

AM 704/25

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 24 January 2025

RESPONDING TO THE CLIMATE AND NATURE EMERGENCY – NET ZERO WITH NATURE

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

1 Summary

- 1.1 In January 2020 as an Authority, we reaffirmed our commitment to playing our part in addressing the climate and nature emergencies by declaring our ambition for the New Forest National Park and surrounding area to be “net zero with nature” by 2050. The subsequent five years have seen action across several areas: establishing data and evidence; activating communities to adapt to the impacts of our changing climate and supporting the implementation of nature-based climate solutions. Conserving and restoring natural ecosystems can reduce the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere and allows areas of land to store carbon and become ‘carbon sinks’. The New Forest National Park acts as an important carbon sink, storing significantly more carbon per hectare in vegetation and soils than the surrounding area. This paper follows a recent report to the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee (4 November 2024) and provides an update on key activities and highlights some of the challenges in ensuring the National Park remains resilient in the face of a changing climate.

Recommendation: Members are requested to note the content of the report.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 In May 2019 the UK Parliament approved a motion declaring a climate emergency for the United Kingdom to achieve net zero emissions before 2050 since when many local authorities have also declared climate and nature emergencies. The most recent report from the Climate Change Committee (July 2024) shows the country is not on track to achieve the emissions reductions needed to achieve the interim 2030 target of reducing emissions by 68% compared to 1990 levels.

- 2.2 The crisis in nature continues too. The State of Nature report 2023 for England highlighted a general decline in species abundance and decreases in distribution of invertebrate and plant species.
- 2.3 Through 2023 and 2024 England experienced its wettest 18 months since records began in 1836. As temperatures continue to rise more rain is to be expected with consequences for farming and land management, travel, the wider economy and for wildlife.
- 2.4 These figures reinforce the need for the Authority to continue our work of encouraging changes to land management and public behaviour to help address the impacts of climate change and help support both wildlife and our local population to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.
- 2.5 The UK's Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 regards National Parks as integral to the health of the climate, wildlife and people. Targets have been set to maximise the contribution National Parks can make to EIP goals around thriving plants and wildlife and mitigating and adapting to climate change.

3 Action in the New Forest National Park

- 3.1 In the five years since the Authority declared a climate and nature emergency, we have reported annually on activity being taken to enable the National Park to be "net zero with nature" by 2050. This has meant a focus on developing our data and evidence; encouraging adaptation through habitat management, restoration and creation; land use planning; demonstrating leadership and advocacy around the climate and nature emergencies and education work to encourage behaviour change amongst our communities and visitors. Projects have included:

3.2 Data and evidence

- Developing a Natural Capital baseline - funding through the Local Enterprise Partnership led to the preparation of the first natural capital baseline of an entire National Park. This helped secure a Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund grant to help inform landowners about the financial incentives associated with emerging green finance markets and the ecosystem services provided by individual landholdings.
- The Net Zero Pathway – the family of England's National Parks have adopted a consumption-based approach to calculate all greenhouse gas emissions associated with producing, transporting, using, and disposing of products and services consumed by a particular community or entity in a given time period. This gives us a sound base on which to determine progress to net-zero in the National Park.

- Covering 10% of England, National Parks have a key role in delivering the Government's ambition to protect 30% of the UK's land for nature by 2030 (30x30). We have identified a range of opportunities for nature recovery extending to 9,240ha, with additional work through the Wildlife Roundtable and ReNew Nature Partnership helping to identify a pipeline of potential projects that could help deliver these opportunities.

3.3 Adaptation

- Sequestration of carbon through appropriate land and habitat management, along with the reduction of emissions through the adoption of low carbon farming techniques is a key focus in the National Park. We have provided advice to farmers and land managers, supported tree and hedge planting; heathland restoration; wildflower meadow creation and provided grants for machinery that reduce emissions through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and Green Blue Horizons project with over £1million invested over 5 years.
- The £1.04million grant from the Species Survival Fund (Defra and the National Lottery Heritage Fund) means that with match funding a total of £1.3m has been secured to enhance 250 hectares of land for nature across 25 sites. Improving connections between woodland, boggy mires, heathland and streams and the creation of new ponds, wetlands and meadows will see an increased abundance of wildlife and help habitats become more resilient to climate change.
- A further £60k from the Environment Agency's Championing Coastal Coordination fund, has enabled us to work with the Countryside Education Trust on raising awareness of sea level rise at the National Park coastline.
- We have continued to support the New Forest Tour as a car-free means of exploring the National Park. The Tour carried 34830 passenger journeys in 2024 and has represented a saving of approximately 752,000 private car miles over a five-year period.

3.4 Land use planning

- Our planning work has a vital role to play in creating a healthy, sustainable and resilient National Park for people and wildlife. It is not possible to achieve this aim without addressing both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation in considering new development.
- The National Park Authority's adopted Local Plan (2019) already includes a strategic objective to 'plan for the likely impacts of climate change on the special qualities of the New Forest National Park. The New Forest National Park Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) encourages the re-use of materials and provides design guidance on improving energy efficiency in

developments. In relation to renewable energy, the Design Guide covers solar power, wind power, heat pumps and combined heat and power. Responding to the climate and nature emergencies will be one of the leading considerations as we embark on the review of our Local Plan.

Dealing with close to 1,000 planning applications a year, our development management processes ensure that all qualifying new development suitably mitigates its impact on the European designated nature conservation sites in respect of recreational disturbance and the need to achieve nutrient neutrality. Flood resilience, pollution control and the need to secure biodiversity net gain (BNG) are also important (and routine) considerations in determining planning applications in the National Park.

3.5 Leadership and advocacy

- The Partnership Plan, published in 2022 sets out commitments under key themes of ReNew Nature and Net Zero with Nature. Produced jointly with our partners, the plan sets out a shared ambition to secure significant cuts in land-based carbon emissions (Net Zero with Nature) and to ensure habitats are more resilient (Nature Recovery).
- We have worked with the National Park family and Natural England to produce a Case for Delivery of Nature Recovery, highlighting the potential to deliver 165,000ha of nature rich areas across the Parks by 2030. This has stimulated a “Team Nature” approach amongst National Parks, with all parks developing a portfolio of projects for potential investment. Locally we have established a Re:New Nature Partnership to help identify opportunities to expand and connect key habitats, making them more resilient to climate change.
- As part of the UK National Park family, we became the first National Parks globally to join the Race to Zero initiative, showcasing the New Forest wetland restoration as a critical contribution to our net zero ambition, creating more areas of carbon storage in freshwater habitats and providing more space for nature.
- We continue to advocate for reforms to the transport network that will deliver the scale and pace of emission cuts required to meet net zero targets, working with HCC, New Forest District Council and Forestry England on the production of the New Forest Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)
- The Green Halo Partnership and the Greenprint initiative, both initiated by the Authority, continue to be important fora in which to promote net zero with nature and nature recovery ambitions beyond the Park boundary.

3.6 Education

The Authority has an important role to play informing people about climate change and nature recovery, the significance of the New Forest as an “ark for

nature” and encouraging communities to act for nature, wildlife to help deliver the net zero pathway.

- The 18-month Green and Blue Horizons project (Sept 21 – Mar 23) secured £539k from the National Lottery Heritage Fund’s Green Recovery Challenge Fund. Working with 5 partners the project focused on habitat restoration and widening understanding about our Net Zero with Nature work with over 7000 people involved. The funding helped kickstart the use of the Countryside Education Trust’s Fort Climate Centre at Beaulieu as a centre for climate change learning and supported the continuation of the Awakening Festival as a means of engaging people with the climate and nature emergencies. The Festival is now in it’s fifth year and it’s climate messages, activities and events have reached over 4.5million people. 1,574 people have signed the climate and nature pledge.
- The £1.4M Youth for Climate and Nature project is almost at its halfway stage. Funded through the National Lottery Climate Action Fund, the three-year project is aimed at working beyond administrative boundaries to enable young people and their communities to discover, understand and act in ways that will help address the climate and nature emergencies. The project is also funding a programme of Carbon Literacy training for NPA staff, members and stakeholders and the production of a Climate Change “Risks and Opportunities Assessment” for the National Park.
- As well as enabling the delivery of practical projects, the Species Survival Fund, Green Recovery Challenge Fund and Climate Action Fund have supported 48 job roles across the NPA (17 roles = 13.4FTE) and partners (31 roles = 13.85FTE) and 12 freelance jobs.

4 Future Work

- 4.1 The evidence shows that greenhouse gas emissions have warmed the atmosphere, and this will lead to changes in weather that will impact on biodiversity. 2024 has been confirmed as the hottest year on record, with the average global temperature 1.6C above preindustrial levels, leading to more extreme weather events.
- 4.2 In the New Forest National Park, the trend is for hotter drier summers and warmer, wetter winters. The NPA remains committed to working to deliver a net zero National Park by 2050 and we will continue to show leadership in meeting the challenges facing the Park.
- 4.3 This includes seeking funding for partnership projects that help to meet these challenges – our monitoring of funding sources has shown a much greater commitment to nature recovery and net zero and we are in a strong position to capitalise on these potential investment opportunities.

4.4 **Targets**

National Parks are being asked to help achieve national outcomes set out in the Environment Improvement Plan. Of relevance to our net zero with nature programme are:

- i) Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline).
- ii) Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050.
- iii) Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).

We are required to agree local targets and publish them by July 2025 as part of the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF).

4.5 **Data and evidence**

There are some evidence gaps that need to be addressed to help us move along the net zero pathway. These include woodland creation opportunity mapping; the relationship between land use change and specific New Forest needs such as back-up grazing for commoners livestock; the impact of planned land use change that will alter the evidence baseline, such as the open habitat restoration within New Forest Inclosures that will impact overall woodland cover and potentially improve peat condition.

- 4.6 The Climate Change Risks and Opportunities Assessment, funded through the YouCAN project is due to be published in March. Climate change is already impacting the biodiversity of the National Park and the changing weather conditions affecting the day-to-day functioning of the infrastructure that underpins local communities and business. The report will generate a set of future climate projections for the National Park and how these may vary spatially across the area.

4.7 **Leadership, advocacy and education**

Public support is essential for the delivery of Net Zero and ensuring resilience for the unique natural resources of the new forest. Responding to climate change, while maintaining and expanding the habitats essential to enabling wildlife species to adapt to rapidly changing environments will require choices to be made based on good information and evidence. Variability of impacts will need to be factored into decision making as while the upward trend of global temperatures can be demonstrated the possible local impacts are more variable and the adaptations required more uncertain. The Hurst Spit to Lymington strategy provides a good illustration of these management challenges. The only

certainty is that sea levels will rise; the adaptations that will need to be made and the potential impacts these will have on the National Park and environs are less clear.

- 4.8 The review of the Local Plan this year and the revision of the Partnership Plan in 2026 will provide opportunities to highlight actions needed to address the climate and nature crises.

4.9 Land management and commoning

- 4.10 The natural environment is the most important and effective solution we have for capturing and sequestering carbon long-term. Restoring the Parks' habitats and ensuring they are more resilient, better managed, bigger and more joined up will enable wildlife to thrive. Much of the New Forest's diverse ecosystem has survived due to the extensive livestock grazing provided by the commoning system and many of the species associated with the National Park rely on these patterns of grazing.
- 4.11 The agricultural transition, started in 2021, will lead to the ending of direct payments to farmers in 2027. The changes to date, aimed at agriculture contributing significantly to environmental goals and addressing climate change, have done little to support a commoning system that is unique to the New Forest. Commoning, critical to the net zero with nature ambitions for the National Park, is itself in crisis. Working with our partners in the Forest Farming Group to shape future land management schemes that support a robust commoning system to deliver necessary environmental outcomes is a key area of work for the Authority.

Recommendation: Members are requested to note the content of the report

Papers:

AM 594-20 Responding to the Climate and Nature Emergency
RAPC 551-24 Net Zero with Nature – establishing a robust and consistent evidence base

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