluable and are petitioning for the scheme to be expanded. Below are some anonymised quotes from staff coordinating trips.

Visit organiser, local school: 'The travel grant makes a big difference towards the whole trip cost, as even relatively close trips have expensive coach costs. This means we can keep trip costs to an affordable level for our parents, and the children get to visit parts of the New Forest they may not have the opportunity to visit with their family.'

We have been able to support the communications team to take on work experience students, providing opportunities for students across the NPA.

Public and community events / rangers

Despite the inclement weather, the ranger team has still braved the elements and been a visible presence out in the Forest, engaging with the public whilst out on patrol as well as keeping local businesses stocked up with NPA literature and key New Forest Code messages.

Rangers have continued to engage with people to promote and educate about the two Public Space Protection Orders. No fines have been issued to date and this is a positive reflection of the public's increased awareness and understanding about the dangers of fires and pony petting/feeding, as well as the work done by NPA and FE rangers and communications teams. We have worked alongside Beaulieu Estate to provide PSPO signage and share expertise for engaging audiences in and around the village and estate.

The team is leading on wildlife conservation volunteering and have delivered tasks at a range of sites across the National Park including Copythorne Common, Harrow Wood Farm and in partnership with Freshwater Habitats Trust at a private landholding in Burley.

A representative from the NPA ranger team continues to support the Police, FE and CDA in attending Operation Mountie sessions targeting speeding drivers across the Forest. Other joint working includes, working with FE to deliver Duke of Edinburgh sessions for SEN students at Oak Lodge School, leading activity sessions for local scouts, rainbows and squirrels with FE and event support at Lepe Country Park with HCC.

In December, Hayden represented the NFNPA at the Supporting Refugee and Asylum Seekers conference in Manchester, gaining valuable contacts for her Europarc Scholarship as well as highlighting work she is doing with these groups in the New Forest and surrounds.

Gillie attended the UK National Park Ranger Managers Conference in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs NP. This was a valuable opportunity to share ideas and learn from colleagues from other areas. Of particular interest was the opportunity to share practice on recreation management initiatives across National Parks. The ranger role appears to have a higher profile north of the border so useful knowledge was shared to assist our work in raising the profile of rangers, their role as an essential social and environmental service and how best to reach decision makers to encourage greater support.

Habitat Mitigation Rangers

We were pleased to be able to extend the contract of Naomi Addleton for six months to continue ranger work funded by NPA habitat mitigation. She is working alongside Assistant Ranger, Dawn Smith, also funded through NPA mitigation budget and Jim Day, People & Wildlife Ranger, delivering habitat mitigation through a Service Level Agreement for New Forest District Council.

In this period the team recorded 1,099 conversations with members of the public promoting the New Forest Code and responsible dog walking messages through a combination of mobile unit and foot patrols in and from Forest car parks across the National Park. Events attended include pop-up play event at Augustus Park, Fordingbridge, and New Forest Marque Roadshow at Everton Nursery. The New Forest Dogs Forum was held with 12 partner attendees. The team has attended and supported joint NFDog/Verderers meetings and delivered a presentation at its working with dogs business seminar.

A positive partnership has been strengthened with Dorset Dogs/Urban Heath Partnership with a joined-up approach to managing commercial dog walking across the two areas,

through the drawing up and agreement of a consistent Charter. The New Forest Professional Dog Walking Charter is held in high regard and has attracted enquiries by several countryside organisations wishing to set up similar schemes. Dawn has arranged and supported dog owner engagement events with the Police and Forest partner organisations.

Communications

For National Tree Week in November, content reached over 140,000 people through our social media channels and had over 4,000 engagements (comments, shares, likes). It also generated nearly 700 clicks through to the website. New website content on tree species in the New Forest and a Knightwood Oak walk was viewed by more than a thousand people following promotion in our email newsletter. We also promoted work by the tree team to retain the well-known King Oak at Moyles Court as a wildlife habitat. The press release received widespread coverage including by BBC News Online and the Daily Mail.

We issued a statement about the Government's announcement of a new nature package and its response to the Glover report. We helped to promote the Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) survey being led by Hampshire County Council. The survey will run until 10 March and different themed workshops are taking place at the same time. The Hampshire LNRS will be informed by our Re:New Nature Challenge which was launched last summer. All counties and unitary authorities are publishing an LNRS and we are also liaising with Wiltshire and Dorset on the promotion of their engagement process.

We also supported the Hampshire Hedge launch with the CPRE and the South Downs National Park, have put together a suite of Farming in Protected Landscapes film case studies on our website and are working on case studies about grant recipients from the Sustainable Communities Fund, with the latest focused on Minstead Study Centre.

Green Careers Week in October provided an opportunity to highlight the range of opportunities in the environment sector through the eyes of our two interns who also attended a careers fair at The Arnewood School; our Early Green Careers Network; two apprentice ranger vacancies and interviews with NPA staff about what a green career means to them. Social posts recorded 76,000 impressions with 4,600 video views and 2,700 engagements (likes, comments, shares). Over the past few months the communications team has also welcomed three work experience students as part of our commitment to promoting green careers. The students' blogs about their time with us are available to view on our website: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/blog.

The Green Health Hub website has been launched and is populated with activities available from green prescribers in and around the National Park and stories about the mental and physical health benefits of connecting with nature.

Communications work around planning included the consultation on the new Article 4 Direction on campsites and the Hampshire Minerals and Waste consultation.

Visitor publications including the Pocket Guide and Essential Guide with the New Forest Code and sustainable travel information have been updated. Code campaigns this period have included reducing animal accidents; warnings against leaving pumpkins in the open Forest after Hallowe'en, fireworks and being aware of calves left temporarily in the Forest by their mothers. The Code partners also released an infographic showing the results of some aspects of the joint campaigns, including outdoor fires down 30%; 700 people educated on the Public Space Protection Order themes of no barbecues or feeding/petting of ponies; thefts from motor vehicles down 50%; 1.7m impressions of code content on social media.

A staff session and separate members session were held on communications to update people about the current media landscape and the work of the comms team and to hear people's priorities and ideas for the coming year. The input will help to shape a new communications strategy for the NPA which is currently being written.

We welcomed new part-time Communications Assistant Sarah Russell to the team who is providing comms support to the New Forest Marque.

Fundraising

Following approval of our expression of interest to Defra's Species Survival Fund, we submitted a full application to the fund for £1.04 million. With additional match funds of £256,000 this would represent a potential total investment into the Forest of £1.3 million. If funding is approved, 250ha of land would be enhanced for nature with increased abundance and diversity of key species and improved connectivity to the New Forest SSSI. The NPA would lead the project and work in partnership with the Freshwater Habitats Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, New Forest Commoners Defence Association, and Wild New Forest. Partners would be supported by the RSPB, as a delivery landowner, and an advisory team drawn from a local New Forest Biodiversity Forum and National Parks Partnerships, an LLP established in 2016 by all UK NPAs. 14 jobs would be created or retained, 50 new volunteers and five interns would be supported to develop green skills, and outreach would demonstrate ways to improve the prospects of species. A decision on the outcome of the bid is expected in February.

Following a positive response to our 'New routes to Nature' project enquiry to The National Lottery Heritage Fund around volunteering and green careers, we submitted a full application to the fund for £248,640. If funding is approved, it would support the development of several pathways that enable a wider range of people to be actively involved in the landscape. This includes increasing and strengthening our volunteer work, employing two new apprentice rangers, and providing training in green skills linked to current gaps in knowledge. We would support this with communications designed to activate and channel people's enthusiasm and voice in promoting benefits to people and nature.

A grant of £65,000 has been agreed from BMW's Recharge in Nature initiative managed by National Parks Partnerships. The grant is aimed supporting environmental sustainability within National Parks and is available to all National Parks. In the New Forest, we have agreed that the funds will go towards our apprentice ranger programme and supporting outdoor learning opportunities for young people.

We continued to support the Pedall team to develop a full application to the National Lottery Community Fund to support the continuation of the project for a further five years.

Interpretation and inclusive projects

As part of our 'Inclusive National Park' theme, we facilitated a visit of young people from Heartbeat, a local charity established in 1992 that helps people diagnosed with congenital and cardiovascular diseases primarily and supports the work of the NHS Wessex Cardiac Unit based at Southampton General Hospital. This is developing into a new partnership resulting on a programme of visits as part of the YouCAN project. We also welcomed Masters of Business Administration students from Bournemouth University on a visit to Brockenhurst to learn about and share ideas on the 'Thriving Forest' partnership plan theme.

The artist in residence programme (sponsored by Arts Council England for three years and in partnership with creative charity SPUD) continued with Beccy McCray's exhibition in October and a programme of engagement over half term outside the New Forest Heritage Centre in Lyndhurst by artist Alex Julyan. Through rain and shine Alex built creative sculptures and dens with passers-by using coppice material from nearby Pondhead inclosure. As Alex describes in her blog: 'Veteran den builders, enthusiasts, reluctant-retired boy scouts, a nuclear power coordinator, a physiotherapist, dog club members, doll's house collectors and a chemistry professor and many more constructed and dismantled a variety of thickety structures over the four days.'

Health and Wellbeing

In November we launched the [Green Health Hub](#), which is a gateway and signpost service for health and wellbeing groups and activities. There are 15 groups on the site with further interest from other groups interested in joining. In addition there is a 'stories' section on the site which highlights the positive difference nature and landscape can have on your health and wellbeing.

The ENLIVEN project, which assisted people with dementia to access the National Park in a variety of ways, was completed on November 16th with a celebratory visit to spudWorks in Sway, where art and craft activities inspired by the New Forest took place and a final film of the project's achievements was shown. The £7k project was funded by Exeter University and in total welcomed 27 people onto the New Forest Tour, ran three PEDALL riding experiences for 39 people and facilitated 54 people to visit Lepe Country Park and spudWorks and try out activities such as birdwatching, paddling in the sea, volunteering to create a butterfly meadow and gardening in the sensory garden.

PEDALL

PEDALL New Forest Inclusive Cycling continued its positive momentum and despite some challenging weather conditions, from October – December 2023 a total of 721 riders joined PEDALL cycling sessions in the New Forest.

As participants in New Forest National Park Walking and Cycling festival, PEDALL featured on BBC Radio Solent. Presenter of the weekend breakfast show, Katie Martin, rode with us and Minstead Trust and produced two four-minute radio features. The very positive items were broadcasted at peak listening time on the breakfast show and showcased the project, our riders, volunteers and project team. As we strive to increase awareness and reach new riders this was very welcome promotion.

We were happy to support Lymington Hospital Stroke support team by attending a recent event for stroke sufferers (60 attendees). We have built strong connections with the physio and 'nurse specialist' teams at Lymington Hospital (Stroke and Parkinsons support) and are always delighted to see patients referred to PEDALL to support physical and mental rehabilitation.

It has been encouraging to see residential care homes for the elderly re-engage with us following COVID. A number of New Forest care homes have been regularly riding with us including Netley Court and Shawford Springs.

Our community outreach events were a highlight of 2023 and inclusive rides at Slades Farm in partnership with Dimensions and Active Dorset (six monthly rides, 311 riders)

and at Southampton Sport Centre in collaboration with Active Nation (five monthly rides, 134 riders) helped drive PEDALL's awareness and engagement. We are planning an extensive outreach event programme for 2024.

Pedall Funding

We currently await news on a number of significant grant applications - from the National Lottery Community Fund (our primary funder), plus New Forest District Council's Health and Wellbeing Fund, from Hampshire County Council/Sport England's Active Health Programme and South Western Rail's Customer and Communities Improvement Fund (CCIF).

Friends of Pedall

Friends of Pedall, supported by PEDALL's project team and NFNPA members, is working with pro bono Charity consultants [Cranfield Trust](#), to develop a shared five year vision and fundraising strategy for the charity. We look forward to sharing this work.

Pedall Volunteers

Our volunteer community has expanded throughout the year (50+) and two experienced PEDALL volunteers recently completed ride leader training expanding the skills and capacity of our volunteering team. It is essential that we continue to invest in our volunteers as this enables PEDALL to expand our engagement and further our community engagement. We enjoyed the Volunteer Christmas quiz hosted by NFNPA and our final festive ride of the year with clients and volunteers.

Volunteering and Ambassadors

In 2023 we completed 1,254 volunteer hours over 200 volunteer days with 72 people. We are now halfway through our winter volunteer programme of wildlife and conservation tasks, working with local landowners to improve habitats and help nature to flourish.

In 2024 we will partner with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) on the Hampshire Hedge project. This project seeks to link the New Forest and South Downs National Parks with a nature recovery corridor of hedgerow. The project officer is Ellie Banks, our former Kick-start ranger, so it's great to see our efforts in supporting young people into green jobs succeeding. [The Hampshire Hedge - CPRE Hampshire](#)

The New Forest National Park Volunteer Fair is taking place on Sunday 28 January at Brockenhurst Village Hall. The Fair is fully booked with exhibitors with over 40 attending again and we are expecting a good turnout of prospective volunteers. This year there is a

youth focus to the event with workshops taking place for young people as part of the YouCAN project.

Recreation Management

The Partnership Plan's joint work programme includes a commitment to 'agree and publish a spatial plan which identifies more appropriate locations for recreation and associated infrastructure' - the aim being to better mitigate recreational pressures. Working closely with Forestry England colleagues, a draft brief has been prepared and this will be the main item for discussion at the forthcoming meetings of the Recreation Management Strategy Advisory and Steering Groups.

We have been involved in helping create a partnership of organisations and landowners to look into coastal issues at Tanners Lane and Hurst Spit. Initial meetings have been held and solutions to some of the recreational disturbance raised. Further stakeholder engagement and funding discussions are planned.

Access and Rights of Way

We installed 16 oak signposts along new promoted walking route at Franchises Lodge in partnership with the RSPB. We have signposts on seven of our 25 promoted walking routes and we have just commissioned a series of waymarker discs to add to these signs to help people navigate the paths.

Access land surveyors are part way through their survey of all 30 parcels of access land. The surveys make sure that access remains open in these areas and no fences or barriers are erected.

The Walking & Cycling festival went well with over 400 people attending an event. Many different organisations from the Ramblers to Nordic Walking experts provided over 40 guided walks and cycles. Many walks this year focused on accessibility and we worked with Open Sight Hampshire, the New Forest Access Forum, and Community First Wellbeing Walks.

3 Duty: Prosper

Re:New Partnership

Officers are involved in projects associated with the development opportunities taking place in the Waterside and A326 corridor. To help shape the vision for the Waterside area we have commissioned a Green Links Study to explore practical ideas to reconnect and expand New Forest habitats, extend areas of grazing and provide accessible, nature-rich green space within the Waterside communities. Once complete the study will be

shared with members and stakeholders.

New Forest Business Partnership

The annual Brilliance in Business Awards were held at Brockenhurst College on the 30 November. We sponsor an award for the Sustainable Business of the Year, encouraging businesses to drive environmental improvements within their industry, creating a greener, more sustainable product or service. This year's winner was Vida Promotions who specialise in providing sustainable merchandise for businesses.

The New Forest Marque Award for Food and Drink was won by Beaky Blinders, a producer of gluten, wheat, dairy, and soya free baked goods with premises based in the National Park.

Commoning in the New Forest

As the changes in funding for farmers and land managers resulting from reforms to agricultural policy and the implementation of the Agricultural Transition Plan continue, the impact on commoning of these changes remain a cause for concern. We helped the CDA organise a visit to the New Forest by the NFU Vice President David Exwood and Director of Policy Andrew Clarke. The visit was an opportunity to highlight the significance of the reduction in Basic Payments on commoners, in particular cattle graziers. We also used the opportunity to highlight the key role played by livestock grazing in managing the Forest habitats.

We have also worked with the Forest Farming Group to secure a grant from the Rural Payments Agency to support the preparation of a Countryside Stewardship feasibility study to help inform the choice of environmental support scheme to follow the Verderers Higher Level Stewardship Scheme.

Visitor experience

We are processing the results from the 786 responses to the 'Enjoy the New Forest' survey and will present findings later this quarter.

We are part of the 'Decarbonising the Leisure Network' and attended a presentation on decarbonising the whole visitor journey for rural destinations across Europe, where a more low-carbon travel experience for visitors is offered, and how it can be applied in the UK. The findings will be shared in due course, and we will consider if any practices or models can be adopted locally.

New Forest Tour

We met with the Tour operator management team on 16 October and with the operational team on 2 November and discussed the season past and future. Last year was the

second year of the resident's ticket, and its popularity has expanded to include areas of the New Forest National Park within Wiltshire. Overall, 271 resident's tickets were purchased, which is a significant increase from the first year (2022). We're working on marketing and operational plans for 2024, which sees the 20th anniversary of the Tour - the season is planned for 29 June – 15 September.

Sustainable transport

The bus fare cap will continue at £2 until December 2024, supporting passengers to use bus travel across the country.

We attended the New Forest Community Rail Partnership (NFCRP) meeting on 6 December and will continue to support on projects where we align. The NFCRP is moving towards full accreditation and will form as Solent CRP but remain separate to Hampshire CRP.

Walking and cycling

We are awaiting the draft New Forest Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan from Hampshire County Council for comment and have played an active role in the stakeholder group shaping it.

The New Forest Cycle Working Group has continued to meet in subgroups to deliver on improved communication and mapping for the cycling community. There has also been liaison with the Verderers in preparation for the next meeting for the whole group in February.

We have also been engaged with local authorities through the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, sharing reflections and challenges around improving and delivering active travel in the New Forest.

Affordable Housing

In December 2023 full planning permission was issued for the development of 46 new dwellings on the Local Plan (2019) site allocation at Church Lane, Sway. The development will deliver 23 affordable dwellings (50%) for local people in housing with a connection to the parish of Sway, as well as 1 hectare of new public open space for the local community. Planning permission is due to be issued imminently for the development of 62 dwellings (including 31 affordable dwellings for local people in housing need) at Whartons Lane, Ashurst. This site is similarly allocated for development in the adopted National Park Local Plan (2019) and has a resolution to grant from the Authority's Planning Committee from April 2022. Between them these two sites will deliver over 50 new affordable dwellings for local people.

In the meantime, we are working with the relevant third parties to resolve the outstanding access agreements for the Burley Affordable Housing site (so that the site can be

accessed from the adjoining District Council car park).

Sustainable Communities Fund

Youth Options has been awarded £4,982 to provide a series of three hour outdoor learning courses over six weeks for up to 10 children. The focus will be on working with local schools to identify children most in need who are struggling in a classroom environment. Two family activity days will also focus on sharing and celebrating learning with the children and their carers as well as promoting the benefits of nature in the New Forest to wider audiences. The sessions will offer fun and engaging activities in a structured environment, for example, woodwork, nature art, games and stories, habitat exploration and woodland walks, gardening, estate management, and maintenance tasks. Activities are designed to allow the development of teamwork, communication, problem solving and critical thinking, and encouraging participants to focus, develop a sense of agency, and make positive decisions. Each child works towards a National Outdoor Learning Award, gaining accreditation they may not be able to access in a traditional classroom.

4 Organisation: Achieving Excellence

New Forest Voices

New Forest Voices is our programme focused on equality, diversity and inclusion as is a key part of our work to deliver the Inclusive National Park theme of our Partnership Plan. The New Forest Voices group, drawn from staff across the NPA, has continued to meet at least every two months to help steer delivery under three themes – understanding, experiences and ways of working. Recent work has included revising our EDI policy and liaising with training providers to help develop a bespoke programme of workshops for our organisation in 2024.

Human Resources

As of 9 January 2024 the total staff headcount was 71 or 63.09 full-time equivalents (FTEs).

	Headcount	Variation from previous report	Full Time Equivalents	Variation from previous report
Core funded	55*	– 1	48.88*	– 1.10
Funded by external projects	16	– 2	14.22	– 2.50
Total	71	– 3	63.09	– 3.60

*Of the core funded roles, one staff member (1 FTE) is working in shared services, one is on a fixed-term contract and 20 are part-time.

In the last few months we recruited to the following roles:

Role	Contract type	How funded
Receptionist (Mondays & Tuesdays)	Permanent	Core funded
Communications Assistant (New Forest Marque)	Permanent	Part core, part project funded
Planning Enforcement Officer	Permanent	Core funded
Administration Assistant (Planning)	Permanent	Core funded
Net Zero with Nature Programme Manager	Permanent	Core funded

We said goodbye to:

Role	Contract type	How role will be filled in future
Seasonal Assistant Ranger	Seasonal, project funded	N/A - end of seasonal role
Planning Officer x 2	Permanent, core funded	Like for like replacement
Administration Assistant (Planning)	Permanent, core funded	Like for like replacement
New Forest Apprentice Ranger	Fixed term, project funded	N/A - apprenticeship completed. New funding for further apprentices from February 2024.
Inclusive Cycling Ride Leader	Fixed term, project funded	Awaiting confirmation of future funding
Policy Officer	Permanent, core funded	Assessing vacancy
Building Design and Conservation Officer	Permanent, core funded	Assessing vacancy

We are currently recruiting:

Role	Contract type	How funded
YouCAN Project Co-ordinator	Fixed term to August 2026	Project funded
New Forest Apprentice Ranger x 2	Fixed term for 18 months	Project funded

Team New Forest / Updating the Partnership Plan

The New Forest Leaders' Panel met 15 December 2023, with nine key New Forest partners represented at a senior level. The meeting included discussion on the strengthened duty to seek to further the National Park purposes set out in the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023. It was highlighted that the Partnership Plan approach provides a way to demonstrate how New Forest partners are working together and pooling resources to deliver our shared ambitions for the Forest. It was agreed that the new Leaders' Panel model would be shared with Defra as useful practice as they prepare further guidance.

The Leader's Panel meeting supported the draft work programme prepared by the partnership plan officers group, which it was agreed had identified the relevant topics for each theme. It was agreed that the Leaders' Panel will meet again in April for a meeting hosted by the Verderers, followed by the summer tour in the north of the New Forest.

IT & Cyber Security Services

Security / Infrastructure:

The Defra ICT security meeting due to be held in October was postponed at the last minute, however, we have received the annual Defra check report, with a couple of recommendations which we are in the process of implementing.

The new backup system has now been fully implemented.

A new cloud PC has been purchased for our third-party GIS support to use. This new system will also allow us to offer temporary staff a way to access our systems without needing to provide them with equipment. This has provided a more secure setup and has enabled us to close down the old remote system, leading to three more servers being switched off. We have also switched off the remaining 2 GIS servers, leaving us with just two phone servers and two domain servers. These last four remaining servers will be switched off once the new Teams phone system has been implemented.

Planning system:

The conversion of a million tif files to PDF's has been completed so we are now in the process of carrying out quality checks. We are in discussions with the planning software providers about when and how exactly the converted files are transferred. We still anticipate this work to be completed by Easter.

We recently met with our new Account Manager for the planning software and went through the outstanding issues we still have in particular with the tifs, and Tree Protection Order documents. We will be having regular meetings with them to help reach a resolution to these outstanding issues.

We attended an Agile User Group meeting where they outlined their plans for the software over the next 12 months, including new features to help with the performance of Agile. Of potential interest, there is an AI validator tool to help automate the initial validation process, as well as the opportunity to participate in the further development of the software, in particular the PowerBI reporting and improvements to the workflow process, which we have said we'd be interested in.

Other work / projects:

A supplier has been chosen for the replacement phone system, and we are in the process of setting up initial project meetings and planning training for staff. The team has also taken over responsibility for the Authority's mobile phones.

The IT team is now known as the IT & Cyber Security team, with team members roles and job titles being amended to reflect the change. A draft updated IT policy is with the Head of Resources for review and the IT work programme for 2024 has been shared with all staff to highlight the projects we aim to complete.

Legal and Information management

Information requests

The number of information requests received is continuing to increase over time. In the first three quarters of this financial year, we received 62 formal requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, which is six more than same period last year, an increase of 11%. We had a particularly busy August receiving three times the usual number, which unfortunately meant that we did not meet the statutory timeframe in five cases, therefore only 92% were responded to within the statutory timeframe. As in previous years more than half of the requests related to our planning function, with requests about specific planning applications, pre-apps and enforcement investigations, as well as policy and statistics enquiries. Those which were not related to our planning function were predominantly concerned with finance and our IT arrangements. We have undertaken four internal reviews so far this year; in all cases the original decision was upheld. We are not aware of any appeals to the Information Commissioner to date.

Complaints

We have dealt with 10 formal complaints so far this year which is an increase on the six received in the same period last year. Formal complaints are almost exclusively related to planning applications or enforcement investigations and this year is no exception. Whilst in percentage terms this is a large increase, the number of complaints received is still very low given the number of planning applications we deal with. The last five-year average for a full year is 16 complaints. All were responded to within our 20-working day deadline. In three cases the complainant requested a review of the matter, at Stage 3, by our Chief Executive, in all cases the complaint was not upheld. At the time of writing, we

are not aware that any matters have been referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, although there does tend to be a time lag before we are notified.

Privacy and data protection

We continue to work hard to ensure that we meet our obligations under the GDPR and are constantly reviewing and updating our website, documents and privacy notices to improve transparency and compliance, whilst responding to data protection queries as they arise.

5 Members

5.1 Some Members were involved in some or all of the following meetings and events

- 21 November – Planning Committee
- 4 December – New Forest Access Forum
- 7 December – Consultative Panel
- 13 December – Members Day – Communications
- 19 December – Planning Committee
- 16 January – Planning Committee

5.2 Forthcoming Members activities include:

- 5 February – Resources, Audit and Performance Committee
- 13 February – Members Day – ‘What’s new in Planning?’
- 20 February – Planning Committee
- 4 March – Resources, Audit and Performance Committee
- 7 March – Consultative Panel
- 19 March – Planning Committee

5.3 Chief Executive’s external engagements

- 20-27 October – Worlds Parks Congress, (Joint International Congress, Chaired Final Plenary session, speaker at Heads of Parks meeting, podcast interview)
- 13 November – Green Leadership Programme session
- 14 November – Green Leadership session for NPA staff
- 15 November – Regular meeting with Chief Executive, NFDC
- 15 November – Meeting with Director, Country Land and Business Association
- 16 November – Meeting with Director, Go New Forest
- 17 November – Meeting with National Parks Partnerships Chair
- 17 November – Introductory meeting with new Executive Director, National Parks England (NPE)

- 17 November – Greenprint meeting
- 20 November – Meeting with Friends of New Forest
- 21 November – Greenprint Steering Group
- 22 November – Meeting with General Manager, Chewton Glen hotel
- 22 November – Waterside discussion with HCC
- 23 November – Attended Hampshire 2050 summit
- 23 November – Meeting with Associated British Ports (ABP) and Solent Gateway
- 24 November – Beaulieu Estate Dinner
- 26 November – Stephen Tarling, a celebration of life
- 28 November – Business South Board meeting and AGM
- 28 November – Business South Strategy meeting
- 30 November – Green Leadership interview
- 30 November – Brilliance in Business Awards
- 1 December – Judging at spudWORKS
- 1 December – Regular catch up with the Deputy Surveyor
- 1 December – National Parks Directors of Conservation subgroup meeting
- 4 December – Green Leadership Programme session
- 5 December – Meeting with National Parks England (NPE) Executive Director
- 5 December – All Parks Health & Wellbeing meeting
- 5 December – Partnership Plan Leadership Group meeting
- 7 December – Green Leadership interview
- 7 December – Meeting with NPA Chief Executives and Defra
- 7 December – spudWORKS event
- 8 December – Meeting with Chief Executive, Business South
- 11 December – Annual Defra review meeting
- 11 December – Green Leadership coaching
- 12 December – St George's Windsor Leadership Fellows Dinner
- 13 December – National Parks England (NPE) Board meeting
- 14 December – Greenprint meeting
- 14 December – Regular catch up with Chief Executive, NFDC
- 14 December – Introductory meeting with Director, South Downs NPA
- 14 December – National Parks Directors of Conservation meeting
- 15 December – Partnership Plan Leaders Panel
- 18 December – English National Park Officers Group meeting
- 19 December – Health & Wellbeing meeting with National Parks England (NPE)
- 19 December – Greenprint discussion with University of Southampton
- 20 December – Green Leadership interview
- 21 December – Lead UK National Park Officer handover meeting
- 9 January – Meeting with consultant about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- 10 January – Call with Policy Engagement Manager, University of Southampton
- 10 January – Partnership for South Hampshire Chief Executive's meeting
- 12 January – All National Park Authority meeting with Steve Reed MP
- 15 January – English National Park Officers Group meeting

- 16 January – Introductory meeting with new CEO, Brockenhurst College
- 17 January – National Parks England (NPE) Board meeting
- 18 January – National Parks Foundation AGM
- 18 January – Waterside Steering Group
- 19 January – Greenprint discussion with HCC
- 19 January – Meeting with CPRE Chair
- 22 January – English National Park Officers Group meeting
- 24 January – Regular meeting with Chief Executive, NFDC

5.4 Chair's engagements

- 23 October – Secretary of State member recruitment meeting
- 6 December – Partnership for South Hampshire (PfSH) Joint Committee
- 12 January – All National Park Authority meeting with Steve Reed MP
- 12 January – Meeting with Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP
- 13 December – National Parks England (NPE) Board meeting
- 13 December – Solent Freeport Board meeting
- 10 January – Meeting with Leader, Wiltshire County Council
- 17 January – National Parks England (NPE) Board meeting

6 Recommendation

To note the report.