

RAPC 550/24

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE – 4 NOVEMBER 2024

Water Quality and Recreation in the New Forest National Park

Report by: Paul Walton, Head of Environment and Rural Economy

1 Summary

- 1.1 The Re: New Forest Partnership Plan highlights the need for a culture of collaboration to deliver key policies and measures to enhance the National Park landscape, economy and communities. Water quality in the National Park is a particular area of interest and a previous paper - RAPC 489/22 – provided a briefing on the Authority's involvement with stakeholders in the wider water environment, the work of the New Forest Catchment Partnership and the Authority's role in ensuring the ecological status of the New Forest catchment's rivers is improved.
- 1.2 In the light of national and local concerns regarding water quality, this paper explores the role of the National Park Authority in enabling recreation in clean and safe waterbodies.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that Members note the report

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The New Forest contains many small rivers and streams which begin in boggy heathland mires, as well as small lakes, numerous ponds and coastal saltmarshes. These water bodies are some of the most important areas for wildlife in the UK and Europe. As highlighted in a previous paper - RAPC 489/22 – the exceptional quality of the New Forest's freshwater habitats is driven by relatively low levels of chemical pollution (nitrates / phosphates) and ensuring this is maintained is a key part of our work with stakeholders. The New Forest Catchment Partnership and New Forest Land Advice Service work with landowners and land managers to address diffuse pollution.
- 2.2 Since the paper RAPC 489/22 was discussed by members in September 2022, there has been considerable national interest in the quality of rivers and inshore waters in relation to swimming and recreation. This has focused on the incidence of bacterial pollution from sewage infrastructure owned and maintained by water companies, highlighted by the work of national and local campaign groups. The National Park Authority has no statutory role or functions in relation to water quality and the provision of water-based recreation. Instead, we work with those partners with duties who do, such as the Environment Agency, local authorities and water companies, to help deliver the ambitions of the National Park Partnership Plan.

3 Water based recreation in the National Park

- 3.1 With 26 miles of coastline the National Park has readily accessible sites that are suitable for watersports and swimming. There are designated Bathing Waters at Calshot and Lepe and others close to the Park boundary within the New Forest district. The Beaulieu River is well used by a range of watercraft but swimming, jet skis and board sailing is not permitted while the Lymington River is largely inaccessible, and swimming is not permitted in Lymington harbour. The myriad of waterways and ponds that exist on the Crownlands are managed by Forestry England for their ecological features and to protect the New Forest habitats, and swimming and watersports are prohibited.

4 Designated Bathing Water status

- 4.1 Designated Bathing Waters (DBW) are the only places in the UK where bacteria levels in open water are monitored and data published. In the National Park there are designated bathing waters at Calshot and Lepe (others within the New Forest District include the River Avon at Fordingbridge).
- 4.2 Anyone can apply to Defra to designate a bathing water. There are set criteria that a proposed bathing water must meet, these include:
- be a coastal or inland water
 - have at least 100 bathers a day during the bathing season (defined as 15 May to 30 September)
 - have toilet facilities that bathers can use during the bathing season, within a short distance of up to about 500m from the site.
- 4.3 Defra formally designate bathing water sites with the involvement of landowners and following a public consultation. Bathing water designation does not mean the water meets bathing water quality standards or that the water is safe for bathers. The Environment Agency monitors bathing water quality (for bacterial pollution) during the bathing season, investigates sources of pollution and recommends measures to improve water quality. The local authority must put up signs that provide information to the public, such as if there is a pollution incident and to warn the public about potential sources of pollution.
- 4.4 Local authorities and landowners contact Natural England for advice on managing waters in protected sites such as SSSIs.

5 The New Forest National Park Authority and water-based recreation

- 5.1 The NPA has no statutory role in relation to enabling or managing water-based recreation in the New Forest. As set out above, the opportunities for swimming and watersports are limited to the coastal inshore waters and the most suitable sites for swimming and watersports are highlighted on the Visit New Forest website which is managed by Go New Forest.

6 Wider Partnership working

- 6.1 Management of the water environment is a complex area with a number of key stakeholders. Officers are involved with a range of partners, the main ones are set out below.

7 Improving water quality in the National Park

- 7.1 Management of the water environment is complex and the NPA's primary focus is working with partners and stakeholders to enhance the ecological status of the catchment's rivers. Pollution incidents from waste water treatment works and Combined Sewage Outflows have put water companies and the Environment Agency under increased scrutiny.
- 7.2 The Environment Agency (EA) is the environmental regulator of the water and wastewater sector. As a signatory to the Partnership Plan, the EA plays a key role in helping to deliver the Plan's objectives, most recently convening a meeting of the Partnership Plan Leaders Panel to focus on the issue of water management and the role of the water companies.
- 7.3 The National Park is served by two water companies - Southern Water and Bournemouth Water. Southern Water (SW) is responsible for all the wastewater treatment works in the National Park. Officers have regular contact with Southern Water across a range of interests: as members of the Southern Water stakeholder forum, as part of the Test & Itchen Drought Order Group and as a member of the SW Independent Climate and Environment Group which is attended by the Chief Executive. This independently chaired group provides strategic advice and challenge to Southern Water on the development and delivery of their business plan and activities. Southern Water have also committed to notifying the NPA when pollution incidents occur that may impact the environment of the National Park.
- 7.4 Earlier this year we hosted a visit by Southern Water's Chief Executive and Director of Environment, and the Environment Agency's Area Director. This provided an opportunity to highlight the significance of the water environment in the National Park and the duty on Southern Water laid out in the Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023 to further National Park purposes when carrying out work that has an impact on land in the National Park. Site visits to demonstrate the work of the Catchment Partnership on diffuse pollution reduction and rainwater harvesting led to consideration of key issues such as nutrients, water demand, surface water management and wetland creation. As a result of the meeting the possibility of an MoU between the NPA and Southern Water is being explored.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 As referred to above, management of the water environment in the National Park is complex. Improving water quality is a statutory function of key stakeholders and the NPA works with those bodies to address concerns around both chemical and bacterial pollution. Enhancing the ecological status of the waterways in the National Park remains the focus for much of our work, being delivered through the work of the Land Advice Service and the Catchment Partnership. With the majority of the waterway network either unsuitable or for swimming and watersports, or with

restrictions applied that limit access to the water visitors and residents are directed to coastal waters or to suitably managed lakes and water bodies beyond the Park boundary.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the report

Papers:

RAPC 489/22 Team New Forest – Authority partnership working and delivery in relation to freshwater habitats and water issues

Contact:

Paul Walton
Head of Environment & Rural Economy
Email: paul.walton@newforestnpa.gov.uk

Ian Barker
Ecologist
Email: ian.barker@newforestnpa.gov.uk