

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2023/24

Scope of responsibility

The New Forest National Park Authority is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively.

The Authority also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Authority is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of the Authority's functions which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

In March 2022, the Authority approved and adopted an updated Local Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/Solace Framework Delivering Good Governance in Local Government. A review of compliance with the Code is carried out on an annual basis by the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer. A copy of the Code is published on the Authority's website and can be obtained from Corporate Services.

This statement explains how the Authority has complied with the Code and also meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement of corporate governance.

The purpose of the governance framework

The updated governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.

The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives, and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness.

The system of internal control is based on an on-going process designed to identify and prioritise the risk to the achievement of the Authority's aims, objectives and policies, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

The Governance Framework

The Local Code of Corporate Governance describes the Authority's governance framework in relation to the seven core principles below and demonstrates how it complies with these:

1. behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values and respecting the rule of law
2. ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement
3. defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits
4. determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes
5. developing the Authority's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and individuals within it
6. managing risks and performance through robust internal controls and strong public finance management
7. implementing good practice in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability.

Our code was first adopted by the Authority in June 2012 and was most recently updated and approved by Members in March 2022.

Through carrying out its general statutory duties and responsibilities in connection with the two national park purposes, the Authority also seeks to work for and with the local communities to foster the social and economic wellbeing of communities within the National Park.

The Authority has noted the recent publication of the 'Best Value Standards and Intervention' guidance (issued by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) and is confident of its compliance with it.

Focusing on outcomes for the community and implementing a vision for the local area

The Authority's purposes, vision and intended outcomes for residents, visitors and other stakeholders are identified in a range of policy documents. The overarching vision for the management of the Forest was set out in the Partnership Plan 2015–2021 and has been revised into the subsequent 2022-2027 Plan published in March 2022. These Plans have been developed jointly by all the main organisations with interests and responsibilities in the National Park, including:

- Environment Agency
- Forestry England
- Hampshire County Council
- Natural England
- New Forest District Council
- New Forest National Park Authority
- Test Valley Borough Council
- Verderers of the New Forest
- Wiltshire County Council.

The Partnership Plan is a plan for the National Park as a place and not specifically for the National Park Authority or any other organisation and has been developed following extensive community and stakeholder engagement. It is vital to have a wide range of important stakeholders who put down in writing what they will be doing for the Forest during this time, increasing governance and accountability for all. The Partnership Plan was approved by the Authority at its meeting 24 March 2022.

A comprehensive governance framework, of both members and senior officers, was developed by the partners in 2023/24 to monitor, review and assess the stated actions and outcomes from the Plan over the next four years.

The Authority's own Business Plan and annual Work Programmes take their cues from the Partnership Plan, incorporating those actions for which the Authority has direct responsibility. The Authority adopted a Business Plan covering the period 2023-2027 at its Authority meeting on 13 July 2023 following extensive consultation of Members and Staff. This consultation was invaluable in identifying the priorities and objectives to be included in the Plan over the four-year term and responding proactively and flexibly to future challenges and opportunities affecting the New Forest National Park. A detailed Work Programme for 2023/24 was approved at the same meeting. The Business Plan presents an account and assessment of the Authority's activities, alongside the separate reports of its financial position and performance, and is aligned to the Authority's purposes and duty as well as the five core themes of 'Climate, Nature, People, Place and Partnership'. Progress is monitored regularly by the Executive Board and the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee.

In 2023/24, the Authority received a single-year core grant settlement at the same financial level as 2022/23 - £3.25m. The Authority is focusing resources towards developing medium-term strategic plans for key areas of work and to identify how the Authority and its partnerships can work together to achieve even more for the Forest – these themes provide important direction in the annual Work Programmes.

Recognising that people are our biggest asset, in 2019 we introduced a 'People Plan' to help focus our development as an organisation. This looks at how we work and sets out actions to further improve our working practices and develop/sustain a high-performing team. A biennial staff survey was undertaken in December 2023; the results of the survey were generally very positive and these results / emerging trends are currently being considered by a staff group with a view to updating the People Plan later in 2024.

An annual Health and Safety report is compiled and considered by the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee in July and a review of the Authority's Health and Safety Policy was conducted in 2023/24; the updated policy was approved by the Committee in June 2023.

Management information is produced to assist with the measurement of performance including a number of key performance indicators. A review of the indicators is currently being considered between the NPA family and Defra regarding a new suite of nationally-collected annual indicators; these are expected to be finalised for 2024/25. Budgetary Control Reports are reviewed monthly by the budget holders and on a regular basis by the Executive Board and Resources, Audit and Performance Committee. The Committee also considers the Authority's Medium-Term Financial Plan which aligns future resources to their priorities. Where performance slips, this is further examined and action taken where possible.

The Authority continues to be very highly successful in attracting external funding into the area, consistently leveraging around £18 for every £1 of funding we put towards partnership projects. The Authority is also keenly investigating corporate partnerships (sponsorships) through the wider National Park family, National Parks Partnerships Ltd and the more recent National Parks Foundation (charitable arm). Their remit is to create successful partnerships that generate vital income to make a significant, sustainable and discernible contribution to the improved quality of UK National Parks and the benefits they offer for generations to come.

The Chief Executive reports to the Authority on the development and performance of the Authority overall. A full Annual Review document, detailing the Authority's activities and achievements over each year, is published each Summer.

The Authority also deals with requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, and Subject Access Requests under Data Protection legislation. In March 2023 internal audit undertook an 'Information Governance – Records Management' audit which resulted in a finding of reasonable assurance. Officers are in the process of reviewing the Authority's records management policies and practices. SharePoint is now being used by all Teams for document management and storage. This is a cloud-based system which provides greater security and more flexibility for home and mobile working. Continued developments in records management processes will lead to improvements in the Authority's compliance with Data Protection legislation and will streamline requests for information and improve the overall efficiency, effectiveness and security of our records management and ICT processes.

The Authority has adopted and maintains a formal complaints process to enable complaints about the Authority's activities to be considered and responded to. Information on how to use the complaints process is available on the Authority's website. Information on complaints received is considered by the Authority's officers and lessons for service improvement are identified wherever practicable. The number of complaints received remains low - fourteen this year, of which two were referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman; both were subsequently closed after initial enquiries with no further action.

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The Authority is subject to a full and independent external audit of the financial management arrangements in place for 2023/24. Audit reports are issued by the External Auditors and Internal Auditors to be considered by the Authority's Resources, Audit and Performance Committee.

In March 2017, the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee approved an Assurance Framework which specifies the sources of information on which the Authority relies to gain assurance that all key risks are identified and that controls are operating effectively. The Resources, Audit and Performance Committee on 6 March 2023 approved an Internal Audit Charter which clearly defined the purpose, authority and responsibility of the internal audit activity; at the same meeting the Committee also approved the Internal Audit Plan for 2023/24.

Services are required to review policies and procedures to ensure those services are delivered, designed and continually monitored to meet the needs of the whole community. As part of its response to the original Landscapes Review, the Authority set up an officer group to review our approach to accessibility and diversity, both within the organisation and the geographic area, under the heading of 'New Forest Voices'. Meetings of the group continued throughout 2023/24, working around three key streams – understanding, experiences and ways of working.

Working together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles

The Standing Orders, Scheme of Delegations, Financial Regulations, Contract Standing Orders and other procedures describe how the Authority operates and how decisions are made to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. All these key policies were kept under review during the year and amendments made as and when necessary. A full review of all the above documents took place during the autumn of 2019 and the amended drafts were submitted firstly to the Standards Committee in October 2019 and then to the Planning and Resources, Audit and Performance Committees in March 2020.

Meetings of the Authority are held in public and live streamed, save for individual items of a sensitive nature properly considered in confidential session in accordance with the legislation. Agendas and minutes of meetings are available for inspection on the Authority's website. Members of the public may ask questions and make representations in person / remotely on relevant matters at meetings. Each of the Committees has distinct terms of reference, with each having a periodic review. Member attendance for the Authority and Committee meetings during the year was 74%.

The roles and responsibilities of the members and officers are further defined in member / officer job descriptions and there is a Local Protocol for Member and Officer Relations. The roles of the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer are filled, with each officer fully understanding their respective responsibilities – none of the holders of these roles have changed during the year.

The effect of strong budgeting and regular financial monitoring procedures has also shown in the financial outturn; for example, in recent years the Authority's outturn has always been within the targeted 2% of the original budget and 1% of any revised budget.

In early 2023, Defra approved a further one-year core grant settlement for 2023/24, with an indication that this arrangement would likely continue for a further two years after that; this has equated to significant reductions each year in real terms. As a direct result of these pressures, Members and Senior Officers established a 'Resources and Business Planning' Task & Finish Group in 2022/23; this group assisted in producing an updated Medium-Term Financial Plan that was unanimously approved at the Authority meeting in March 2024.

There are agreed protocols for consultation with the Chief Finance Officer on key decisions and advice to the Authority and its Committees. The CFO attends meetings of the Authority's Executive Leadership Team, Strategic Leadership Team and Executive Board in order to ensure a sound understanding of the organisation's key priorities and risks.

The role of the Monitoring Officer is performed in-house by the Authority's Solicitor, with a service level agreement with Hampshire County Council for any additional legal support required (with any additional specialist external legal advice being obtained from time to time as required). All service level agreements are reviewed, and their performance monitored.

Promoting and demonstrating values through high standards of conduct and behaviour

There are Codes of Conduct for members and officers in place and performance appraisal processes for officers. Training is given to members on the Code of Conduct and there is a complete Register of Members' Interests. The Authority operates a standards regime for the conduct of members in compliance with the Localism Act 2011. There is currently a Standards Committee which monitors the ethical framework of the Authority. An internal audit review into the 'Corporate Governance Framework for Members' was undertaken in 2021/22 and received the second highest assurance level.

There is an adopted Whistleblowing Policy, with confidential reporting arrangements in place to enable internal and external whistleblowing. There is also an Anti-fraud & Corruption Policy in place and a supplementary Anti-Money Laundering Policy. In March 2023, the Authority approved a new draft Safeguarding Policy and this was

officially launched in 2023/24 with an agreed communication and training plan. The Authority's core 'Values' were included in the 2023/24 staff annual appraisals to provide an opportunity for staff to consider how they have put the Authority's values into practice; ideas to promote the values are covered on the Authority's intranet. The Authority is also currently consulting staff on an updated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy.

The Monitoring Officer continuously reviews the Authority's Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegations and updates them as and when necessary. The Authority's Committee structure is also kept under review, as is the meetings timetable to facilitate long term planning and diarising of meetings.

Taking informed and transparent decisions and managing risk

There is a systematic strategy, framework and associated processes for managing risk. The Risk Management Strategy was updated and reviewed in December 2015. The risk register was reviewed in 2019 and focuses on those projects where the risk of not achieving them would have a significant impact on the Authority. These projects are grouped in the register under the purposes and duty of 'Protect, Enjoy and Prosper'. Significant operational risks potentially affecting the Authority have been grouped under 'Achieving Excellence'. Risks are scored by likelihood and impact to give a green, amber or red warning level and regular consideration is given to appropriate measures and strategies to mitigate the risks – the risk register details 17 key risks across the organisation and, as at the end of March 2024, 7 risks were green, 8 amber and 2 red. The register is monitored and reviewed by the Executive Board and half-yearly by the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee.

The risks associated with our annual work programme are monitored through the quarterly reports to RAPC using the traffic light system to monitor progress. Members oversee the strategic direction and annual objectives. This enables relevant risks to be identified and evaluated, with consideration given to appropriate mitigation strategies.

The Authority complies with the Local Government Transparency Code and, as such, has a designated page on its website containing all the information required to be published; in a number of cases the Authority has gone beyond the minimum requirements of the Code and published further information to better aid understanding and transparency.

The Authority is fully compliant with all current procurement legislation including the Public Contract Regulations 2015. It uses an online e-procurement portal (In-Tend) and the governments 'Contracts Finder' website for all significant quote/tender/framework opportunities, ensuring openness and fairness to all potential suppliers.

Developing capacity to be effective

Senior Officers' learning and development needs are identified and met through induction programmes and the appraisal system, which includes learning and development target areas. All new members undergo a full internal induction programme and are actively encouraged to attend a general 'National Parks' induction.

There have been a number of informal training sessions for members and Members' Days on various aspects of member responsibilities and to aid the development of policy; these include training days for the Partnership Plan, Planning Committee members and meetings with representatives from Forestry England. Over 2023/24, a members' group worked closely with the Executive Leadership Team within a Task & Finish Group, established by RAPC, reviewing the Authority's 'Future Resources and Business Planning'.

The Authority continually seeks to train its managers and officers. Advocating mental health wellbeing in the workplace is an important part of the People Plan and we have arranged training and certification of a number of Mental Health First Aiders to assist them with crisis intervention and to act as advocates of mental health wellbeing in the workplace. We have also arranged mental health awareness courses for all staff and managers - this will be an ongoing programme designed to provide staff with an understanding of mental health enabling us to build resilience and apply self-care and has helped managers recognise the early warning signs of poor or declining mental health within their team to enable early intervention and signposting. This has been particularly important during the pandemic and lockdown periods which could have impacted employees' mental health and wellbeing.

Other important developments and training include Safeguarding, Emergency First Aid at Work, Fire Awareness, Discovery Days and many more specific personal development courses. Officers continue to be encouraged to complete relevant courses through the e-learning portal which offers a wide range of training and development opportunities for all staff.

Engaging with people to ensure accountability

The Authority has developed and maintained a range of relationships and arrangements with other agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors, to ensure that they are able to engage with and contribute to the work of the Authority.

Following the launch of the Accord between Forestry England and National Parks England in July 2018, members agreed that although there was a significant amount of engagement with Forestry England, there was good case for more formal mechanisms that would ensure more effective and collaborative working as well as early engagement and identification of opportunities and solutions. Officers from both Forestry England and the Authority accordingly held a number of workshops to finalise proposals for delivering local outcomes for the shared priorities and the Deputy Surveyor and NPA officers provide periodic updates to the Resources, Audit

and Performance Committee on joint working activities between Forestry England and the Authority in terms of the Accord.

Our Statement of Community Involvement on Planning Matters, setting out how the National Park Authority would involve local communities and others in its work, was revised in 2022/23 and, following significant formal consultation, was approved by Members in 2023.

Member representation has continued with a number of external bodies such as the Court of Verderers, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Government Association, New Forest Local Access Forum, New Forest Marque and Campaign for National Parks.

The Authority continues to work with local businesses to deliver Local Information Points to promote visitor information in the National Park. Our core ranger work is boosted by jointly funded projects with Forestry England and New Forest District Council, enabling us to engage with visitors and local residents throughout the National Park and in nearby communities. Other examples of joint working include taking forward the work of the Green Halo Partnership (supporting the local economy, improved health and wellbeing encouraging sustainable living and enhancing the natural environment) and Hampshire Greenprint.

The Authority continued to develop contacts during the 2023/24 year to promote understanding of the National Park. This included work with schools to highlight the things that make the New Forest special and how we can all care for it. We also renewed efforts to contact new and under-served communities.

Progress continued to be made on the Recreation Management Strategy review during 2023/24 within the overall new Partnership Plan framework. The [Recreation Management Strategy](#) sets out the strategic direction for the management of outdoor recreation in the New Forest National Park from 2010 – 2030. The strategy seeks to guide and influence recreation and spatial planning policy and implementation across the whole of the National Park and adjoining areas. Work to manage recreation in partnership with other organisations is ongoing through the Recreation Management Steering Group and Advisory Group. This includes both issue-specific activities and wider strategic work.

The Authority has continued to support and input into the New Forest Consultative Panel, which is an advisory forum comprising representatives from approximately eighty organisations with an interest in the New Forest National Park and adjacent areas. It meets quarterly to discuss topical issues and provide views to the National Park Authority and other statutory bodies. We also facilitate other Forums with wide representation from relevant organisations to help guide and communicate work programmes relating to dog walking, cycling, equine issues, animal accidents and recreation management.

The New Forest Land Advice Service has continued to provide wide-ranging support to land-owners, land managers and young commoners throughout the year. The future of commoning is an extremely important issue at present, and for the coming year, given the uncertainties around future funding provision.

The Authority routinely consults Parish Councils for their views on all planning applications by providing them with an initial planning officer assessment alongside details of the application. Communication has been aided further with the successful Parish Quadrant meetings which are held throughout the year and Member presence at Parish Council meeting.

The Authority published, or engaged with, the New Forest Essential Guide, Park Life, a Pocket Guide and an Annual Report to ensure regular communication on our work performance and issues and opportunities, together with events, press releases, regular email newsletters, website updates and social media posts.

Continuous Improvement

In December 2018, the Authority fed into the Landscapes Review – Call for Evidence (often referenced as the ‘Glover Review’), reflecting views expressed by members and staff to the questions raised. The final review document was published on 21 September 2019 and the Authority clearly set out its initial response to react positively to its thoughts and recommendations. In January 2022, the government published their response to the original report recommendations and undertook a 12-week open consultation to which the Authority responded in April 2022.

The Authority aims to be clearly accountable for the effective delivery of services, through setting targets and measuring performance. As reported earlier in the Statement, a review of the annual national indicators is currently being considered between the protected landscapes family and Defra.

Objectives and targets are developed for each service, and performance reviewed against these. Despite the effects of the pandemic and the uncertainty of our grant, the Authority is using the period of financial stability in 2023/24 to review its efficiency and effectiveness and to plan more strategically. Senior officers from National Park Authorities are constantly exploring possible savings and efficiencies in sharing best practices and, in some cases, sharing services. The Authority’s financial position was further stabilised by a one-off further grant by Defra of £440,000 in March 2023 and a published commitment in November 2023 to provide regular additional funding to protected landscapes.

Service level agreements with New Forest District Council provided the services of strategic HR advice, Internal Audit, GIS and some financial services. The Authority also provides services to other local bodies through SLAs; this included archaeology, rangers and communications services during the last year.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Authority has a responsibility for conducting, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of Officers within the Authority who have the

responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Internal Auditor's report and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.

Factors which influence the controls environment include: ethics, integrity, operating style and the way management and Members assign responsibility and authority.

The roles of the Authority, the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee and Internal Audit are explicit in maintaining the effectiveness of the governance framework.

Of the thirty-six Actions/Outcomes in the 2023/24 Work Programme, there were twenty-nine green, six amber and one red.

Major strategic plans and policies receive consideration by Members. A comprehensive scheme of delegation to Officers has been approved by Members and makes clear that the role of Officers is to implement and give effect to strategies and policies approved by the Authority.

The Authority has maintained arrangements to ensure that its dealings are lawful and comply with financial regulations. The Authority's Solicitor considers all reports considered by Members, which assists in ensuring that the Authority discharges its functions in accordance with the law.

Members have a key role in providing assurance that the Authority's funds are used economically, efficiently and effectively in accordance with agreed policies. The Medium-Term Financial Plan and Budget is agreed annually by the Authority and budget monitoring reports are considered quarterly at meetings of the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee. The Authority's Accounts are subject to external audit on an annual basis and reported to the Authority at a public meeting.

All Member meetings of the Authority commence with an item regarding declaration of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests, with signed records of interests declared kept with the minutes of the meeting. A Register of Members' Interests is maintained and Members' interests are publicly available on the Authority's website.

The Internal Auditor's report for 2023/24, considered at the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee meeting on 5 June 2023, states:

'I am satisfied that sufficient assurance work has been carried out to allow me to form a reasonable conclusion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control environment. In my opinion frameworks of governance, risk management and management control are reasonable and audit testing has demonstrated controls to be working in practice. Where weaknesses have been identified through internal audit review, we have worked with management to agree appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for improvement.'

Ernst & Young LLP act as the Authority's external auditors and are responsible for reviewing and reporting on the Financial Report (Statement of Accounts) and

arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.

The Authority's Business Continuity Plan was updated and reviewed during 2017/18 and audited by the internal auditors with a reasonable level of assurance and a limited number of management actions which have been agreed to by officers. This Plan was reviewed again by internal audit during 2021/22 to consider the impact of the pandemic arrangements and any lessons that were learnt from them for possible future scenarios. Staff have now settled in to using the offices more frequently again, with a suggested split of 50:50 between office/home working. Our planners, rangers and other staff continued their Re:New engagement and campaigns in the Forest with partners.

The wellbeing of our staff was monitored very closely during and after the pandemic, including the continuation of the Wellbeing Group, full staff surveys completed in 2021 and 2023, regular All-Staff Team meetings and an increased frequency of Health & Safety meetings.

Significant governance issues:

With the adoption of the National Park-wide Partnership Plan in 2022, the Authority completed and approved a set of priorities for its own Business Plan during 2023/24, to include an annual Work Programme and its monitoring framework.

The Authority's review of its Counter Fraud policies and procedures, in light of updated code of practices and self-assessment toolkit from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) and International Framework for Good Governance in the Public Sector, was not progressed as expected in 2023/24 due to other pressures and so this work will be prioritised in 2024/25 to ensure the Authority continues to follow best practice.

As reported elsewhere in the Statement, a full staff survey was conducted at the end of 2023. The very positive results are being analysed by the staff working group and will be used to inform a review of the People Plan.

As mentioned above, the Authority will look to complete its, broader than originally expected, work on establishing best practice in records management across the organisation, thus ensuring compliance with data protection legislation (including GDPR) and retention schedules.

CERTIFICATION

To the best of our knowledge, governance arrangements, as defined above have been in place within the Authority for the year ending 31 March 2024 and up to the date of approval of the Annual Report and Statement of Accounts.

We propose to take steps over the coming year to address those areas identified above to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified during the review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Signed:

Signed:

David Bence
Chair
Date:

Alison Barnes
Chief Executive
Date: