

AM 656/23

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY MEETING – 21 SEPTEMBER 2023

APPLICATION TO THE SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

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

Summary:

- 1.1 The New Forest National Park Authority has a strong track record of securing grants to deliver our Partnership Plan work, regularly submitting bids in excess of £750,000 to appropriate funding sources. There is an established pipeline of funding opportunities from the National Lottery and government and the National Park Authority, through our ways of working with partners, is well placed to respond to these as they arise.
- 1.2 Most recently we submitted an expression of interest to the Defra Species Survival Fund with and on behalf of several organisations. We have subsequently been asked to submit a full application to the fund by 26 October 2023. The NPA Scheme of Delegation requires formal bids over £50,000 to be approved by the Resources Audit and Performance Committee. An oral report was given to the RPAC meeting on 4th September where the committee were supportive in principle but requested that more detail be provided. With the application deadline before the next RAPC meeting the paper is brought to this meeting for a decision.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that Members support the submission of an application to the Species Survival Fund as outlined in the report, and that authority be delegated to officers to take all action as necessary to input this bid and, if successful, to complete the project.

INTRODUCTION

- 2 Nature recovery and working in partnership as Team New Forest are key themes of the Re:New Forest Partnership Plan. Securing resources to realise the ambition of the Partnership Plan is a key focus of our work; an area where the NPA has developed a strong track record. In doing so we have worked with a range of partners, developing trusted relationships that enable us to work quickly and effectively to respond to appropriate funding opportunities. The recent Re:New Nature Challenge identifies the need to secure resources to help drive large-scale improvements for nature in the National Park and beyond. The announcement of the Species Survival Fund provides an opportunity to build on our recent Green and Blue Horizons work that ended in March 2023 and demonstrate how Team New Forest can work together, and at scale to maintain, reconnect and enhance nature in the National Park.

3 Defra Species Survival Fund

- 3.1 The Species Survival Fund is aimed at projects in England that create and restore wildlife-rich habitats that contribute to species abundance at a landscape, catchment, or local scale, either within or outside of protected sites. It is being delivered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund on behalf of Defra and has been designed to make crucial early progress towards the statutory 2030 species abundance target. The focus is on general habitat restoration, rather than specific work that targets a particular species, and green jobs are supported as well as public engagement with species and nature. Partnerships are also encouraged. Across the portfolio of projects, a combination of capital and revenue activity will be supported to a ratio of 2:1 capital to revenue. Projects must begin after 1 March 2024 and be completed by 28 February 2026.
- 3.2 The Authority is coordinating and leading a bid for the New Forest on behalf of several trusted partners including Freshwater Habitats Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, New Forest Commoners Defence Association, and Wild New Forest. Key landowners are the RSPB and the National Trust. The project will enable us to bring in several new partners to widen knowledge and expertise. Our experience and track record in delivering these types of partnership projects demonstrates our continued role as a convenor, enabling others to deliver for the Forest.
- 3.3 Projects must be fully planned and able to deliver within the two-year funded period. We will work with landowners where we have established relationships and a strong track record of delivery. The project will maintain momentum of the recent 18-month Green and Blue Horizons from city to Forest (2021-23) project funded by Defra's Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF). This has generated evidence for priority woodland and wetland species returning to areas where conservation interventions have been delivered. The GRCF project in turn built on the five-year £4.4 million Our Past, Our Future landscape partnership scheme (2016-2020).
- 3.4 Within the bid, the partners are proposing to work together to address the downward trend for rare and atypically abundant species shown in the natural capital baseline for the New Forest (2019). Our focus will be rapidly increasing species abundance and distribution with around 50-60 New Forest priority species benefitting for example Pine Marten, Curlew, Great Crested Newt. Around 100 hectares of priority wildlife-rich habitat will be created, restored, and expanded in areas adjacent to the National Park boundary. Currently these habitats are of low biodiversity importance and provide much lower ecosystem services than those in the core of the National Park. Improvements will provide stepping-stones for wildlife, support total species abundance and diversity, and enhance carbon storage and sequestration capacity. Priorities and targets are informed by the National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027 and the Re:New Nature Partnership for the New Forest National Park.
- 3.5 The bid is likely to seek funding of around £940,000 plus additional match funding of £100,000 from landowners, private investment, and charitable sources. If successful, we anticipate that the funds will enable a programme of capital works to be delivered and support 10 green jobs. Connecting people with nature is also a priority for the fund and numerous opportunities will be delivered through citizen science, volunteering,

work experience, species monitoring, and communications support. A comprehensive programme of monitoring, evaluation and learning will take place. Inflation costs will be included in the budget as well as contingency on capital items.

- 3.6 In relation to the Authority in particular, the bid is likely to include funds for staff posts to support the New Forest Land Advice Service team, coordinate the project and report on progress to the funder, and to manage project communications.
- 3.7 The deadline for submission of the full bid is 26 October 2023. Supporting evidence required includes a capital works plan, engagement activities plan, and a risk register. Awards will be made in February 2024. The fund is highly competitive and demonstrating value for money is essential.
- 3.8 If funding is approved, the programme of work will start in April 2024. At that stage, the partners would be required to sign a contractual partnership agreement. The programme of work will be complete by 28 February 2026.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members support the submission of an application to the Species Survival Fund as outlined in the report, and that authority be delegated to officers to take all action as necessary to input this bid and, if successful, to complete the project.

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Papers:

Annex 1: Expression of Interest for Re:New Nature in the New Forest – saving species, restoring communities

Equality Impact Assessment:

There are no specific equality, diversity or inclusion implications to note arising from this report.

Annex 1

Expression of Interest: Re:New Nature in the New Forest – saving species, restoring communities

Our partnership of New Forest environmental NGOs, volunteers, and public sector combines knowledge, expertise, resources to restore and connect wildlife-rich habitats in areas of strategic and urgent need to improve biodiversity and ecosystem services so wildlife can adapt to change and move through the National Park landscape.

Our partnership:

New Forest National Park Authority (lead)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
Freshwater Habitats Trust
Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust
New Forest Commoners Defence Association
Wild New Forest

Key landowners:

National Trust
RSPB

Summary

- Assist key landowners and others to create, restore, expand 100 hectares of priority wildlife-rich habitat.
- Focus on driving the National Park nature recovery network, protecting, and expanding existing habitats, increasing connectivity to wider countryside.
- Deliver benefits for people: citizen science, volunteering, work experience, species monitoring, comms support focused on linking species and communities.
- Support 10 green jobs and multiple contractors; skilled and entry-level roles to boost existing teams and enable collaboration between partners.
- Sites/capital/target actions identified; established partners ready to start:
 - Woodlands – reintroducing management, thinning, removal of INNS.
 - Wetlands – mire restoration, pond creation.
 - Grasslands and hedgerows – restoring, expanding.
 - Heathlands – restoring, expanding.
- Optimum species interventions and targets will be informed by data modelling.

Outcomes

We want to address the downward trend for rare and atypically abundant species shown in the natural capital baseline for the New Forest (2019), working with landowners where we have established relationships and a strong track record of delivery. We'll target sites adjacent to the National Park boundary which are currently of low biodiversity importance and provide much lower ecosystem services than the core. These can provide steppingstones for

wildlife, support total species abundance and diversity, enhance carbon storage and sequestration capacity. RSPB and National Trust sites are particularly important here.

We'll establish a five-year monitoring programme to evidence increases in total species abundance and priority species distribution at landscape scale. Baseline monitoring will take place on heathland (ARC), grassland and woodland (Wild New Forest) and wetlands/ mires (FHT). Three-year post project monitoring will be delivered through professional survey, mentoring of early career/student field surveyors and citizen science, using technologies to ensure data informs project outcomes.

Focus will be rapidly increasing species abundance/distribution, with 50-60 New Forest priority species benefitting for example Pine Marten, Curlew, Great Crested Newt.

Targets:

30 ha grasslands and hedgerows created.
40 ha woodlands restored.
20 ha wetlands improved.
10 ha heathlands expanded.

Heritage

We'll work at a landscape scale focussing on locations that enable expansion of and connectivity with the New Forest SSSI; it's mosaic of priority habitats (lowland heathland, valley mires, ancient woodland) hosting an incredible diversity of priority species.

We will target currently degraded SINC's and non-designated sites (e.g., due to drainage and land use intensification) with great potential to increase priority species abundance; helping reverse the long-term trend of increased fragmentation of habitat around (and beyond) the Forest boundary. We have sufficient baseline data to monitor change for some key species groups, e.g., New Forest SPA species.

Need

In the National Park there is an urgent need to ensure the landscape is more resilient, better managed for wildlife, more joined up. Priorities and targets for improving nature at scale is informed by a partnership of key nature organisations and agencies and set out in the National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027 produced jointly by all main organisations with interests and responsibilities in the National Park. From July 2023 a 'Re:New Nature Partnership for the New Forest National Park' will be established and align with the New Forest Biodiversity Forum.

This work forms part of a National Parks collective ambition to create, restore, manage 120000ha of nature rich areas by 2030 that contribute to Government's Environment Improvement Plan, international 30 by 30 commitments, and Environment Act 2021.

This project will maintain momentum of the recent 18-month £800k Green Recovery Challenge Fund nature restoration project which has generated evidence for priority woodland and wetland species returning to areas where conservation interventions have been delivered. The GRCF project built on a five-year £4.4 million landscape partnership scheme.

This project complements the £10M New Forest Higher Level Stewardship project focussed on the protected Forest core and vital role of the commoning community.

Timetable

Start 1 March 2024

Capital works complete 31 Dec 2025

Reporting/evaluation complete 28 February 2026

Finances

Total cost: £1,040,000

Capital - £700,000:

Staff costs £103k

Contractor costs for capital works to include materials, permission fees £534k

Contingency at 10% £63k

Inflation included in staff costs.

Revenue - £340,000:

Staff costs £150k

FCR plus NPA costs £87k

Monitoring, evaluation, legacy planning £74k

Staff travel £9k

Materials, events £20k

Total Income: £1,040,000

Defra funding request: £940k

Partnership Funding: £100k

All from non-government sources:

£5k charitable trust grant

£80k private investment – landowner contributions

£15k private investment – private donor