

RAPC 567/25

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 2 June 2025

Active Travel England National Park Capability Fund and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan update

Report by Jim Mitchell, Access and Learning Manager

1 Summary:

- 1.1 This paper provides a summary of work carried out under Active Travel England's National Park Capability fund, which we received in 2024/25. It also provides an update on progress of the New Forest Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, produced by Hampshire County Council (Lead Partner) and supported by the New Forest NPA, New Forest District Council, and Forestry England.

2 Recommendation:

Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

3 Background

- 3.1 The National Park Active Travel England Capability Fund has enabled £1M of support for the development of rural walking, wheeling, and cycling routes across the ten English National Parks. The New Forest NPA received £100k for delivery between April 2024 and the end of June 2025 (a three-month extension to the project was granted due to the late confirmation of the grant in March 2024). Engagement with Active Travel England is underway concerning potential future funding opportunities.
- 3.2 Since 2017, the Government's recommended way of planning and prioritising walking and cycling infrastructure at the local level has been through the preparation of a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). An LCWIP covers a 10-year period. The key outputs of LCWIPs are:
- a network plan for walking and cycling which identifies preferred routes and core zones for further development
 - a prioritised programme of infrastructure improvements for future investment
 - a report which sets out the underlying analysis carried out and provides a narrative which supports the identified improvements and network

- 3.3 We have been working with Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council and Forestry England on a New Forest LCWIP since 2021. Collaboration among these partners has ensured that proposals align with the special qualities and protections of the National Park and its recreational management.

4. Active travel England Capability Fund

- 4.1 The Capability Fund aims to support the development of Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) or similar strategic planning across England's National Parks. The New Forest LCWIP was already in progress when we received the fund, so the funding enabled support for that work and the delivery of three key capacity-building and feasibility projects, addressing longstanding issues identified by stakeholders and emerging from the LCWIP process.

Project: A35 crossings study

- 4.2 Crossing the A35 has long been recognised as a significant barrier to active travel within the National Park. The A35 severs the Forest in two, and traffic speeds and volumes are high compared to many other Forest roads. The National Cycle Network 2 (NCN2) also crosses the A35, currently it does this underneath Holmsley Bridge, albeit with signs indicating that this part of the route is not currently sufficiently safe to be considered part of the NCN2. To start work on this problem, we commissioned a small £5k study with the active travel consultancy Sustrans to scope the entire NCN 2 within the National Park, and this confirmed the crossing of the A35 as a key issue that needed to be addressed.
- 4.3 Hampshire County Council (HCC) have received funding to address safety issues across the length of the A35. Approximately £1M of this fund is allocated to improve safety west of Lyndhurst. To help unlock this funding, a £25k feasibility study is currently looking into crossing options in four locations on the A35- Rhinefield Ornamental Drive, Lyndhurst Road, Holmsley Passage and the 'Holmsley straight mile' (the fast section of 40mph road along the old railway embankment and then under Holmsley Bridge, currently the missing link of the NCN2).
- 4.4 In partnership with HCC, we commissioned Sustrans to carry out stakeholder consultation, site visits, ecology, archaeology, landscape, arboricultural surveys and speed and accident analysis to come up with options and proposals for crossing solutions. The crossings need to be both in keeping with the setting of the national park and provide a higher degree of safety for crossing. This project is due to deliver recommendations by end June and then will be passed to Hampshire County Council who will use the information to move to a capital programme of crossing delivery, seeking further permissions as required.

Project: Multi-user off road gravel network wayfinding study

- 4.5 We have been working with Forestry England and New Forest District Council on a plan to better waymark the multi-user 'off road gravel network' on Crown Lands as well as enhance navigation to the network from adjacent towns and villages. NFDC have allocated £500k Community Infrastructure Levy funding towards improving the multi-user network which will include surface improvements and new wayfinding posts to aid both

navigation and to help people keep to the permitted tracks. As the contribution from NFDC is capital funding, work was needed to develop a wayfinding strategy first. Careful recommendations on where all the waymarkers should be, both on the current network and any future additions being considered, were also needed.

- 4.6 We commissioned a landscape architect consultancy, Plan Vision, to produce a wayfinding study for the network and devise key principles of a wayfinding system to connect to local towns and villages. This report will assist Forestry England, NFDC and the New Forest NPA in developing a wayfinding system fit for purpose. The New Forest Cycle Working group provided expertise and stakeholder advice on the project. Further work is now needed to apply the principles to the 400+ locations of current wayfinder posts, whilst considering possible amendments to the network in future, as well as digital considerations, such as how might the system work for people using a phone or phone app for navigation.

Project: Lymington to Lyndhurst feasibility study

- 4.7 We have commissioned Hegsons Design Consultancy, working with Active Planning and City Infinity, to produce a feasibility study for a key route identified in the New Forest LCWIP: Route 120 from Lymington to Lyndhurst. This route has long been identified as a link between main settlements and provides both a commuting (utility) and a key leisure route for cycling, wheeling and walking. This route was very highly rated by respondents in the consultation on the draft LCWIP.
- 4.8 Finding the most feasible route involves looking at different options, including gravel tracks, bridleways, on-road routes on quiet lanes and new cycle / multi-user paths that could be constructed either by the side of the carriageway or across public or private land. All these options need to consider planning permission, ecology, landscape, archaeological impacts as well as likelihood of success, financial considerations (and therefore overall value for money) and safety considerations. To achieve a step change in active travel and reduce impacts of the car on the national park and its communities, then a route is needed which will be attractive not only to regular cyclists and walkers but will need to encourage those not currently walking or cycling.
- 4.9 The New Forest Cycle working group has helped advise on the route and additional ecology expertise has been brought in to help analyse options. The favoured route option will then need further development and stakeholder consultation, for which funds will be sought, before a full business case developed and relevant permissions applied for.

5. Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)

- 5.1 A paper covering the LCWIP process was presented to RAPC in March 2021. Completion was originally planned for 2023. A consultation on a draft LCWIP took place in Autumn 2024, resulting in a high level of responses, many of considerable detail. A number of issues have resulted in a lengthy delay in the delivery of the final plan. The key factors in the delay are: complexity in geographic scope, complexity of regulations, volume of consultation responses, and personnel/resource constraints at Hampshire County Council. However, the partnership team remains committed to producing a LCWIP and the final document is being prepared for approval.

- 5.2 In response to the New Forest LCWIP consultation, Natural England advised that a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) should be conducted to determine 'whether the proposal is likely to have a significant impact on any European site...'. These sites include Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Ramsar sites. A HRA has been conducted by Hampshire County Council's ecology team in order to satisfy the advice given by Natural England.
- 5.3 Whilst most of the proposals with the LCWIP have not been found to directly affect European Sites within the New Forest area, some have been modified to ensure that the potential options will not cause habitat loss or recreational disturbance. These modifications include considerations such as construction restrictions over particular times of the year, and noting the need for non-invasive construction methods. Full details of these modifications will be set out in the HRA and the relevant sections of the LCWIP.
- 5.4 Where satisfactory modifications could not be made to the LCWIP proposals, or compensation for habitat loss could not be achieved, route alignments have been retained in the LCWIP document but proposals have been removed. It is the County Council's intention that these alignments should be used to determine alternative routes and measures where possible at a scheme feasibility stage, or where funding is secured for cycle and walking improvements over a broad area, as these routes represent desire lines on the network which should factor into future decision making about active travel improvements within the New Forest. These indicative route alignments are noted within the HRA and LCWIP document. LCWIP sections where proposals have been removed include text outlining the reasons for keeping the route alignment in the document, along with the principle HRA considerations which led to the removal of proposals. The current ATE work on the Lyndhurst to Lymington route (see 4.7 above) is piloting this approach.
- 5.4 The final LCWIP is currently being finished and will go to the HCC's September cabinet meeting. Following this it will be taken to NFDC and New Forest NPA's respective boards, with the January full Authority meeting being targeted.

6. Summary

- 6.1 Although delivery of the LCWIP has been delayed, it is now nearing completion. Final approval is expected by early 2026 by the New Forest NPA.
- 6.2 The ATE National Park Capability Fund has significantly enhanced the Authority's ability to support active travel planning and delivery, building both stakeholder engagement and the evidence base needed to secure future investment in sustainable travel within the National Park. Engagement with Active Travel England is underway concerning potential future funding opportunities.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

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Equality Impact Assessment: Active travel England / Department of Transport planning guidance on accessibility and inclusivity is being followed. Consultants have been selected for their expertise in planning routes and solutions open to the maximum number of users.