



## Notice of Meeting

# Cabinet

**Date:** Wednesday 11 May 2022

**Time:** 5.30 pm

**Venue:** Conference Room 1, Beech Hurst, Weyhill Road, Andover SP10 3AJ

**For further information or enquiries please contact:**

Emma Horbury - 01264 368001

[ehorbury@testvalley.gov.uk](mailto:ehorbury@testvalley.gov.uk)

**Legal and Democratic Service**

Test Valley Borough Council,  
Beech Hurst, Weyhill Road,  
Andover, Hampshire,  
SP10 3AJ

[www.testvalley.gov.uk](http://www.testvalley.gov.uk)

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**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SCHEME**

*If members of the public wish to address the meeting they should notify the Legal and Democratic Service at the Council's Beech Hurst office by noon on the working day before the meeting.*

### **Membership of Cabinet**

<b>MEMBER</b>	<b>WARD</b>
Councillor P North (Chairman)	Bourne Valley
Councillor N Adams-King (Vice-Chairman)	Blackwater
Councillor P Bundy	Chilworth, Nursling & Rownhams
Councillor D Drew	Harewood
Councillor M Flood	Anna
Councillor I Jeffrey	Mid Test
Councillor A Johnston	Mid Test
Councillor T Tasker	Andover Romans

**Cabinet**

Wednesday 11 May 2022

**AGENDA**

**The order of these items may change as a result of members  
of the public wishing to speak**

- 1 Apologies**
- 2 Public Participation**
- 3 Declarations of Interest**
- 4 Urgent Items**
- 5 Minutes of the meeting held on 30 March 2022**
- 6 Recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee: None**
- 7 New Forest National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027** **4 - 42**

**Planning**

To consider endorsement of the New Forest Partnership Plan as a main partner organisation, as requested by the national park authority.

- 8 Annual Governance Statement 2021/22** **43 - 61**

**Finance and Resources**

To consider the approval of the 2021/22 Annual Governance Statement.

## **ITEM 7      New Forest National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027**

Report of the Strategic Regeneration and Partnerships (South) Portfolio Holder

### **Recommended:**

**That the New Forest National Park Partnership Plan 2022-2027 (Annex to the report) be endorsed by the Council, as a main partner organisation of the National Park Authority.**

#### **SUMMARY:**

- The New Forest National Park Authority has a statutory duty to prepare a partnership plan for the national park and to review it regularly in order to keep it up to date. The plan identifies the priority actions for the next five years.
- The plan has been produced jointly by a partnership group comprising statutory bodies which cover the national park, including the Council, and follows public consultation.
- As a main partner organisation, the Council has been requested by the national park authority to formally endorse the plan.

### **1      Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval of the final draft version of the New Forest Partnership Plan 2022-2027, attached as an Annex.
- 1.2 The Partnership Plan is an overarching strategic document for the National Park and sets the framework for more detailed plans and strategies prepared by the National Park Authority and partner organisations.
- 1.3 The national park authority approved the plan on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022 and has invited the main partner organisation, including each of the local authorities which fall within the national park designated area<sup>1</sup>, to endorse the partnership plan. Post each organisation endorsing the plan the national park authority intend to adopt the final version of the Partnership Plan in June 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> Hampshire County Council, Wiltshire Council, New Forest District Council, Test Valley Borough Council, the Verderers, Forestry England / Forestry Commission, Natural England, Environment Agency.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 The national park designation for the New Forest was confirmed in March 2005 and the national park authority took on its full powers and responsibilities in April 2006, including as sole planning authority. The area of Test Valley to the south west of the A36(T), within the parishes of Melchet Park and Plaitford, and Wellow lies within the designated area. The Council as a member of the national park authority appoints a councillor representative.
- 2.2 All national parks are required by statute to have a management plan / partnership plan for their area, to help guide the work of those with responsibilities or an interest in the national park. The plans reflect the two statutory purposes that are the main reasons for their designation and describe the overall focus for their management. The two purposes are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the national park; and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public.
- 2.3 In this Partnership Plan, it sets out a refreshed Vision for the New Forest National Park's future in the context of the climate crisis and green recovery and in response to the experiences of the pandemic. It renews the collective commitments to deliver the purposes for which the National Park was designated. This has been articulated into five themes, which will be the focus for the next five years. These are:-
- Nature Recovery – helping habitats to be more resilient, restored, expanded and connected
  - Net Zero with Nature – cut land-based carbon emissions through securing and restoring natural habitats and enabling carbon capture
  - Thriving Forest – supporting a living, working and culturally rich heritage
  - An inclusive National Park – helping people of all socio-economic backgrounds to understand and value the New Forest
  - Team New Forest – communities, businesses and organisations working together to deliver the vision of the plan.
- 2.4 The plan is accompanied by an appendix which contains actions to deliver partnership plan priorities linked to the five themes. There are a number of specific references within the plan and appendix which are connected to the Borough. These include agreeing consistent recreation mitigation measures and managing visitor pressure and establishing stronger links with business and communities within and adjoining the New Forest.
- 2.5 The plan will need to be taken into account in the Council's decision making and in drawing up our own policies and strategies, where relevant. Whilst not part of the development plan, it may also be a material consideration in planning decisions for development management purposes.

- 2.6 It is considered that the themes, actions and general content of the Partnership Plan should be supported. The Council has had, and will continue to have, a key role in delivering the principles contained within the partnership plan. There are examples where these overarching principles reflect or are consistent with our own objectives of economic support and training; sustainable travel and providing more affordable homes.
- 2.7 The Council also has a role in specific actions. For example where the plan includes an action to identify more appropriate locations for recreation mitigation. Cabinet will recall that the Council were instrumental in helping to obtain the Government grant of £250,000 on behalf of several authorities and organisations to evidence the visitor pressure on the New Forest. The Alternative Natural Green Space at Sherfield English and Stoneham are examples of where mitigation schemes have been supported by the Council.
- 2.8 As such and together with the role of the Council as a main partner organisation of the national park authority and the duty on the Council to have regard to national park purposes, it is recommended that the plan should be endorsed, as requested.

### **3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities**

- 3.1 One of the four priorities of the Council's Corporate Plan 2019-23 concerns the local environment. The aims under this theme complement those of the Partnership Plan with regards to the provision of high quality green infrastructure; sustainable travel; and economic growth.

### **4 Consultations/Communications**

- 4.1 This Partnership Plan has been prepared with input and support from the main statutory organisations who share responsibility for delivering the aims and objectives of the Plan as well other key stakeholders and organisations. Its scope was set by a widely advertised call for views at the New Forest Show in 2019, followed by a public 'snapshot' survey in 2020 with over 2,700 responses. The resulting draft Partnership Plan received responses and feedback from over 380 individuals and organisations as part of the public consultation in Summer 2021. The feedback and comments received from partners and the local communities have undoubtedly helped to strengthen the Plan.

### **5 Options**

- 5.1 In considering the plan, the only option to assess is whether or not it is appropriate for the Council to endorse it, as has been requested.

### **6 Option Appraisal**

- 6.1 Option 1 – Endorse the plan – This would satisfy the request which the national park authority has made and the existing partnership plan, requires updating. The Council would continue its role as full stakeholder and help deliver those would be giving its approval and be a full stakeholder in the update plan, in which it has a role in assisting to deliver.

- 6.2 Option 2 – Do not endorse the plan – Failure to endorse the plan would exclude the Council from fully participating in what is intended to be a partnership plan for all the main organisations which have responsibilities in the national park. The Council would remain subject to the duty to have regard to national park purposes, but without having committed to the collective management plan to achieve these.
- 6.3 Option 1 is recommended, as it is considered that given the role of the Council as a main partner organisation (of the national park authority), in contributing to the delivery or a number of the identified priority actions and taking account of the duty on the Council to have regard to national park purposes in exercising its functions, that the plan should be endorsed, as requested.

## **7 Risk Management**

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks associated with the matters in this report indicate that further risk assessment is not needed because the issues covered do not represent significant risks for the Council.

## **8 Resource Implications**

- 8.1 The financial costs associated with the preparation and publication of the plan are funded by the national park authority. There are therefore no direct financial resource implications for the Council as a result of its endorsement.
- 8.2 However, officers have taken part in meetings of the management plan leadership group which contributed towards its joint preparation. Officer involvement will continue as appropriate and there may therefore be future resource implications both financial and in officer time, in taking forward some of the plan's individual actions. Should these arise, they can be considered as part of the assessment of the potential delivery of such actions, in due course.

## **9 Legal Implications**

- 9.1 The statutory duty to prepare a management plan (under Section 66, Environment Act 1995) rests with the national park authority. However, it is intended as a partnership plan and as a main partner organisation with a key role contributing to its delivery, the Council has been requested to endorse it.
- 9.2 The Council has a statutory duty under Section 62 Environment Act 1995, to have regard to national park purposes in exercising its functions.

## **10 Equality Issues**

- 10.1 An EQIA screening has been completed in accordance with the Council's EQIA methodology and no potential for unlawful discrimination and/or low level or minor negative impact have been identified, therefore a full EQIA has not been carried out.

## 11 Other Issues

- 11.1 Community Safety - None
- 11.2 Environmental Health Issues - None
- 11.3 Sustainability and Addressing a Changing Climate – Sustainable development includes complying with national park purposes, whilst also fostering the economic and social well-being of local communities within the national park. Planning for climate change including managing and adapting to its impacts on the natural environment of the national park is one of the issues which the plan seeks to address.
- 11.4 Property Issues - None
- 11.5 Wards/Communities Affected – Blackwater Ward. Parts of the parishes of Melchet Park & Plaitford and Wellow, which lie south west of the A36(T).

## 12 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

- 12.1 Given the statutory duty on the Council to have regard to national park purposes in exercising its functions, as it is a main partner organisation (of the national park authority), and given its role in contributing to the delivery of a number of the identified actions in the Partnership Plan it is considered that the plan should be endorsed, as requested.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	1	File Ref:	pp6.10
(Portfolio: Strategic Regeneration and Partnership (South)) Councillor N Adams-King			
Officer:	Graham Smith	Ext:	8141

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:	1	File Ref:	pp6.10
(Portfolio: Strategic Regeneration and Partnership (South)) Councillor N Adams-King			
Officer:	Graham Smith	Ext:	8141

# **New Forest National Park Partnership Plan**

**2022 – 2027**

**Final version for Authority approval**

**March 2022**

## Foreword

As we reflect on what has been an incredibly difficult period, our collective experience of the recent Covid pandemic has made us realise just how much we rely on the natural environment for our health and wellbeing. Like all National Parks, the New Forest National Park has provided a vital space for respite and recovery. In turn, this has increased focus on the importance of the natural world and ensuring that the landscape and the nature it supports is sustained for future generations. An urgent step change is needed - many agree that now is the time to redouble our efforts to tackle the twin challenges of our age – the decline of nature and biodiversity and the fundamentally connected threat of the climate crisis. This has been reflected in conversations at a national and international level, such as COP26, measures in the 2021 Environment Act, the Government's response to the national Landscapes Review (2022)<sup>1</sup> and locally in our discussions and the projects that have emerged in partnership with local organisations and communities where local action is at the fore.

Nationally attention is on a 'green recovery', on how we recover the economy, address societal needs as a whole and crucially, the environment is leading to measures to move us towards a greener future. It is not only the UK which has undergone this realisation; globally there is a clear desire to see change.

In this Partnership Plan, we set out a refreshed Vision for the New Forest National Park's future in this context of crisis and recovery. This renews our collective commitments to deliver the purposes for which our National Park was designated - to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage and to promote understanding and enjoyment of the Forest's special qualities. In so doing we also have a duty to foster the social and economic wellbeing of our communities.

The Government has confirmed its support for strengthening the role of National Park Management/Partnership Plans. The new Partnership Plan is a call to action for individuals, communities, businesses, public bodies, voluntary sector and other organisations to work together to deliver a positive future for this special place.

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<sup>1</sup> Landscapes review (National Parks and AONBs): government response, January 2022

## Introduction

National Parks are protected landscapes recognised to be of the highest national importance for the natural beauty of their landscapes, the value of their wildlife habitats and cultural heritage, and the opportunities they give for many people to enjoy these qualities.

The New Forest has long been recognised as an exceptional landscape, shaped over millennia by the people who have lived and worked here. It is one of the most important areas for nature conservation in Europe and its open landscape, coastline and unique natural beauty have inspired generations of local people and visitors alike.

In 2019, we celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 which led to the designation of the first National Park in England, the Peak District National Park.

We now have 10 National Parks in England and the New Forest was one of the last to be formally designated in 2005. Covering 220 square miles on the central south coast of England, it is the smallest National Park in the UK, other than the Broads. Yet it is also home to more than 34,000 people and 2,500 local businesses. More than 16 million people live within a 90-minute drive of the New Forest and its ease of access make it one of the most visited National Parks in the country.

Our National Parks are the ‘breathing spaces’ for the nation and 73 years on from the first designation, the Government recognises National Parks as our most iconic and beautiful places, representing our shared heritage and national identity, and home to many of our rural communities and businesses. The Government sets out a vision for nationally protected landscapes as ‘A coherent national network of beautiful, nature-rich spaces that all parts of society can easily access and enjoy. Protected landscapes will support thriving local communities and economies, improve our public health and wellbeing, drive forward nature recovery, and build our resilience to climate change.’<sup>2</sup>

## Plan of action

Looking beyond the Covid pandemic, we need to respond to the climate and nature emergencies and as we transition to a new way of life outside the European Union, now more than ever we need a clear, up-to-date plan of action to equip the Forest for the future.

The central role of this Plan is to guide and co-ordinate the work of all those with an interest and influence in the National Park in delivering the National Park purposes and duty. This includes organisations with statutory responsibilities, land management interests, businesses, local communities and user groups. It is a Plan for the National Park, not the National Park Authority. All those with interests in the

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<sup>2</sup> Landscapes review (National Parks and AONBs): Government response, January 2022

New Forest National Park should take account of the Partnership Plan's vision for the area and embed the relevant actions within their own work programmes.

This Plan outlines the key drivers and challenges facing the National Park and sets out how these will be addressed collectively. It sets out an overall approach to managing the National Park for the next five years, which will frame more detailed policies and actions over this period. It will guide and align the priorities and resources of the National Park Authority with those of partner organisations, businesses and communities who are key to the implementation of our collective ambitions. Our intention is that it will also influence wider decisions and investment of all those who have a part to play in protecting this most special landscape. It will also enable the support and engagement of communities in and around the New Forest who have a crucial role in achieving a positive future for the National Park.

We are building on many achievements from the previous Partnership Plan. Its legacy includes success in securing and managing grants for projects across the Forest together, such as the Heritage Lottery funded 'Our Past Our Future' and the Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. More recently grant funding has been secured due to this track record of successfully delivering large partnership projects.

This Partnership Plan has been prepared with input and support from the main statutory organisations who share responsibility for delivering the aims and objectives of the Plan. Its scope was set by a widely advertised call for views at the New Forest Show in 2019, followed by a public 'snapshot' survey in 2020 with over 2,700 responses. The resulting draft Partnership Plan received responses and feedback from over 380 individuals and organisations as part of the public consultation in Summer 2021. The feedback and comments received from partners and the local communities have undoubtedly helped to strengthen the Plan.

## Our Vision for the New Forest National Park

The Vision for the New Forest is to be a national beacon for a sustainable future, where nature and people flourish. In 2050, the National Park is a unique and immediately recognisable place where:

- people live and work sustainably, having successfully adapted to the impacts of the climate emergency and supporting nature's recovery and resilience
- tranquillity and a feeling of naturalness pervade large parts of the New Forest
- the mosaic of distinctive landscapes and habitats have been conserved and greatly enhanced, supporting wildlife to recover and flourish
- there is a strong sense, understanding of and support for the heritage and living culture of the New Forest, especially the local tradition of commoning
- facilities such as car parks, campsites, walking and cycling routes and community green spaces are in the right places to both protect rare wildlife and to provide a better, more informed experience for people
- all communities and visitors are better informed and gain inspiration, health and wellbeing and enjoy the extensive areas accessible across the National Park whilst respecting the fragile nature, unique environment and rich culture of the New Forest
- local, regional and national organisations recognise and work to enhance the value of the National Park; there is an appreciation of its importance and role within the wider area
- everyone contributes to caring for the National Park as a special place for present and future generations.

## The Qualities that make the New Forest special

The special qualities of the New Forest are those qualities that define it, make it unique and immediately recognisable and, when taken together, distinguish it from all other parts of the country. These qualities are fundamental to the two National Park purposes and are the underlying reason for its designation.

***The New Forest's outstanding natural beauty:*** the sights, sounds and smells of ancient woodland with large veteran trees, heathland, bog, autumn colour and an unspoilt coastline, with views of the Solent and Isle of Wight.

***An extraordinary diversity of plants and animals and habitats of national and international importance:*** the mosaic of lowland heath, mire, ancient pasture woodland and Forest lawns that forms the Open Forest is unique in Britain and Europe. In addition, the Solent coastline comprises extensive areas of mudflats, salt marsh and shingle, backed in places by low cliffs, supporting large populations of wintering wildfowl and waders. In total 56% of the National Park is designated for its national or international nature conservation value - a far higher proportion than any other English National Park.

***A unique historic, cultural and archaeological heritage,*** from royal hunting ground, to shipbuilding, salt making and 500 years of military coastal defence. The cultural landscape of the New Forest has developed continuously from prehistoric times to the present. The National Park has 214 Scheduled Ancient Monuments, constituting almost 10% of all scheduled monuments in the south east region, together with many important unscheduled sites.

***An historic commoning system*** that maintains so much of what people know and love as 'the New Forest' forming the heart of a working landscape based on farming and forestry. The New Forest remains one of the few extensive lowland commons where rights are still widely practised and a strong commoning culture continues. The right of mast allows the turning out of pigs to feed on the acorn crop, while common pasture allows the grazing of ponies, cattle and donkeys.

***The iconic New Forest pony*** together with donkeys, pigs and cattle roaming free. The grazing of ponies and cattle has always been central to the pastoral economy of the New Forest. They are one of the most obvious and distinctive features of the area, and for many visitors they are undoubtedly a very important part of their experience of the New Forest.

***Tranquillity*** in the midst of the busy, built up south of England. The tranquillity and sense of remoteness that can still be found in many parts of the National Park is a quality of importance to many people. This contrasts with the increasingly built up and intensively managed landscape of southern England and provides a means of release from the pressures of modern life.

***Wonderful opportunities for quiet recreation,*** learning and discovery in one of the last extensive gentle landscapes in the south including unmatched open access on foot and horseback. There is open access on foot or horseback to more than 30,000

hectares (116 square miles) in the centre of the National Park, and an extensive network of footpaths, bridleways and cycle paths across the rest of the area.

**A healthy environment:** fresh air, clean water, local produce and a sense of ‘wildness’. The coastal location and prevailing south westerly winds means that air pollution is generally low, and water quality in the New Forest rivers and streams, and on the coastal beaches, is also good. The variety of food and other products produced and sold locally continues to increase, giving the opportunity for people to live healthily and sustainably and at the same time support the local economy.

**Strong and distinctive local communities** with a real pride in and sense of identity with their local area. The New Forest communities have a strong cultural identity, with a wealth of local traditions and a thriving commoning community. Many local people have a strong sense of the Forest’s history and are deeply committed to the protection of the area and many volunteers support local organisations improve the Forest environment, its culture and local communities.

## The role of the Partnership Plan

All National Parks are required by statute to have a Management Plan (often known as the 'Partnership Plan') for their area, to help guide the work of those with responsibilities or an interest in the National Park. The Plan is for the National Park as a place and not specifically for the National Park Authority or any other organisation.

National Parks have two statutory purposes that set out the main reasons for their designation and describe the overall focus for their management. The two National Park purposes as set out in primary legislation are:

1. to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park; and
2. to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public.

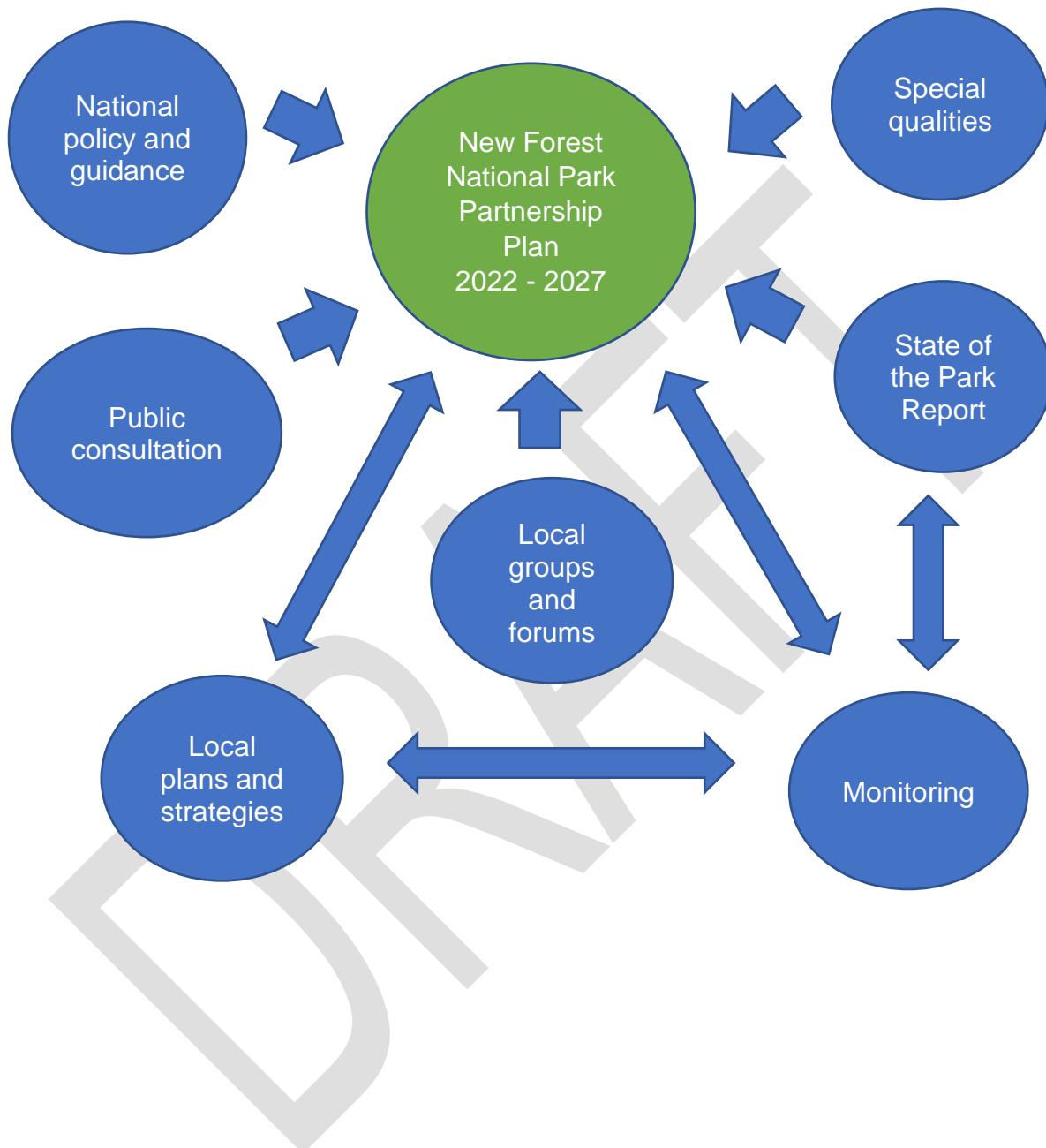
National Park Authorities also have a duty in taking forward the two National Park purposes to seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of local communities within the National Park.

The relationship between the purposes is commonly known as the 'Sandford Principle', which states that every effort should be made to reconcile any conflicts between the purposes, but that if such efforts fail then the priority must be given to the first purpose of conservation and enhancement. The primacy of conservation is especially important in the New Forest National Park which has the highest proportion of its land (56%) covered by international nature conservation designations when compared to other local authority areas in England.

All public and statutory bodies must have regard to National Park purposes when making decisions or carrying out activities relating to or affecting land within the National Park. This legal 'duty of regard' acknowledges that the fulfilment of the National Park purposes rests not only with those bodies directly responsible for their management but also relies on effective partnership working.

The Government is now looking to strengthen the role of National Park Management Plans and has highlighted their importance in setting priorities and actions for nature recovery and our response to the climate emergency.

## How the new Plan brings together existing forums, policies, plans and strategies



## Major issues for the New Forest National Park

The New Forest faces a period of significant change as the country recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic, confronts the twin challenges of the climate and nature emergencies and adapts to life outside the European Union. New and emerging domestic legislation and reforms are likely to have a profound and lasting impact on how the National Park is managed in the future, although the future direction of national policy and funding is still to be determined at the time of preparing this Plan. So whilst this Plan sets out our shared Vision, priorities and objectives for the next five years, a more detailed set of actions and targets to guide our collective work over the next two years has been produced. Thereafter, we will review and publish a revised annual work programme for years three, four and five.

### Climate and nature emergencies

In 2019 the UK became the first national government to declare an Environment and Climate Emergency. That decision marked a renewed sense of urgency in tackling climate change with the Government legally committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The Government has recognised the key role of protected landscapes in addressing the [climate and nature emergency](#)

In the New Forest National Park, we are already seeing wetter winters, hotter, dryer summers, rising sea levels, an increasing frequency of extreme weather events and longer periods of higher fire risk. Combined, these factors have far reaching implications for our biodiversity, our communities, land managers and local businesses.

More than two-fifths of UK species including animals, birds and butterflies have seen significant declines in recent decades. The State of Nature report (2019), which draws on scientific monitoring since the 1970s, showed that there has been no let-up in net losses for the UK's wildlife. More intensive agriculture is still driving declines in farmland nature, while climate change is also having an increasing effect, with average UK temperatures rising by 1C since the 1980s. The state of wildlife in the New Forest remains a major concern, with just over 50% of our Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) judged to be in 'favourable condition'.

#### Key state-of-play indicators:

- Only 53.22% of SSSIs in favourable condition
- Sharp decline in ground nesting birds, in some cases more than 50%
- 33% decline in breeding waders

#### However:

- 44ha of grassland and heathland has been restored
- 12.5km of wetland sites (channels and drains) restored
- Over 90% of respondents to a recent local public survey (2021) want to see the environmental improvements seen during the pandemic continue

## Responding to recreational pressures

A challenging issue for nature conservation and recovery in the New Forest is how to respond to increasing demand for access without compromising the integrity of protected wildlife sites.

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that there were over 15 million day-visits for leisure and recreation each year to the National Park. 75% of these visits arose from just 300,000 relatively local people travelling from home on a regular, often daily basis. The remainder of the visits were by just over one million people who were on holiday. These large numbers and the fact that well over 50% of the National Park is designated for its rich wildlife create a unique management challenge.

In 2019, an extensive consultation known as '[Future Forest](#)' debated and sought views on recreation in the New Forest National Park and surrounding area. Through this work partners have already agreed a comprehensive series of [actions](#) to manage recreation across the New Forest and beyond. Several of the most fundamental actions have been incorporated into this Partnership Plan. In addition, several local planning authorities in and around the New Forest have adopted planning policies and associated mitigation schemes in place to ensure the recreational impacts arising from new development do not impact on the integrity of the New Forest's internationally protected habitats.

Linked to this, one of the Partnership Plan actions is to move towards a more coordinated, strategic approach to mitigate the recreational impacts of the significant levels of new housing proposed in the areas surrounding the National Park. Up and until now, this has largely happened independently in local authorities around the New Forest, but the benefits of a more coordinated, strategic approach are recognised.

For the foreseeable future, there is likely to be an increased demand for 'staycation' holidays and further recreational demands placed on the National Park. A joint 'care for the Forest, care for each other' action plan was put in place for 2021 (and will be repeated in 2022) but we recognise that we need to take forward the longer-term actions that have already been agreed to manage these increasing recreational pressures. This is likely to entail a fundamental review of an increasingly outdated and fragmented infrastructure that includes campsites, car parks and the waymarked off road cycle routes. There is also a need to secure opportunities for significant new nature-rich green spaces for recreation close to where people live, to both take pressure away from the protected habitats of the New Forest and to create healthy communities for the future, such as exploring the feasibility of a new country park to benefit the growing resident populations on the Waterside.

### Key state-of-play indicators:

- Estimated increase in the level of recreational access to protected sites of around 11%, solely from new housing within a 25km radius of the New Forest's internationally designated nature conservation sites.
- Almost 130,000 new dwellings / 16.4% increase in housing within 25km of the New Forest SAC/SPA/Ramsar sites by 2036

## Traffic and Transport

Transport is absolutely fundamental to the sustainable future of the New Forest – how we move affects how we live, work and interact; how we experience places; how our businesses operate; and our health and wellbeing.

The New Forest is one of the most visited National Parks in England and traffic within the National Park is a major issue for many residents and visitors. The New Forest also has some of the highest car ownership in the country and the vast majority of visitors travel to the area by car. With a limited range of alternative transport options, an ageing population and lack of connectivity, the opportunities for active travel for some journey types are more limited. There is evidence to show that whilst there was a reduction in traffic in Hampshire during the pandemic lockdowns, traffic levels quickly bounced back to more typical ‘pre-Covid’ levels.

High levels of car dependency can affect the quality of life of local communities, the quiet enjoyment of the National Park, the welfare of livestock and the integrity of the Forest’s landscape and habitats. It is also a significant local contributor to climate change and air quality, with roads and road transport generating the highest emissions in the National Park. Other matters of concern include the volume of traffic generally, verge parking, animal accidents, maintenance of minor roads, congestion in the larger villages (particularly Lyndhurst), failure to observe speed limits, lack of sustainable transport alternatives and commercial lorries’/vans’ use of minor Forest roads.

Reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from transport is a major priority. The Government’s Decarbonising Transport Strategy (2021) sets out the commitments to fully decarbonise transport by 2050, including greater promotion of cycling and walking. Both Hampshire County Council and Wiltshire Council are preparing new Local Transport Plans with a focus on sustainable transport and reducing dependency on the private car.

### Key state-of-play indicators:

- Total carbon footprint in the National Park was 500kt of CO<sub>2e</sub> (kilo tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) in 2021 with the largest emissions coming from road transport (40%)
- 50 commoners’ animals killed on the roads in 2020
- Only 7% of visitors travelling to the New Forest are car free
- Over 100km of off-road cycle paths, although not always well connected to enable round trips/active travel between destinations

## Commoning, farming and land management

The New Forest is celebrated as a living, working landscape where sustainable farming and land management systems deliver many benefits to society – increasingly known as ‘public goods’. The unique and ancient system of common grazing is a critical component of ensuring the Forest survives as an extensive, intact cultural landscape.

This new Plan coincides with the start of a period of 'agricultural transition' following the UK's departure from the EU. Funds will be diverted from Direct Payments to farmers into a new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) from 2024. This will replace the Higher Level Stewardship scheme that over 12 years has provided more than £22 million to help restore and enhance the internationally-important habitats of the New Forest. Partners on this scheme are now working together to understand what is needed to deliver public goods into the future. From 2021-24, a Farming in Protected Landscape programme will support farmers and land managers in the National Park deliver environmental outcomes and contribute to Government priorities for nature, climate, people and place.

**Key state-of-play indicators:**

- 22,919 hectares of landcover within the National Park classified as high importance for pollinating insects
- 20 new commoners' dwellings built since 1992

### Affordable housing

The provision of affordable housing in the New Forest is consistently raised as one of the biggest challenges facing local communities in the National Park. The affordability of housing is a major barrier to sustainable communities in the New Forest, where the average house price is around 15 times average earnings – making the New Forest the least affordable National Park in the UK.

The high proportion of larger properties, and the associated high price of housing, make it particularly hard for young people and young families to secure low-cost housing that would enable them to continue living in the area.

There is some early evidence to suggest that the pandemic has accelerated people moving from high density urban areas to the countryside, which together with more people choosing to work from home, is likely to increase pricing pressures on the National Park's limited housing stock.

**Key state-of-play indicators:**

- Most expensive National Park in England: average price for a house within the National Park was £643,371 in 2019, about 15 times the average wage of people living in the National Park
- Over 200 eligible applicants on New Forest District Council's and Wiltshire Council's housing registers waiting for affordable housing opportunities in the National Park
- 51 new affordable homes have been completed in the National Park since 2006

## Connecting with people

The English National Parks were created in part to provide a healing space, both mentally and physically, in the aftermath of the Second World War. The pandemic has similarly raised many fundamental questions about the way we can sustain healthy lives in harmony with our environment. There is a greater appreciation of our natural environment and the benefits of having accessible green space on our doorstep. Just as in the 1940s, National Parks are well placed to be inclusive and accessible places that support the nation's health and wellbeing and to lead the way on sustainable tourism and opportunities for people to volunteer and engage in community projects for the benefit of all. Government is responding to calls for these opportunities to be improved and more open to all by supporting a renewed focus in protected landscapes to reach and welcome people and remove barriers to access to National Parks for all parts of society.

### Key state-of-play indicators:

- One of the lowest 'easy to use' footpath network rating compared with other National Parks (taking account of factors such as obstructions, overgrowth, and condition of gates)
- Visitor surveys reveal that of people within 5km of the National Park boundary, 89% of those living in the 10% least deprived areas had visited in the previous year compared to 58% of those in the 10% most deprived areas. This trend continues as you move further from the boundary (source Footprint Ecology 2019)

## Working together

There is a huge and diverse range of organisations, charities, groups and forums working in and for the New Forest, with healthy levels of public engagement and participation. There are some excellent examples of partnership working but equally there are many areas where organisations and communities could work better together and pool resources to achieve more and in doing so strengthen the understanding of the New Forest beyond our boundaries, presenting a more unified, powerful voice to national and regional policy and decision makers.

At the time of writing, the Government is consulting on how partner organisations can work together more effectively in protected landscapes. It is also widely recognised that strengthened management plans would secure greater ambition for our special landscapes and to better reflect all parts of society. This Plan takes account of the proposed direction in the Government consultation and is written in anticipation of a strengthened role for management plans and requirement for public bodies to work more collaboratively going forward.

## Our shared ambition

In order to deliver the proposed Vision, we have focused on five theme-based ‘agendas for action’ which describe in more detail what we want to achieve and how we plan to do it. The themes do not cover all of the work that will be ongoing within the National Park but instead highlight the areas where we intend to work together to achieve transformational change. The themes are intended to be taken together as an integrated package of measures that reinforce one another and work across the landscape. The agendas for action in this new Plan are very ambitious, and we recognise that they will be challenging to realise, but their inclusion in the Plan is intended to drive and target efforts to work as a high-performing partnership for the New Forest National Park and to secure the funding and resources required.

For the next five years, our collective endeavour will focus on achieving outcomes in five key interlinked areas:

- **Nature Recovery** – habitats are more resilient, restored, expanded, connected and maintained to enable wildlife to thrive, both within and beyond the National Park
- **Net Zero with Nature** – significant cuts in land-based carbon emissions are secured through restoring natural habitats and enabling carbon capture
- **Thriving Forest** – a living, working Forest is sustained through its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty and support for commoning. There is a vibrant local produce market, access to affordable homes and a growing green economy featuring sustainable tourism and green businesses
- **An inclusive National Park** – people within reach of the New Forest of all backgrounds, abilities and socio-economic groups value the National Park as an important part of their lives and seek to care for it
- **Team New Forest** – communities, businesses and organisations work together as a team to deliver the vision of the Partnership Plan, sharing knowledge, ideas and resources to deliver the best for the Forest

## Key themes at a glance

	<b>What we are seeking to achieve</b>
<b>Nature Recovery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce a local nature recovery plan to (i) maintain, restore and expand habitats so that they are resilient and support thriving wildlife (ii) mitigate recreational pressures and (iii) ensure recreation takes place in the most resilient areas</li> <li>• Harness the benefits we receive from nature in the New Forest ('natural capital') to generate increased investment and projects to enhance nature and the services it provides</li> <li>• Help landowners, farmers and commoners move to the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) which rewards working with nature</li> </ul>
<b>Net Zero with Nature (NZWN)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a 'net zero with nature' programme with partners and communities to ensure the National Park is carbon neutral by 2050.</li> <li>• Promote and develop best practice in nature-based solutions to meet climate and nature goals</li> <li>• Help communities to take action on the climate emergency</li> </ul>
<b>Thriving Forest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect cultural heritage assets and support commoning and local produce to sustain the unique natural beauty of the landscape and culture of the New Forest for future generations</li> <li>• Invest in green skills and jobs, creating a recognised reputation as a centre of excellence for a growing green economy</li> <li>• Provide more affordable housing</li> </ul>
<b>An inclusive National Park</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop opportunities to deliver a 'Natural Health Service' within and beyond the National Park, through a programme of measures provided by communities, businesses and the health and environment sectors</li> <li>• Foster a greater appreciation of the New Forest, its landscape and cultural heritage</li> <li>• Help new and diverse audiences connect with nature, discover why the National Park is special and how to care for it, with a particular focus on young people</li> </ul>
<b>Team New Forest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish new ways of engaging with our communities, hearing their ideas and encouraging grassroots action</li> <li>• Ensure the New Forest is leading the environmental agenda by delivering exemplary projects and partnerships and showing how these can support and shape policy and sustainable decisions beyond our boundaries, both regionally and nationally</li> <li>• Develop a data, evidence and insights capability to underpin our collective decisions and actions and use up to date technology to help us manage and communicate across the National Park more effectively</li> </ul>

## 1. Nature Recovery

### **Outcome:**

Habitats are more resilient, restored, expanded, connected and maintained to enable wildlife to thrive, both within and beyond the National Park.

### **Why is it important?**

The New Forest National Park is one of the most valuable areas for wildlife in Europe and has the highest proportion of designated nature conservation sites of any National Park in the country (54% of the National Park is a Special Area of Conservation, Special Protection Area or Ramsar Site and a further 5% is non-statutory sites (SINCs)). Even though they remain important we can no longer simply protect nature from harm through special sites and reserves. The unique mosaic of heathland, mires, grassland, woodlands, rivers and ponds of the Open Forest; the fields, hedges and woodlands of the forest fringe; the species-rich floodplains of the Avon Valley; and the grazing marshes and saline lagoons of the coastal plain - all are under threat from a variety of factors including climate change, recreation pressure, new diseases and invasive species.

The condition of the New Forest SSSIs has shown a slight increase in recent years as a result of large-scale habitat restoration work under the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship scheme, with 53% in favourable condition (2022). There is no comprehensive assessment of the condition of non-statutory wildlife sites. Urgent action is needed to ensure our habitats are more resilient, better managed, bigger and more joined up. Ecosystems need to be restored and wildlife needs to be able to move through the landscape freely if it is to adapt to change, which means looking beyond the Open Forest and working across the wider countryside.

The New Forest is well placed to drive a nature recovery network locally, in particular through increased connectivity within and beyond the boundaries of the National Park. Nature cannot recover if it is restricted to isolated pockets and therefore we need to ensure the nature recovery network is joined up across a landscape scale.

Nature Recovery is a major commitment in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan and the Government is putting National Parks at the heart of driving forward and delivering nature recovery and building our resilience to climate change. The Government has also committed to protect 30% of land in the UK by 2030 to support nature recovery. By bringing together partners, legislation and funding, we can make an important contribution to this target and provide nature-based solutions that will restore ecosystems, habitats and prioritise key species for recovery and reintroduction.

## Our priorities

We will work together, and at scale, to maintain, reconnect and enhance nature. We commit to developing a nature recovery programme for the National Park that:

1.1. Makes more space for nature through:

- 1.1.1. Restoration and expansion of the Open Forest heath, mire and pasture woodland habitats; inclosures suitable for restoration and sites that share a common boundary with the Open Forest
- 1.1.2. Enhancing grassland and open habitats, rejuvenating hedgerows, woodland and arable habitats of the forest fringe
- 1.1.3. A programme of river, wetland restoration and pond creation
- 1.1.4. Opportunities for coastal realignment and saltmarsh restoration
- 1.1.5. Opportunities to reduce flood risk by working with natural processes within catchments
- 1.1.6. A programme of halting and reversing the decline of priority species, supporting species recovery, reintroduction of native species where appropriate and control of invasive species

1.2. Enhances Natural Capital by:

- 1.2.1. Valuing and accounting for the public goods provided by the New Forest
- 1.2.2. Providing accessible nature-rich green space near to where people live
- 1.2.3. Incorporating natural capital in our policies and programmes
- 1.2.4. Generating opportunities for increased investment in ecosystem services
- 1.2.5. Coordinating research to better understand the role of peat and other carbon stores in the New Forest

1.3. Supports nature recovery through the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) by:

- 1.3.1. Working with and through the 'Forest Farming Group' to develop a common approach to land management which delivers on the 25 Year Environment Plan's ambition of 'public money for public goods'
- 1.3.2. Taking a collaborative approach with private landowners, farmers, land managers and conservation charities
- 1.3.3. Continuing to provide advice to landowners, farmers and commoners
- 1.3.4. Providing support for ELMS Test and Trial projects and farm cluster groups across the National Park

1.4. Ensures developers deliver a wider range of environmental benefits over and above the full environmental impact of the proposed development by:

- 1.4.1. Having clear and up-to-date planning policies and new supplementary planning guidance that maximise this Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) through new development
- 1.4.2. Adopting a Design Code for new buildings

1.4.3. Developing a better understanding of the impact of development and activities on dark night skies and taking opportunities to mitigate those impacts

1.5. Mitigates recreational pressures by:

- 1.5.1. Developing a spatial plan for where recreation should be accommodated in the New Forest and surrounding areas
- 1.5.2. Agreeing a strategy to facilitate changes to the location and capacity of car parking on the Open Forest and adjacent commons
- 1.5.3. Developing a strategic approach to mitigate the potential impacts associated with increasing recreational pressures arising from planned new housing and visitor accommodation on the internationally designated habitats
- 1.5.4. Increasing the level of funding available for recreation management so that it is sufficient to address both existing and future needs
- 1.5.5. Using appropriate and proportionate enforcement strategies to deter illegal use of the Forest

## 2. Net Zero with Nature

### **Outcome:**

Net zero carbon emissions is achieved by 2050, through significant cuts in land-based emissions and the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, to both reduce emissions production and remove emissions from the atmosphere.

### **Why is it important?**

Climate change, along with biodiversity loss, is the greatest long-term challenge of the present day. The impact of climate change on the New Forest is likely to be wide reaching, with warmer, wetter winters, hotter, dryer summers, rising sea levels and an increasing frequency of extreme weather events, the effects of which are already being seen. The overriding challenge for the Partnership Plan is to make a significant contribution to both mitigating and facilitating the adaptation of people and wildlife to a warming world.

The National Park Authority declared a climate and nature emergency in January 2020, with a commitment to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2030. Many of the partner organisations have made similar declarations and we all recognise that progress can only be made through collaborative working and a collective ambition to achieve net zero with nature.

The natural environment is the most important and effective solution we have for capturing and sequestering carbon long-term. As a partnership we will work to safeguard the New Forest landscape, restore habitats to sequester carbon and combat biodiversity loss as well as support behaviour changes to ensure the National Park continues to be a treasured landscape for the nation.

### **Our priorities**

We will provide leadership to reduce carbon emissions and increase carbon sequestration, working towards the National Park being 'net zero with nature' by 2050. Net zero is achieved when the amount of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs) emitted by human activities on a global scale are equal to that being removed by the natural environment. We will do this through a programme of work that:

#### 2.1. Establishes baseline data and evidence by:

- 2.1.1. Working collectively to both identify relevant emissions and the pace at which they need to be reduced to meet net zero by 2050
- 2.1.2. Researching and monitoring likely impacts of climate change and how that affects the National Park's ability to maintain its carbon stores and continue to sequester carbon
- 2.1.3. Developing research agendas and links with national level research bodies
- 2.1.4. Mapping both existing carbon storage and sequestration (carbon removal from atmosphere) rates across the National Park, as well as the potential increase in carbon sequestration the Park could support.

2.2. Implements nature-based climate solutions by:

- 2.2.1. Identifying the range of nature-based climate solutions in the National Park and working collectively to agree actions to implement these, e.g. the most appropriate type of habitat restoration, preferred areas for tree and hedgerow planting, woodland creation including natural woodland regeneration ('the right tree in the right place')
- 2.2.2. Providing advice on low carbon and nature-friendly practices and engaging farmers / landowners in the uptake of agricultural practices that both reduce carbon emissions and increase carbon sequestration (carbon removal from atmosphere where it causes climate change)
- 2.2.3. Training advisors on low carbon and nature-friendly farming practices
- 2.2.4. Taking action to protect our existing carbon stores by building resilience into our ecosystems e.g. maintaining genetic diversity within our woodlands to combat pests and diseases that threaten tree survival
- 2.2.5. Exploring the potential for both public funding and private finance to fund nature restoration at the scale required to tackle the climate crisis

2.3. Builds a New Forest coalition for a net zero economy by:

- 2.3.1. Creating forums for working collectively to reduce carbon emissions across all sectors
- 2.3.2. Carefully integrating infrastructure projects with the wider natural environment
- 2.3.3. Promoting measures to reduce demand, increase energy efficiency and use energy from renewable energy sources
- 2.3.4. Promoting investment opportunities to fund nature recovery that increases carbon sequestration and protects our existing carbon stores

2.4. Activates communities through programmes of education and engagement by:

- 2.4.1. Supporting our communities to take action by encouraging low carbon living and sustainable purchasing
- 2.4.2. Encouraging visitors to adopt low carbon forms of travel to access the Park
- 2.4.3. Enlisting more volunteers and support for the New Forest Ambassadors' Scheme

2.5. Increases Sustainable Travel by:

- 2.5.1. Producing and delivering an agreed New Forest Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)
- 2.5.2. Campaigning for lower speed limits across the Forest where appropriate and evidenced, to secure quieter, slower and reduced traffic impacts
- 2.5.3. Developing a more co-ordinated and integrated approach to sustainable transport through the relevant Local Transport Plans and by developing a New Forest Transport Strategy
- 2.5.4. Supporting bids for schemes that enable us to decarbonise the transport system

### 3. Thriving Forest

#### Outcome:

A living, working Forest is sustained through its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty and support for commoning. There is a vibrant local produce market, access to affordable homes, a growing green economy featuring sustainable tourism and green businesses.

#### Why is it important?

The New Forest is one of the last remaining extensive areas of unspoilt countryside and semi-natural habitat in lowland Europe. It is a cultural landscape of exceptional natural beauty, shaped over the millennia through the close relationship between the land, the history and culture of its people. It is also a living working landscape that has survived largely because of the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the exercise of common rights of grazing and mast. The New Forest is now one of the few remaining extensive systems of common rights operating in lowland Europe. There are nevertheless concerns about the longer-term viability of commoning, which is particularly vulnerable to recreational pressures.

Maintaining a high-quality natural environment can also contribute substantial economic benefits by supporting the growing green economy, including sustainable tourism and helping to attract high-value businesses and employees. Local produce and local businesses are vital to the health and wellbeing of our rural environment and local economy.

The Government's National Parks Circular confirms that by harnessing the economy to environmental ends, tangible economic benefits can be delivered in National Parks through the delivery of the two statutory purposes<sup>3</sup>. The New Forest National Park itself is home to 35,000 people and around 2,500 local businesses. Tourism and the visitor economy make a significant contribution to the local economy. It is estimated that tourism-related activities generate over £528 million annually and provide nearly 20% of all local jobs.

For these reasons, national policy recognises the need for small-scale, sustainably located development within National Parks to support the socio-economic wellbeing of our communities. We need to support community and green economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and at the same time take steps to address societal issues such as the high cost of housing and an ageing population.

#### Our priorities

We will sustain a living working Forest through a collective programme of work that:

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<sup>3</sup> National Parks Circular, 2010 - [Policy paper overview: English national parks and the broads: UK government vision and circular 2010 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk/government/vision-and-circular-2010)

3.1. Increases green skills and jobs by:

- 3.1.1. Recognising the National Park as a centre of excellence for green skills and jobs and a hub for investment in natural capital
- 3.1.2. Developing a strategy and opportunities for young people through education and training
- 3.1.3. Designing an apprenticeship programme building on the 'Our Past Our Future' (OPOF) ranger scheme
- 3.1.4. Creating a green recovery / investment fund

3.2. Supports Sustainable Land Management by:

- 3.2.1. Developing new business models with landowners to support the delivery of public goods
- 3.2.2. Maintaining, continuing and enhancing public goods through commoning and farming; safeguard vital back-up grazing
- 3.2.3. Facilitating the Forest Farming Group

3.3. Champions the future of New Forest Commoning by:

- 3.3.1. Securing the future of commoning by collaborating with relevant organisations to protect and promote commoning

3.4. Supports New Forest Business and Green Tourism by:

- 3.4.1 Encouraging investment by businesses to halve emissions by 2030
- 3.4.2 Supporting the development of activities delivered by local businesses that provide authentic, sustainable experiences linked to the landscape
- 3.4.3 Supporting local produce through the New Forest Marque

3.5. Increases the availability of affordable housing by:

- 3.5.1. Providing more affordable housing for local communities, commoners and forestry keepers where appropriate, and retaining the existing stock of affordable and occupancy restricted housing
- 3.5.2. Facilitating site finding, community involvement and application process through the 'rural exception route'
- 3.5.3. Better monitoring and reporting of availability of restricted housing stock (conditions/leases/tenancy agreements)

## 4. An inclusive National Park

### **Outcome:**

People within reach of the New Forest, of all backgrounds, abilities and socio-economic groups, value the National Park as an important part of their lives and seek to care for it.

### **Why is it important?**

People need nature and culture for their physical, mental and spiritual health. The future of the New Forest depends on future generations' understanding and valuing this internationally-important landscape – and helping to care for it. Education officers across Forest organisations teach 10,000 children and young people a year with sessions tailored to learning about the New Forest and rangers work with thousands more through their family-focussed events and activities. Many more are engaged through the media, print and online platforms.

We want to encourage greater understanding and appreciation of the National Park, whilst ensuring minimum impact, and support the social and economic benefits that visitors bring in a sustainable way. We also want to specifically help people who face barriers or particular challenges to access so that they can benefit equally from engagement with the National Park. Effective engagement, interpretation and communication programmes with new and existing partners will be required to ensure we are a National Park for all.

### **Our priorities**

We will do this through a programme of work that:

#### 4.1. Promotes health and wellbeing by:

- 4.1.1. Building a strong, mutually beneficial partnership between the health and environment sectors, including a five-year programme of 'Health Education Fellowships' and facilitating effective local networks
- 4.1.2. Addressing health inequalities locally and regionally through improved green space, targeted interventions and nature-based referrals
- 4.1.3. Increasing uptake of walking for health, inclusive cycling for health and volunteering for health programmes.

#### 4.2. Connects people with nature and landscape by:

- 4.2.1. Removing barriers to participation and access – physical and perceived, e.g. affordable public transport
- 4.2.2. Recruiting more rangers, part of whose role is to help people understand and enjoy the New Forest, including apprentice rangers
- 4.2.3. Using data and evidence to create a more accurate picture of the current and possible users of the New Forest National Park and barriers to participation

- 4.2.4. Developing comprehensive and inclusive programmes of health and youth engagement and outreach to build relationships with diverse communities and audiences, including a Youth Action Project and bespoke education activity.
- 4.3. Leads inclusive place-making, celebrates beauty and safeguards our cultural heritage by:
  - 4.3.1. Assisting communities and local organisations to lead and shape cultural and natural heritage projects that foster identity and a sense of place
  - 4.3.2. Bringing together cultural heritage and archaeological datasets, identifying gaps and surveying identified areas to achieve a complete picture for future management
  - 4.3.3. Interpreting and disseminating landscape, cultural and natural heritage through specific outreach such as the New Forest Knowledge website.

## 5. Team New Forest

### **Outcome:**

Communities, businesses and organisations work together as a team to deliver the vision of the Partnership Plan, sharing knowledge, ideas and resources to deliver the best for the Forest.

### **Why is it important?**

The long-term survival of the New Forest is just as dependent on what happens around the boundary, regionally and nationally as within. We need to consolidate our networks and influence, nurture a culture of collaboration and enable delivery of policies and a package of measures to ensure the National Park landscape, economy and communities thrive. We need to be better than the sum of our parts to meet the challenges ahead and to ensure we are as efficient and effective a team for the New Forest as possible.

We want to harness the wealth of experience, skills and views in delivering this Partnership Plan. The Plan will be a living programme of work that will evolve over time, adapting and improving to new challenges and changing agendas. As well as building effective and impactful working arrangements to deliver, we also need to ensure that we hear and take account of all sections of our community and incorporate their ideas and innovations as we move forwards.

Everyone stands to benefit when we embrace and value the diversity of thoughts, perspectives and ways of working that people from different backgrounds, experiences and identities bring to the National Park. Our work and our National Park will be richer and more impactful if we take account of and include the views, talents and skills of all sections of society.

We will ensure a range of interventions are in place to enable all sectors of our community to have their say, take part and influence action in the National Park.

Data, evidence and understanding of the context we work in must underpin and help guide the Partnership Plan and our work with different organisations and groups. It will also be needed to monitor and measure impact. We will establish a National Park insights capability with universities, businesses and other stakeholders to ensure that our decision-making is anchored in robust research, that our action is monitored and that we are able to capture regular insights into the views of the community and of relevant social, economic and policy context.

### **Our priorities**

We will do this through a programme of work that:

#### 5.1. Works with a wide range of people in our community and beyond by:

- 5.1.1. Growing understanding of each other and our audiences
- 5.1.2. Enabling enriching experiences for a diversity of people

5.2. Establishes strong partnerships and relationships within and beyond boundaries by:

- 5.2.1. Increasing the breadth and depth of our engagement by helping recreational users to understand their impacts on the National Park and the changes residents could make to help contribute to nature's recovery and tackle the climate emergency.
- 5.2.2. Establishing a new Partnership Board
- 5.2.3. Advocating regionally, nationally and internationally; identifying key means by which we can realise the ambition of the Partnership Plan
- 5.2.4. Expanding and consolidating links from the New Forest to Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire
- 5.2.5. Activating and channelling people's enthusiasm for caring for the New Forest and learning more about it (such as New Forest Ambassadors Scheme); harnessing and supporting existing movements within our communities

5.3. Leads the green agenda; seeking to influence, shape and innovate by:

- 5.3.1. Ensuring blue-green infrastructure is in place, connecting key network areas to help solve climate challenges by building with nature
- 5.3.2. Managing recreation across the area effectively, seeking new opportunities for sites where people and nature can benefit
- 5.3.3. Working with the national parks and wider protected landscapes to ensure they are recognised as central to providing nature-based solutions to the climate emergency and recovery of people.
- 5.3.4. Positioning the Green Halo Partnership to cement our role as thought leaders, influencing, developing and implementing policy in this area
- 5.3.5. Championing and helping to deliver the green recovery and the 'Greenprint' aspirations of the wider area
- 5.3.6. Working with Southampton City Council on developing its National Park City campaign
- 5.3.7. Exploring the National Park City region bid with Southampton City Council, South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

5.4. Develops our reputation as a 'centre of excellence' through our work together for the National Park and wider area by:

- 5.4.1. Understanding our evidence needs, the gaps and how to fill them; we are known as a centre of excellence for evidence, data and insights – in its commission, collation and application
- 5.4.2. Successfully scanning horizons using up-to-date evidence and data
- 5.4.3. Developing a 'SMART' National Park ambition with greatly improved broadband connectivity and use of up-to-date technologies where they can help solve National Park issues and take beneficial opportunities
- 5.4.4. Working with each other efficiently, effectively and with respect.

## **Annex 1 - Actions to deliver the Partnership Plan priorities**

The Partnership Plan is an overarching strategic document for the National Park and sets the framework for more detailed plans and strategies, including the annual business plans prepared by the National Park Authority and partner organisations.

A new partnership group will be established to oversee the implementation of the new Plan and to lead the review of future updates of the Plan. This new partnership group, comprising a small core membership of key partner organisations with an independent chair, will also activate and monitor the actions in the new Plan.

Delivery and performance of the Plan will be evaluated by tracking progress against identified measures of success. An annual progress report which will be published detailing key outputs and case studies from projects and other activities. We shall share this information widely with the public and all those helping to deliver our shared ambition for the National Park.

SEE SEPARATE ANNEX

**Nature Recovery**

Priority	Action	Target date	Measures of success	Partners	Legislation and policy
Making space for nature	NR1: Restore and expand priority habitats  NR2: Halt and reverse the decline of priority species (from the Hampshire Notables list)	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65% of the National Park well managed for nature and in good or recovering condition</li> <li>• 5,000 hectares of priority habitats brought into active management</li> <li>• 10km of hedgerow created</li> <li>• 75% of SSSI restored to favourable condition</li> <li>• 5km watercourses enhanced</li> <li>• Number of new ponds created</li> <li>• Decline of priority species halted; species reintroductions informed by Local Nature Recovery Strategies</li> <li>• Multi-functional accessible greenspace near residential development created and designed to support nature recovery objectives in the Forest</li> </ul>	NE, HIIWT, RSPB, NT, HIIWT, RSPB, EA / NFCP, FE/FC, NFLAS, Parish councils, WC & HCC	25 YEP, Environment Act 2021, Glover (Proposal 3) State of Nature report
Enhancing Natural Capital	NR3: Promote understanding of natural capital and its role in the New Forest	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural capital baseline adopted and used by partners</li> <li>• Peat resource map established</li> </ul>	NPA, FE, NE	National Climate Change Adaptation Programme, Glover (Proposal 2)
Supporting Nature Recovery through ELMS	NR4: Develop closer working with and better support for land managers	2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ELM scheme for the Open Forest agreed by 2023</li> <li>• Increase in number of landowners, farmers and commoners benefitting from advice</li> </ul>	Forest Farming Group, NFLAS, NFDC, TVBC, HCC, WC, RSPB	25 YEP, Glover (Proposal 5)
Mitigating recreational pressures	NR5: Agree and publish a spatial plan which identifies more appropriate locations for recreation and associated infrastructure	2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Car Park Local Development Order (LDO) developed in tandem with spatial plan (2024)</li> <li>• Mitigation strategy agreed</li> <li>• Funding for recreation management secured</li> <li>• Availability of new enforcement powers to address illegal use &amp; activities on the Forest</li> <li>• App to distribute New Forest code messages and collect recreation management data launched</li> </ul>	NPA, NE, Mitigation project steering group, NPA, FE, GNF, NFT, NFDC, RSPB	Footprint Ecology reports, Habitats Regulations

## Net Zero with Nature

Priority	Action	Target date	Measures of success	Partners	Legislation and policy
Establishing data and evidence baseline	NZN1: Enhance understanding, identification and monitoring of carbon data	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Carbon emission baseline for the National Park agreed by 2022</li> <li>Carbon storage and sequestration rates for National Park habitats established and mapped by 2022</li> <li>Actions to reduce emissions to Net Zero identified by 2023</li> <li>Management interventions to increase carbon sequestration rates identified</li> <li>Target carbon sequestration rate identified for the National Park</li> <li>Climate change effects on National Park's carbon storage and sequestration capabilities investigated</li> </ul>	NPA, FE, NE, EA, NFDC, HCC, HIWWT, RSPB	Glover (Proposal 3), Net Zero with Nature strategy due 2022
Implement nature-based climate solutions	NZN2: Implement nature-based climate solutions to reduce carbon emissions and increase carbon sequestration by identifying suitable interventions, working with land managers and securing sufficient finance	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction of land-based emissions in line with a trajectory that is compatible with preventing global warming to 1.5C</li> <li>Actions that sequester carbon prioritised</li> <li>Maintain habitats' carbon storage capabilities and prevent their degradation</li> <li>The New Forest's peat resource is protected and enhanced</li> <li>Woodland creation carried out where appropriate</li> <li>Hedgerows created and restored</li> <li>Areas set aside for woodland to naturally regenerate</li> <li>Coastal saltmarsh protected</li> <li>Soil carbon stores enhanced and protected</li> <li>Number of farmers / landowners engaged and collaborating with others at a landscape scale</li> <li>Public and private finance secured to restore nature and sequester carbon</li> </ul>	NPA, HIWWT, FE, NFLAS, land management community, NE, HCC, National Trust, RSPB, NFDC	Forest Design Plan, Local Nature Recovery Design Plan, NEIRF project, Glover (Proposal 3), 25 YEP, Net Zero with Nature strategy due 2022
Building a New Forest coalition for a net zero economy	NZN3: Work collectively to reduce carbon emissions and identify investment opportunities  NZN4: Require all developers to build zero-carbon homes	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forums established to work together to reduce emissions</li> <li>Emissions reduced in line with limiting global warming to 1.5°C</li> <li>Encourage residents and visitors to use sustainable forms of travel to access the National Park</li> <li>Reduce energy use and increase low-carbon energy use in buildings across the National Park</li> <li>Reduce waste creation in the National Park</li> <li>Zero carbon homes policy adopted in new National Park Local Plan</li> </ul>	Green Halo / PfSH, NFLAS, NF Business Partnership, HCC, NFDC	Glover (Proposal 3), Net Zero with Nature strategy due 2022
Activating communities	NZN5: Support communities, businesses, and visitors to	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education and engagement programme established by 2022</li> </ul>	NPA, NFDC, WC, NFBP, RSPB,	Glover (Proposal 3), Net Zero with

## APPENDIX

	adopt a more carbon friendly way of living and visiting		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding for sustainable living initiatives secured (in addition to SCF)</li> <li>• Increased number of volunteers taking part in climate, nature and heritage activities</li> </ul>	education and youth work partnerships, tourism partnerships, parish councils, green groups	Nature strategy due 2022
Increasing sustainable travel	NZN6: Adopt and implement sustainable transport plans	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Forest Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) agreed and network improvements made</li> <li>• Lower speed limit trial implemented and analysed</li> <li>• Bespoke New Forest transport and rural roads approach established, as part of Local Transport Plans</li> <li>• Funding for sustainable transport schemes secured</li> <li>• Reduced number of visitors using the private car as their main mode of transport (2019 baseline 93%)</li> <li>• Increased number of people using the New Forest Tour (compared to 2019 baseline)</li> </ul>	NPA, NFDC, HCC, , WC, RSPB Police, SWR, MoreBus	DfT guidance on local cycling & walking infrastructure plans, Net Zero with Nature strategy due 2022

**Thriving Forest**

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Measures of success</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Legislation and policy</b>
Increasing green skills and jobs	TF1: Promote opportunities in the green jobs sector, especially for young people	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education and training strategy for young people established, including an apprenticeship programme</li> <li>• More young people reached</li> <li>• Green recovery / investment fund created</li> </ul>	NPA, LEP, NFDC, RSPB, education and youth work partnerships, Energise Me, universities	Greenprint, Freeport
Supporting sustainable land management and securing the future of commoning	TF2: Collaborate with relevant organisations to protect and promote commoning	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commoners' review updated</li> <li>• Public's knowledge about commoning and its heritage increased</li> <li>• No net loss of back-up grazing land</li> </ul>	CDA, Verderers, RSPB	NEIRF, ELM
Supporting NF business and green tourism	TF3: Increase green investment opportunities for businesses  TF4: increased number of households benefitting from superfast broadband	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased investment in green infrastructure and initiatives</li> <li>• Percentage of households benefitting from superfast broadband</li> </ul>	Go New Forest, LEP, NFDC, WC, RSPB, Hampshire Chamber of Commerce, NFBP, HCC	Green Leaf
Increasing the availability of affordable housing	TF5: Work collectively in identifying and facilitating site finding, community involvement and the application process	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 new affordable dwellings delivered through rural exception sites</li> <li>• No net loss of existing stock of affordable and occupancy restricted dwellings to open market housing</li> </ul>	NPA, NFDC, HHH, FE	Forestry England Housing Review, Local Plans, National planning policy and guidance
Increase the Park's resilience to the effects of climate change	TF6: Increase the resilience of the Park's habitats and adapt Park infrastructure where necessary	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate change impact assessments carried out on Park green infrastructure and natural capital resilience-building interventions carried out</li> <li>• Identify infrastructure at risk to climate and nature impacts and carry out remedial works carried out</li> </ul>	NPA, NFDC, HCC, WC, FE, NE, HIWWT, RSPB, National Trust, NFLAS	Climate Change Adaptation Manual 2020 by Natural England, Independent-Assessment-of-UK-Climate-Risk-Advice Climate Change Committee 2021

**An inclusive National Park**

Priority	Action	Target	Measures of success	Partners	Legislation and policy
Promoting health and wellbeing	INP1: Implement a variety of health and nature-based interventions	2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More people benefitting from new partnerships between the health and environment sectors, with a focus on health inequalities</li> <li>More people taking part in walking / cycling / nature activities for health programmes, with better information sharing and signposting to offers</li> <li>New PedALL centre established in Ashurst</li> </ul>	NPA, NHS, Bournemouth Uni, PedALL, NFDC, RSPB, Community First	National Parks England & Public Health England Joint Accord 2017, Glover (Proposal 10)
Connecting people with nature and landscape	INP2: Establish programmes to engage with more people from diverse backgrounds and support initiatives	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New programmes established that remove barriers to participation and access to nature</li> <li>Increased number of rangers working in the National Park</li> <li>Increased number of people from specific audiences engaged</li> <li>Increased number of volunteers and ambassadors are from under-served groups</li> <li>Youth Action project established</li> </ul>	FE, NT, HCC, NPA, NF, RSPB, Access Forum, New Forest Educators' Forum	Glover (Proposal 7), Statutory National Park purposes
Safeguarding cultural heritage	INP3: Establish programmes for communities and residents in fostering local identity	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More local communities (heritage groups, parish councils, interest groups, local organisations) involved in cultural and natural heritage projects</li> <li>Cultural heritage and archaeological dataset consolidated</li> <li>Maintain 'NF Knowledge' website and increase participation</li> <li>Successful 'Culture in Common' Arts Council England-funded project</li> </ul>	NPA, NFHC, RSPB, NFDC, parishes, Energise Me	Statutory National Park purposes, HLS

**Team New Forest**

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Measures of success</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Legislation and policy</b>
Establishing stronger partnerships within the New Forest boundary	TNF1: Deliver the annual action plan  TNF2: Annual review and relaunch 'Care for the Forest, Care for Each Other' Action Plan	2023  2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6,000 people/year engaged through programme of regular collaborative surveys and consultations by the partnership</li> <li>• Establishment of new partnership group to oversee, activate and monitor the actions in the new Plan</li> <li>• Care for the Forest campaign delivers measurable reduction in recreation impacts with more organisations / individuals supporting it</li> </ul>	NPA, constituent local authorities, other statutory bodies	Section 62, Environment Act 1995
Leading the Green Agenda beyond the New Forest	TNF3: Establish stronger links with neighbouring business communities and councils	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of business engaged / signed-up to Green Halo</li> <li>• Number of projects arising from Greenprint</li> <li>• Southampton CC supported in national park city bid</li> <li>• National Park City region concept scoped out</li> </ul>	NPA, LEP, SCC, SDNPA, AONB, Universities, Green Halo Partnership, HIOWWT, PfSH, Future South, Business South, Greentech South, BCP, Dorset Council, Wiltshire Council, TVBC	
Developing a Centre of Excellence of insights and innovation for the New Forest	TNF4: Understanding our evidence needs, the gaps and how to fill them	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updated State of the Park report published</li> <li>• Audit of insights/data/evidence available completed and gaps identified to enable delivery of the Partnership Plan</li> <li>• Dashboard-style webpage providing relevant data available on NPA website</li> <li>• Improved broadband connectivity and use of up-to-date technologies to help solve National Park issues</li> </ul>	NPA, HCC, HBIC, universities	

## ITEM 8                    Annual Governance Statement 2021/22

Report of the Finance & Resources Portfolio Holder

### **Recommended:**

**That the Annual Governance Statement for 2021/22 be approved and that the Leader and Chief Executive be authorised to sign it on behalf of the Council.**

### **Recommendation to Council**

#### **SUMMARY:**

- The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the Annual Governance Statement, which accompanies the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts.
- Best practice requires that the approval of this Statement is considered separately from the Statement of Accounts, although both are published together each year.

## **1        Introduction**

- 1.1 Test Valley Borough Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and used economically, efficiently and effectively.
- 1.2 The Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

## **2        Background**

- 2.1 As part of its responsibilities outlined above, the Council is required to produce an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) and publish the Statement alongside its Annual Statement of Accounts. The format of the statement is based on guidance produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA) in conjunction with the Society of Local Chief Executives (SOLACE) titled “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework”.
- 2.2 The Statement is attached as an Annex to this report and covers the following areas:
  - (a) Scope of responsibility
  - (b) The purpose of the Governance Framework Test Valley Borough Council

- (c) The impact of Covid-19 on the governance framework
  - (d) The Governance Framework in place at the Council
  - (e) A review of its effectiveness
  - (f) A separate Annex of best practice actions that have been identified and will be implemented during 2022/23.
- 2.3 The Review of Effectiveness (item 2.2 (e)) has been carried out by the Internal Audit Manager, who has reviewed all of the internal audit work carried out during the year. To inform this work, a self-assessment of the internal audit function's conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) was carried out in March 2022.
- 2.4 On the basis of Internal Audit work completed in 2021/22, the Internal Audit Manager has provided a "substantial assurance" opinion in respect of the Council's risk management, control and governance arrangements.
- 2.5 The emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic towards the end of March 2020 has continued to impact the Council's budgets and governance arrangements throughout the 2021/22 financial year. The impact that this has had on governance arrangements is explained throughout the AGS.
- 2.6 The date for final publication of the Council's accounts and Annual Accounts and Annual Governance Statement for 2021/22 is 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

### **3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities**

- 3.1 In addition to its legal responsibilities, approval of an AGS is considered to be best practice and will ensure that proper arrangements are in place to deliver the aims of the Council's Corporate Plan.

### **4 Consultations/Communications**

- 4.1 The Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and all Heads of Service have been asked to review the AGS and consider whether there are any areas which they felt are appropriate for disclosure. All comments received have been incorporated in the Statement.
- 4.2 The Audit Panel also reviewed and endorsed the draft AGS at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

### **5 Options and Options Appraisal**

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory duty to approve an AGS. In view of this, if the annexed AGS is not recommended for approval, Cabinet should provide a clear indication as to what changes are needed in order for a revised version to be presented as soon as possible.

### **6 Risk Management**

- 6.1 The research and preparation of the 2021/22 AGS has not identified any significant red or amber risks that need addressing.

- 6.2 Five areas have been identified where improvements can be made to existing controls to further strengthen the Council's governance arrangements. These are summarised as an appendix to the AGS.

## **7 Resource Implications**

- 7.1 There are no direct resource implications in approving the AGS. The publication costs can be met within existing budgets.

## **8 Legal Implications**

- 8.1 The Council is required by the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 to approve, and subsequently publish, the AGS with the Statement of Accounts.

## **9 Equality Issues**

- 9.1 This report has not identified any equalities matters.

## **10 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation**

- 10.1 The AGS is part of the framework for delivering good governance in local authorities. The Statement is a high profile document signed by the Leader and Chief Executive and is published with the Statement of Accounts each year to demonstrate a commitment to the continuous review and development of the Council's governance arrangements.

### Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015

### Confidentiality:

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:	1	File Ref:	N/A
(Portfolio: Finance and Resources) Councillor M Flood			
Officer:	Carl Whatley	Ext:	8540
Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	11 May 2022

**Test Valley Borough Council****Annual Governance Statement 2021/22****1 Scope of responsibility**

- 1.1 The Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 1.2 In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and which includes arrangements for the management of risk.
- 1.3 The Council has approved and adopted a local code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government*. A copy of the Local Code of Corporate Governance is on the Council's website at:  
<http://www.testvalley.gov.uk/aboutyourcouncil/corporatedirection/local-codecorporate-governance>, or can be obtained from the Head of Legal and Democratic Services. This statement explains how the Council has complied, and continues to comply, with the principles underlying this code and also meets the requirements of regulation 6 of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015, which requires all relevant bodies to prepare an annual governance statement.

**2 The purpose of the governance framework**

- 2.1 The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Council to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, value for money services.
- 2.2 The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk at a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an on-going process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Council's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks occurring and the impact should they happen, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

- 2.3 The governance framework that has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2022 is explained in the following section along with changes that have been implemented in the year. It will continue to be developed during the coming year.

### **3 The impact of Covid19 on the governance framework**

- 3.1 The Council's governance arrangements have continued to be impacted by the coronavirus pandemic during 2021/22. Response and Recovery Plans initially established at the onset of the pandemic during 2020/21 have been subject to regular review and update during the year and the Council has put in place and adapted robust and effective measures for managing these impacts including:
- Taking an active role in the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Resilience Forum (LRF) contributing to the wider LRF response and recovery programmes.
  - Establishing clear roles and responsibilities with the Council's Cabinet who are the recovery sponsors and the Management Team meeting specifically as a response and recovery programme group to review and guide the delivery of the action plans derived from the strategic priorities set out in the recovery plan.
  - Continuing to support community response and recovery through funding and bringing together community partners on a regular basis.
  - Working with its strategic partners to support testing and vaccination centres which are now in operation within the borough.
  - Identifying priorities and work streams and fully assessing and regularly reviewing the impacts and mitigating actions.
  - Drawing upon some of the lessons learned throughout the pandemic, the Council has commissioned a New Ways of Working programme to support the Council's onward modernisation. The programme has utilised the experience gained from working more remotely and developed plans for working in a more agile way. Following a pilot phase the Council is embedding this new approach through three key work streams: people & culture, business infrastructure and innovation in service delivery.
- 3.2 The Council has continued to embed the practices learned throughout the pandemic and control measures have worked well throughout the waves of the virus. Forming part of the corporate risk register means that Management Team have been reviewing Covid19 impacts alongside other key strategic risks on a quarterly basis as part of the corporate dashboard. A lessons learned / project closure report for the recovery project is being produced as response arrangements are scaled down and/or embedded as part of business as usual activities. Wider more systemic / long term recovery issues which the council is not solely responsible for (e.g. economic recovery) are to be addressed through ongoing policy and strategy development.

## **4 The governance framework**

- 4.1 The key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the Council's governance arrangements are as follows:
- The Council has fulfilled the following key roles (now formally adopted as part of the Local Code of Governance):
    - To promote the well-being of the area and provide leadership to the community;
    - To ensure the provision of high quality services provided in-house, by private sector companies, (where the ability to influence exists), jointly with other Councils or agencies, or by the voluntary sector;
    - To be accountable and provide stewardship for the use of public funds and resources;
    - To build a strong sense of community.
- 4.1.1 In fulfilling these roles the Council is committed to following the six core principles of good corporate governance identified in the CIPFA/SOLACE Guidance and how the Council is working towards achieving these principles is set out in the document "Principles of Good Governance"
- 4.2 A single strategic partnership for the Borough is in place called the Test Valley Partnership. It brings together the key partner agencies from across the public and voluntary and community sector. It meets twice a year and provides a place in which the key strategic issues facing the borough can be discussed, joint work developed and statutory duties met.
- 4.2.1 The Test Valley Partnership and its umbrella groups (community safety management group, community resilience forum and the newly established civilian military forum) all continued to meet throughout the pandemic. During 2021 the main partnership met on two occasions. The partnership has started to review its programme of work in-light of the pandemic and where evidence is demonstrating a focus is required.
- 4.2.2 A significant piece of work this year has been on mental health with the partnership finalising the process for signing up to the mental health concordat which requires an action plan to be developed and endorsed by all partners. The Community Resilience Forum has continued its work and met in 2021 to review how community resilience models developed within the pandemic could shape future planning which is also contributing to a wider Local Resilience Forum review.
- 4.3 The Council has a clear vision of its purpose and desired outcomes for the short, medium and long term. These are encapsulated in its Corporate Plan through a range of corporate and service strategies and through four areas of focus as part of the Council's commitment to the Test Valley Partnership.
- 4.3.1 There has been considerable consultation and stakeholder involvement in the

development and progression of these plans and strategies and they are made available to the public through a variety of means including the Council's website and Test Valley News.

- 4.3.2 The Council has published a Corporate Plan for 2019 / 2023 "Growing Our Potential" which was approved by the Council on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2019. It has four main aims and an action plan detailing how these aims will be delivered. In developing the plan, previous priorities were reviewed, extensive consultation was undertaken with local people and elected Councillors whilst also considering external influences on the borough, such as government policy.
- 4.3.3 The Council has a longstanding strategic commitment to work with its communities collaboratively. At the centre of this is the democratic role elected councillors play in bringing communities together to ensure inclusivity when undertaking local action planning and priority setting. The Council's Member and Community Development Group, chaired by the Leader of the Council, supports community councillors to engage more effectively with local residents and communities.
- 4.3.4 This has enabled the Council to develop innovative practice such as being one of only three Local Authorities in the country to be part of the Innovation in Democracy Programme in 2019/20 in which a Citizens Assembly was held in Romsey focused on the priorities for the South of Town Centre Masterplan. The Council continues to build upon the experience gained from the Innovation in Democracy Programme.
- 4.3.5 In 2021 the Council's senior managers who form the Senior Managers Forum took part in a one-day workshop hosted by the Southern Policy Centre with contributions from a former government minister on how the Council could use deliberative engagement techniques as a way to ensure effective evidence-led engagement with residents and move beyond traditional survey models. This includes applying the principles of lived experience and deliberation as part of our approach to developing key policy areas such as the next corporate plan. In addition the Council is also piloting further deliberative engagement activities such as:
  - Contributing to the Local Resilience Forum review of community resilience through a series of deliberative events to shape a future model of community resilience.
  - A youth engagement project in Andover
  - A commitment to three deliberative events as part of the development of the next corporate plan.
  - embedding deliberative community engagement as part of the consultation process for the 2023 Corporate Plan.
- 4.3.6 The Council formally reviews its progress and performance against its corporate priorities through an Annual Corporate Action Plan Report <https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/aboutyourcouncil/corporatedirection/corporate-plan-for-2019-to-2023> which is presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSCOM) and the Cabinet.

- 4.4 The Corporate Plan is supported by a performance management framework (including performance indicators) to measure progress. 2021 saw the introduction of a new Corporate Dashboard which brings top-line strategic information for the Council's Management Team to review each quarter and act as a catalyst for the onward Management Team work programme. The Dashboard applies the good governance principles and uses the framework developed by the Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CFGs) of "anticipate, manage and adapt" to help structure discussion. The dashboard focuses on the following key areas:
- Finance
  - Emerging issues and hot topics (strategic oversight)
  - Organisational health – people
  - Democratic matters
  - Corporate Performance
  - Corporate Action plan delivery
  - Governance and Risk management
- 4.5 Members of OSCOM undertake task and finish panel reviews. Once an area for review has been identified, the lead member/chairman of the panel presents the draft scoping document for the review to the full committee for consideration.
- 4.5.1 A full report is then subsequently presented to OSCOM once the review has been completed or reached an appropriate stage. This process has ensured more effective and focused reviews and a clear line of responsibility to the main committee. In addition, there are standing panels; the Audit Panel and the Budget Panel which meet regularly throughout the year and cover scrutiny of all the financial activities of the Council. The standing Panels report to OSCOM on a regular basis and bring any issues of concern to the attention of the Committee.
- 4.6 The Council has in place a Medium Term Financial Strategy, updated annually, which supports the aims of the Corporate Plan. The Medium Term Financial Strategy has been materially affected by the impacts of the coronavirus, though most income and expenditure is returning to pre-pandemic levels. The greatest risk to the MTFS is the uncertainty surrounding the potential for a business rates re-set which could see a material reduction in a key income stream, the timing and extent of which is beyond the Council's control.
- 4.7 The quality and value for money of services provided to users is measured through the Authority's performance management system. This includes the measurement and review of performance against national and local performance indicators and actions taken to address areas for improvement. Performance is monitored regularly throughout the year by Performance Boards and as part of the Corporate Dashboard process.
- 4.8 The roles of the Cabinet, OSCOM, and other committees of the Council as well as specific roles assigned to the Leader, Deputy Leader, Portfolio Holders and senior officers of the Council are defined and documented within the Council's Constitution.

- 4.8.1 The Leader undertook a Portfolio Holder review and update on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2021. The Constitution also clearly identifies the powers, duties and responsibilities delegated to the Deputy Leader, Portfolio Holders and Officers, and includes rules for how Council and committee meetings should operate and the relationship between Members and Officers.
- 4.8.2 Arrangements have been put in place to reinstate physical Council and Committee meetings after the Government ended the ability to hold remote meeting in May 2021. This included incorporating Covid-19 protection measures, as appropriate, as guidance changed.
- 4.8.3 Having regard to the benefits of remote meetings, the Council has responded to the Government's consultation/call for evidence on the subject. The Council has been able to continue to avail itself of the ability to conduct non-committee business remotely or in a hybrid fashion where appropriate.
- 4.9 During 2021 the Council established a Strategy and Innovation Service to strengthen the Council's ability to develop and manage its corporate planning processes. In its first year of operation the Service led on key projects and programmes including the Council's approach to new ways of working.
- 4.10 The conduct of Members and Officers is regulated by separate codes of conduct within the Council's Constitution. The Council's General Purposes Committee together with the General Purposes Employment Appeals and Ethics Sub-Committee promote high standards of conduct by Members and consider complaints made against Members.
- 4.10.1 A comprehensive set of Human Resources policies ensures compliance with employment legislation and promotes good personnel practices. These include disciplinary and capability processes to deal with conduct or performance which is unacceptable. These policies and procedures are regularly reviewed and revised.
- 4.11 The conduct of day to day Council business is regulated through policies and procedures such as Contract Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. The delegations to Members and Officers are kept continually under review and revised as appropriate.
- 4.12 Elected members and all officers are aware of their obligations under equality legislation, as well as the standards of behaviour and language which are expected from representatives and employees of the Council. Ongoing training is provided for both Members and officers.
- 4.12.1 Equality impact assessments are built into the Council's decision making process. The Council has reviewed its corporate equalities objectives, alongside its duties under the new gender pay gap publication requirements. The Council continues to deliver training on the Equality Act 2010 to new members of staff and to Members.

- 4.12.2 As part of his Portfolio Review in October 2021 the Leader introduced a new area of Portfolio responsibility “Diversity and Inclusion”. The responsibility for being the Council’s lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion has been allocated to the Council’s Management Team. The Council has published information that demonstrates compliance with the Equality Duty as defined by the Equality Act 2010 on its website.  
[\(https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/aboutyourcouncil/corporatedirection/equality---diversity/equalities\)](https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/aboutyourcouncil/corporatedirection/equality---diversity/equalities)
- 4.13 The Council has established Disability Focus Groups that contributed towards the development of the new Corporate Plan. The groups are helping the Council and its partners on an ongoing basis.
- 4.14 The Council is a statutory partner with regards safeguarding its residents of all ages under both The Children Act 2004 and The Care Act 2015. The Council has in place a Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy and this and the associated procedures are monitored regularly to ensure compliance with these duties. The Council also liaises with both the Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership and Hampshire Safeguarding Adults Board to ensure this.
- 4.15 On a bi-annual basis the Council is required by the Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership to complete the required Section 11 audit as a self-assessment of its position with regards its safeguarding duties. The last full audit which took place in 2020 was reviewed in 2021 and identified that the Council is compliant with Section 11 of the Children Act.
- 4.15.1 On a bi-annual basis the Council is also required by the Hampshire Safeguarding Adults Board to undertake an audit of its position with regards its safeguarding duties, the last undertaken in 2020 with the 2022 assessment in progress.
- 4.16 The Council approved a Climate Emergency Action Plan in 2020 to identify the steps it will be taking to work towards achieving carbon neutrality. The ability to make progress on the actions has been affected by the challenges posed by Covid19. However, because of the circumstances created by the pandemic certain areas have progressed quicker than anticipated such as new ways of working. In other areas, evidence is being gathered to create greenhouse emissions and a decarbonisation plan for the Council’s buildings.
- 4.17 The Council’s approach to risk management is outlined in its Risk Management Strategy. Corporate and Service specific risks are reviewed on a quarterly basis by the Council’s Service Performance Boards and progress in managing the corporate risk register is reported to OSCOM on an annual basis. Risk management also forms part of quarterly Corporate Dashboard discussions with the Council’s Management Team which includes the review and update of corporate risks.

- 4.17.1 The Finance & Resources Portfolio Holder is the Council's Member Champion for risk management and risk management is embedded within the Council's processes e.g. reports to decision-making committees use a template which includes a section on risk assessment which must be completed before the report can be considered.
- 4.18 The requirement to achieve Nutrient Neutrality from new residential development, overnight accommodation and tourist attractions affects the Council's strategic priority to deliver housing.
- 4.18.1 Measures to secure the use of land to provide off-site mitigation solutions necessary to protect the internationally designated nature conservation sites in and around the Solent have included the purchase of nitrate credits from a third party which can be purchased from the Council directly through an approved mitigation framework. The Council is investigating the amount of nitrate credits arising from recent land purchases and how any credits could be used. Work has also continued with the Environment Agency, Southern Water and other partners to review permit limits at Wastewater Treatment Works serving the Borough.
- 4.19 The Council's OSCOM Audit Panel met three times in the year to undertake the core functions of an "audit committee". The terms of reference for the Audit Panel include:

**Audit Activity**

- To consider the Internal Audit Manager's annual report and opinion, and a summary of internal audit activity (actual and proposed) and the level of assurance it can give over the Council's corporate governance arrangements.
- To consider summaries of specific internal audit reports as requested.
- To consider reports dealing with the management and performance of the providers of internal audit services.
- To consider a report from internal audit on agreed actions not implemented within a reasonable timescale.
- To consider the external auditor's annual letter, relevant reports, and the report to those charged with governance.
- To consider specific reports as agreed with the external auditor.
- To comment on the scope and depth of external audit work and to ensure it gives value for money.
- To commission work from internal and external audit.

**Regulatory Framework**

- To review any issue referred to it by the Chief Executive, the Deputy Chief Executive, or any Council body.
- To monitor the effective development and operation of corporate governance in the Council.
- To monitor Council policies on whistleblowing and the anti-fraud, anti-corruption and anti-bribery strategies and the Council's complaints process.

- To oversee the production of the authority's Annual Governance Statement and to recommend its adoption.
  - To consider the Council's arrangements for corporate governance and agreeing necessary actions to ensure compliance with best practice.
  - To consider the Council's compliance with its own and other published standards and controls.
- 4.19.1 At its meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Council resolved to establish an Audit Committee with effect from 18<sup>th</sup> May 2022. This will replace the arrangements that have been in place throughout the 2021/22 financial year and will be reported in more detail in the next Annual Governance Statement.
- 4.20 The Chief Executive is the Council's Head of Paid Service and has overall corporate management and operational responsibility for the way in which the Council delivers its services. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services is designated as the Council's Monitoring Officer and has responsibilities under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 for ensuring that the Council complies with relevant laws and regulations and internal policies such as Contract Standing Orders. The Head of Finance and Revenues is designated as the Council's Section 151 Officer with responsibility for ensuring the "proper administration of financial affairs".
- 4.20.1 The Head of Finance and Revenues also has responsibility under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 for reporting to the Council and the external auditor if the Council has made, or is about to make, expenditure which is unlawful.
- 4.20.2 These three statutory officers meet regularly throughout the year (plus as required on an ad hoc basis) to discuss significant corporate issues.
- 4.21 The CIPFA statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government requires the Chief Finance Officer to report directly to the Chief Executive and be a member of the 'Leadership Team', of equal status to other members. The Council does not strictly comply with this requirement in that the Head of Finance and Revenues reports to the Deputy Chief Executive. However, in practice, the Head of Finance and Revenues is able to report directly to the Chief Executive and Members as and when required, is a member of the Management Team, and is involved and consulted in all matters which have financial implications for the Council.
- 4.22 The Council's Constitution contains a Confidential Reporting Code for Employees which safeguards "whistle-blowers" who raise legitimate concerns about the Council's actions and specifies how their concerns should be addressed.
- 4.22.1 Financial Regulations require all staff to raise concerns about the use or misuse of Council resources with the Head of Finance and Revenues or Internal Audit who will carry out an independent investigation of the circumstances. Internal Audit also actively encourages staff to raise matters of concern through "Speak Up" campaigns. A form is available on the Council's intranet for staff to raise concerns (anonymously if desired) about the use of Council resources and this facility has been extended to the website so that members of the public can raise concerns in this area.

- 4.22.2 The Council also has a formal complaints procedure for members of the public to raise issues, e.g. where they are dissatisfied with the service they have received, and an annual report is prepared for OSCOM summarising these complaints and how they were resolved.
- 4.23 The Council has a detailed Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy which sets out the roles, responsibilities of officers and Members and actions to be taken when fraud or corruption is discovered. In addition, an Anti-Bribery Policy has been approved to address the requirements of the Bribery Act 2010.
- 4.24 The Democratic Services Manager is responsible for identifying and providing for Councillors' training needs. The Council has a cross-party Member and Community Development Group which is supported by officers from a range of services.
- 4.24.1 This Group has continued to work to promote an enhanced role for Councillors that focuses on them acting as a catalyst for change to encourage communities to reach their full potential. This work has brought together the needs and expectations of our communities in order to make balanced decisions, and has ensured a culture of democratic accountability is embraced throughout the Council.
- 4.24.2 The Group enables the Council to develop a programme of Councillor training and development that is shaped by the Councillors themselves, ensuring that training and development activities offered is tailored to individual Councillor needs as well as the needs of Councillors generally, the council and communities. This work has been shared with the Councillor Commission and has become a key part of the ongoing work that supports this national project.
- 4.24.3 All new Councillors are provided with induction training to assist them with understanding and successfully carrying out their different roles, with an ongoing programme of training and development provided on specific issues where appropriate e.g. planning, and to build key skills and knowledge.
- 4.24.4 All officers also receive induction training and appropriate professional and skills training and development identified, for instance, through annual performance discussions.
- 4.25 A People Strategy was produced in 2020/21 which shapes the cultural direction and people management practices for the future to enable the Council to achieve its ambitions over the next 3-5 years. Whilst being able to respond to the changing needs of local government and the borough's residents this forms part of the Council's Corporate Framework with close links to the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 4.26 The Council has in place various channels of communication with the community and other stakeholders. The Council's Consultation Portal provides a single link to all our current 'live' consultations, giving residents the opportunity to get involved, as well as access to details of the feedback from previous consultations.

4.26.1 There are a number of tools in place to enable the Council to hear the widest range of views from local communities, in a consistent way, as part of an evidence led approach to decision making. These include:

- Statement of community involvement.
- Community Planning Toolkit.
- Specialist advice and support through Community Engagement Officers and policy Team.
- Equality objectives which set out how the Council will ensure an inclusive approach to consultation.

4.26.2 As the Council's place-based approach has grown, partnership websites such as Andover Vision and Romsey Future have been developed, where appropriate, due to the collaborative nature of the projects e.g. Romsey South of Town Centre. Consultation and project information has been posted to these websites with clear links back to relevant Council Services.

<https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/consultations>

4.26.3 Publications such as Test Valley News are sent to all households and the Council's website is an important source of information about the Council and its services. The Council's website has been designed to make it more accessible to residents and businesses of Test Valley and to make it easier to undertake transactions online. An External Communications Strategy has been produced to support the emerging Corporate Plan.

4.27 The Council has identified its key partnerships and promotes good governance in those. The Council's Contract Standing Orders and Financial Regulations contain specific sections on partnerships and identify officer responsibilities in relation to the management and involvement in partnerships. Protocols and agreements are put in place for the management of significant partnerships.

4.28 Covid19 Governance - The coronavirus pandemic and social distancing requirements have necessitated some interim amendments to processes and controls in response to an increase in remote working and access to meetings. These are being delivered in a controlled manner with appropriate advice to managers regarding the risk of error and fraud.

4.28.1 The crisis has required the Council to be innovative and flexible in releasing funds in a swift and controlled way. Interim processes have been put in place to maximise the benefits to residents and businesses. Crises like this will inevitably attract individuals who see the opportunity for fraud. All managers have been reminded of the risk of fraud and the various forms it may take. Interim processes are designed with this particular risk in mind.

## **5      Review of effectiveness**

5.1 The Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the senior managers within the Authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the annual report of the Internal Audit Manager, and also by comments made by the external auditor and other review agencies and inspectorates.

- 5.2 The effectiveness of the governance framework is maintained and reviewed through a number of mechanisms and processes:
- 5.2.1 Full Council is ultimately responsible for approving amendments to the Council's Constitution. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the Constitution which is undertaken at least annually to ensure that it is up to date with current legislation and best practice.
- 5.2.2 The Cabinet has responsibility for the day to day operation of the Council's business unless that business is delegated specifically to another committee (e.g. Planning, Licensing) and ensuring that governance arrangements and compliance is adequate for the conduct of that business.
- 5.2.3 As part of the Council's open and transparent approach, Overview and Scrutiny Committee has responsibility for scrutinising the decisions of the Cabinet and reviewing the Council's policies and functions and making recommendations to the Cabinet as appropriate.
- 5.2.4 The Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee and its Audit Panel takes responsibility for audit and risk management issues, reviewing the Council's work in these areas and monitoring the progress and performance of both Internal and External Audit.
- 5.2.5 The Council's General Purposes Committee together with the General Purposes Employment Appeals and Ethics Sub-Committee have the role of promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct amongst Members and assisting them to observe the Authority's Code of Conduct. The work of the Sub-Committee is supported by the appointment of three Independent Persons and Parish representatives as required by the Localism Act 2011. The General Purposes Committee may receive reports as to the operation of the Code of Conduct. In addition, the General Purposes Employment Appeals and Ethics Sub-Committee will be required to determine complaints which are referred to it by the Monitoring Officer following investigation and direct or recommend any further action required consistent with the Localism Act 2011 and associated regulations.
- 5.2.6 The Council's Internal Audit team, located within the Finance & Revenues Service, carries out a continuous review of the Council's systems to provide independent assurance that the control environment is effective in achieving the Council's objectives. The team objectively examines, evaluates and reports on the adequacy of the control environment as a contribution to the proper, economic, efficient and effective use of the Authority's resources. The performance of the Internal Audit team is monitored by the Council's Audit Panel and Section 151 Officer. The Internal Audit Manager presents the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Audit Plan to the Audit Panel and produces an Annual Report giving an opinion of the adequacy of the Council's systems of internal control.

- 5.3 A self-assessment of the internal audit function's conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) was carried out in March 2022. The Public Sector Internal Audit Standards are a mandatory requirement, the objectives of which are to:
- define the nature of internal auditing within the UK public sector, o set basic principles for carrying out internal audit in the UK public sector,
  - establish a framework for providing internal audit services, which add value to the organisation, leading to improved organisational processes and operations, and
  - establish the basis for evaluation of Internal Audit performance to drive improvement planning.
- 5.3.1 The self-assessment concluded that the function "generally" conforms to the standards.
- 5.3.2 There is evidence that the work the Internal Audit function has delivered is effective; especially around risk and performance. It contributes to and has influence in the Authority on these areas. It is a highly respected service that is engaged with the organisation and which provides ongoing support in key areas, as well as effective assurance on controls.
- 5.4 The Internal Audit Manager has provided substantial assurance in respect of the Council's risk management, control and governance arrangements. "Substantial Assurance" means that systems in place are generally sound, but some best practice developmental areas have been identified to strengthen the Council's governance arrangements. These form the basis of the action plan appended to this Statement.
- 5.5 As noted throughout this statement, the Council's governance arrangements have been impacted during 2021/22 by the coronavirus pandemic and the need for Response and Recovery Plans to be adapted and implemented. Internal Audit have continued to monitor the governance arrangements relating to this response during 2021/22 and the adoption of impact assessments into business as usual.
- 5.6 The Council has been required to administer business rates, Test and Trace and other Covid-related grants and schemes within extremely short timescales, multiple times during 2021/22. Internal Audit conducted post-assurance reviews to determine eligibility compliance, whether there were any errors or fraudulent claims and if any money is to be recovered from fraudulent or incorrectly administered grants. These audits resulted in a substantial assurance opinion being given.
- 5.7 The Council is regularly audited by the External Auditor (Ernst and Young LLP) who independently examines the Council's accounts and financial systems and who presents an [Annual Audit Report](#) to Members, the latest available covering the financial year 2020/21. This was a positive report with an unqualified opinion on the Council's accounts, system of internal control and arrangements to achieve value for money.

- 5.8 The Covid19 pandemic has continued to have an unprecedented impact on the Council's governance arrangements for 2021/22. These impacts have been evaluated, in line with government guidance and mitigation measures, and developed alongside the Council's strategic partners and Local Resilience Forum.
- 5.9 The date for final publication of the Council's Annual Accounts and Annual Governance Statement is 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

**6 Declaration**

- 6.1 We have been advised on the implications of this review of the effectiveness of the governance framework and of any significant governance issues. A plan to address weaknesses and ensure continuous improvement of the system is in place as shown in the attached annex.
- 6.2 We propose over the coming year to take steps to address these matters to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

**Signed:** ..... **Signed:** .....

Leader of the Council

Chief Executive

## Governance Actions for 2022-23

No significant governance issues have been identified. The following are best practice developmental areas to strengthen the Council's governance arrangements

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Action to be Taken</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead Officer</b>
<b>Lessons learned:</b> Learning any relevant lessons arising from high profile local authority governance failures (elsewhere in the country).	To develop in-house training session for senior managers on the lessons to be learnt.	31/03/23	Chief Executive
<b>Member Learning &amp; Development:</b> Developing Member awareness around the key principles of good governance.	The key principles of good governance to be incorporated, as appropriate, into the Member Induction programme for 2023-24.	31/03/23	Head of Legal & Democratic and Democratic Services Manager
	To develop some form of performance information to be provided to Members through its Overview and Scrutiny function.	31/03/23	Head of Strategy & Innovation
<b>Robustness of Council policies:</b> Ensuring Council policies remain aligned to new and alternative ways of working.	Council policies to be reviewed and updated alongside the New Ways of Working programme to ensure they remain fit for purpose.	31/03/23	Head of Strategy & Innovation

<b>Strength of Audit Systems:</b> Improving clarity between the roles of the Audit Panel and General Purposes Committee.	To consider current arrangements for Audit reporting in the light of the Council's external auditor's recommendation that further clarity is needed between the role of Audit Panel and General Purposes Committee & the recommendation that a separate Audit Committee be established.	31/03/23	Head of Legal & Democratic in consultation with Statutory Officers
<b>Business Continuity Planning:</b> The Council has a well-established approach to Business Continuity Planning which is primarily based on alternative office accommodation for its employees to relocate to. Although the current Business Continuity Plan remains valid the lessons learned from the pandemic and the move to more remote working means the BCP would benefit from review.	The Corporate Business Continuity Plan is being revisited and revised as part of a Corporate project. This to consider the new ways of working introduced in response to the pandemic.	31/03/23	Deputy Chief Executive
	To review and confirm those systems classed as "critical" for BCP purposes and carry out appropriate testing of these systems.	31/03/23	Deputy Chief Executive