

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE HELD ON MONDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2024 AT 10:00 HOURS IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, LYMINGTON TOWN HALL, AVENUE ROAD, LYMINGTON

Present:

Members:

Gordon Bailey
David Bence (Deputy Chair – in the Chair)
Victoria Mander
George Meyrick
Neville Penman
Joe Reilly
Ann Sevier
Derek Tipp

Officers:

Alison Barnes	Chief Executive
Steve Avery	Executive Director Strategy and Planning
Nigel Stone	Head of Resources (CFO)
Paul Walton	Head of Environment and Rural Economy
Jim Mitchell	Access and Learning Manager
Hilary Makin	Communications Manager
Jo Murphy	Information and Data Protection Officer
David Stone	Corporate Services Manager
Frances Connolly	Executive Assistant
Ella Abbott	Education and Youth Officer

46. Apologies for absence

46. 1 Apologies for absence were received from Patrick Heneghan (Committee Chair) and David Harrison.

47. Declarations of Interest

- 47.1 None

48. Chair's announcements

- 48.1 None

49. Minutes

- 49.1 The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 June 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Resolved, that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 June 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

Voting: Unanimous

50. Public Question Time

- 50.1 There were no questions or statements from the public.

51. First Quarter Progress Report 2024-25

- 51.1 Members considered the first quarter progress report of the 2024/25 Work Programme and discussed several issues therein. Members also specifically referred to the following where action was required:
- 51.2 Page 10 (Development and delivery of high-quality, bespoke curriculum linked education for schools and colleges). Members requested a members' information session on issues relevant to youth initiatives to improve connections to nature for young people and addressing social and mental wellbeing needs as well as information on the work of the Educators Forum.
- 51.3 Page 12 (Supporting sustainable land management and securing the future of Commoning). Officers advised that a Landscape Recovery application was anticipated to be submitted in 2024/25; however information on the timing and nature of this initiative was awaited from Government. In the meantime the Forest Farming Group would engage with Ministers in the new government and officers would be obtaining the views of Commoners on a bespoke environmental scheme that sustained Commoning and the viability of open forest grazing.
- 51.4 Page 15 (Data gathered to support an application for International Dark Sky Reserve status for the National Park in 2025/26). Members requested to see the submission for Dark Night Sky status once this was prepared. In addition, officers were requested to arrange a members' information session on Dark Skies possibly located at Cranborne Chase.

Following further brief discussion, members noted the report.

52. April-July Budgetary Control Report 2024-25

- 52.1 Nigel Stone presented the report to members and answered a number of Members' detailed questions regarding specific figures in the main report.
- 52.2 By way of an addendum to the published report, Mr Stone reminded the Committee of the background to the 2022/23 audit whereby there had been a new statutory deadline proposed for all outstanding audits to be completed by 13 December 2024. However, Ernst & Young LLP had advised this new statutory deadline would pass without our audit being undertaken, leading to the Authority alongside many other public bodies, receiving a qualified / modified audit opinion. The accounts for 2023/24 had been audited but this has not yet been formally completed / signed off.
- 52.3 The 2022/23 process timing was unfortunate as the next Authority meeting was on the 17 October and the disclaimed opinion would not be received until the end of October at the earliest. He would therefore take the Accounts documentation, as it stood, to that Authority meeting and ask Members to delegate final approval (in November or early December) to the Authority Chair, Chief Executive and himself as

CFO. The 2023-24 accounts had to be signed off by the end of February 2025 and at that point everything audit-wise would then be fully up to date.

- 52.4 In answer to a question, he said the delay in audits was a national problem with Audit firms, largely around lack of staffing, and he assured members that there were no issues resulting from anything done on the Authority's side.
- 52.5 Nigel Stone informed members that there were seven member volunteers, from across the whole all the Authority not just this Committee, to sit on the Resources Task and Finish Group to help the Executive Leadership Team move forward with the future finances and facilities. The first meeting of the group was set for early October and they were likely to meet on a monthly basis thereafter.
- 52.6 Members then noted the report.

53. Review of Data Protection and Access to Information Policies

- 53.1 Jo Murphy presented the report and advised that she had given the Authority's information policies and practices a revamp to make them more condensed and user friendly.
- 53.2 A member asked about the process for responding to requests for environmental information under the Environmental information Regulations and Jo Murphy explained that there was a presumption in favour of disclosure and that if a requester was dissatisfied, they could ask for an internal review and refer to the matter to the information commissioner and ultimately the First Tier Tribunal. She reassured the Committee that the information requested was provided in the majority of cases and would only withhold information if an exception applied and the public interest test favoured withholding the information because the harm that would occur from disclosure.
- 53.3 Jo Murphy was also asked about the payment system and whether that should be mentioned in the policy. She said that she didn't think it needed to be in the policy but she would look at the Privacy notice to ensure it was transparent about how the Authority managed payments.
- 53.4 On behalf of members, the Chair thanked Jo Murphy for her report and advice on this important area of Authority work.

Resolved, that the Committee approve the Data Protection Policy and the Access to Information Policy as set out in the submitted report with immediate effect.

Voting: Unanimous

54. Any other items that the Chairman decides are urgent

- 54.1 Members received a verbal update on the water quality of local streams as mentioned under minute item 38.3 of the last Committee meeting on 3 June 2024 and noted that although water quality was of an acceptable standard in some river areas, others were not. Paul Walton advised that the Authority, together with campaign groups, was working with water companies to improve water

quality. Initiatives by the Authority in this regard included recent meetings with senior officers of Southern Water and liaising with Bournemouth University with a view to arranging for a post graduate student to assist in monitoring and reporting on water quality of local streams. Paul Walton advised that he would be preparing a report for consideration by members at the meeting of the Committee on 4 November 2024.

PART II ITEMS WHICH MAY BE TAKEN IN THE ABSENCE OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC ON THE GROUNDS THAT EXEMPTED INFORMATION MAY BE DISCLOSED

Resolved that the public be excluded from the meeting during the following item of business, as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information within Paragraph 3, Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, and further that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information, namely the need to avoid disclosing sensitive information relating to the Authority's financial and business affairs.

55. Application for Funding

- 55.1 Members received an update on the application for funding. This is a summary of the minute which contains exempt information.

56. Date of next meeting

Members noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 4 November 2024.

The meeting closed at 12:00 hours

SignedDate.....
(Chair)