

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 24th March 2022 and has invited the main partner organisation, including each of the local authorities which fall within the national park designated area¹, 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.

¹ 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 of 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.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

None

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:	pp6.10
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(Portfolio: Strategic Regeneration and Partnership (South)) Councillor N Adams-King

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