

RAPC 559/25

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY – 3 March 2025

INCLUSIVE NATIONAL PARK UPDATE

Report by: Jim Mitchell, Access and Learning Manager

1 Summary

- 1.1 A theme of the Re:New Forest National Park Partnership Plan and of the National Park Authority Business Plan is 'An Inclusive National Park'. Its outcome is that '**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**'. Since publication of the Partnership Plan in 2022, activity across several core and externally funded projects has taken place towards this outcome.
- 1.2 This paper highlights some of the work carried out under these workstreams during 2024/25, outlines key areas of activity, and gives members an overview of the different projects and what they are aiming to achieve collectively.

Recommendation:

Members are requested to note the content of the report.

2 Strategic focus

- 2.1 A key element of the Inclusive National Park theme focuses on the need to remove barriers to accessing national parks for all parts of society, through programmes of partnership and engagement to build relationships with diverse audiences. This work is integral to delivering on both National Park purposes and our duty.
- 2.2 Our Inclusive National Park programme is closely aligned with the '**New Forest Voices**' initiative that has been active since 2020. A programme steering group from across the NPA has been working on three complementary areas: enhancing **understanding**, developing **experiences**, and creating new **ways of working**. The steering group recognises that the NPA has some good experience and a strong reputation with its existing engagement, and that this can be further developed to increase inclusion and enhance diversity in our thinking and decision making.
- 2.3 Workshops held for staff and members were held at the end of 2024, where discussion of this work took place and ideas for improvement were collected. These ideas will now inform future work in this area.
- 2.4 This paper mainly focusses on the **experiences** area of New Forest Voices. A paper at a future RAPC will cover our **ways of working** and will include options and progress on increasing the ways different voices can be heard in our decision making, such as the National Park Youth Board, proposals to co-opt members and other ways to make the business of the National Park Authority more accessible.

2.5 Our partnership approach seeks to maximise benefits by collaborating with partners in the New Forest and by seeking strategic partners in the region who are working with audiences who currently are under-represented and / or otherwise wouldn't be able to access and engage with the National Park. A key test for our inclusion work is: *are we enabling groups and individuals which otherwise would not be able to engage with the National Park?*

2.6 The Partnership Plan Inclusive National Park theme includes the objectives:

- 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.
- Foster a greater appreciation of the New Forest, its landscape and cultural heritage.
- 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

2.7 Our objectives in the Business Plan under 'Inclusive National Park' include:

- Deliver programmes that remove barriers to participation and access to nature.
- Deliver a portfolio of learning and engagement activities for different audiences, making the National Park relevant and accessible to all and giving everyone a voice in its future.
- Deliver communications and event activity to engage new audiences and connect them with nature and the National Park.
- Maintain the development and delivery of high-quality, bespoke, curriculum-linked education for schools and colleges.

2.8 In early 2024 DEFRA published the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework which included a target for this area of work, namely:

- 9. Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using existing metrics in our Access for All programme.

There were a number of metrics associated with this Target. Collectively, national park access officers are speaking to DEFRA seeking further guidance on the metrics, especially on how some of these are to be defined, prior to development and publication of the New Forest specific targets in the summer.

2.9 Locally we evaluate our impact in a number of ways. Projects such as PEDALL, YouCAN and our Artist in Residence programme have specific evaluation budgets and programmes. PEDALL for example has many years evidence of impact on wellbeing. We also carry out surveys of our volunteers and gain feedback from schools and groups after visits which we then use to improve our delivery.

3 Audiences

3.1 National Parks are intended to serve all of society, attracting a broad and diverse audience. Various sources provide insights into who currently visits the New Forest, who does not, and the demographics of both the local population and surrounding areas. Analysing this information helps us better understand our current visitors and potential future audiences.

3.2 For example, the 2021 census data indicates that:

- 18.2% of the New Forest population experienced some level of limitation in their daily activities due to long-term health issues or disabilities in 2021
- 23.0% of New Forest's population, 27.6% of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole (BCP) and 34.1% of Southampton's population are under 25 years old.
- 23.2% of New Forest's population, 16.1% of BCP and 9.3% of Southampton's population are over 70 years old.
- There is an increase of people of describing themselves as from black, Asian and other diverse ethnic communities both in the New Forest (increased from 2.4% to 3.2% from 2011 to 2021) and in Southampton (increased from 14.1% to 19.3% from 2011 to 2021).

3.3 For the past three years we have been running an 'Enjoying the Forest' visits survey in partnership with Go New Forest and Forestry England. This survey is completed online and promoted via social media and also via posters on site and from our mobile units. In 2023 there were 786 respondents and in 2024 there were 744.

3.4 By looking at both local demographic data and survey data we can understand how respondents to our surveys relate to the wider population. For example, over the past two years, 17.5% of respondents to the survey indicate a disability or long-term health condition, close to that of the New Forest census data proportion.

3.5 To take another example, the proportion of people responding to the survey indicating Asian or Asian British/ Indian Pakistani/ Bangladeshi/ any other Asian background and those indicating Mixed/ white and black Caribbean/ white and black African/ any other mixed background is between 1 to 2%, which is similar to the % in the New Forest area census but lower than the % for nearby cities such as Southampton.

3.6 We have three years of data for most questions and two years for some additional questions we introduced in 2024. Over time we will be able to see trend data. We have other data available from the Footprint Ecology visitor studies carried out in 2018, which included some information from telephone surveys on barriers to visiting the New Forest.

3.7 We will continue to collect data from our visits survey but also look to draw on other sources to enhance our picture of current and potential audiences for our work. The data sources referred to here are listed in the annex. From these sources, we can identify there are opportunities to enhance the wellbeing of local people and visitors, provide greater accessibility for audiences who face barriers or challenges and also increase opportunity from under-represented or under-served audiences to benefit from the National Park.

4. Resources

4.1 Our core DEFRA grant enables us to run education visits, some ranger-led engagement with diverse groups and limited access and interpretation projects. It also provides us with the ability to host projects and seek and manage grant applications and other fundraising to enable much wider and broader activity. Greater core grant would enable us to do more of this. Through external funding we have been able to develop projects such as PEDALL, volunteering, health and wellbeing and youth engagement, as well as expanding other engagement activity.

5. Work streams

5.1 **PEDALL** is a highly successful project, hosted by the National Park Authority but almost entirely externally funded, comprising a team of four staff (2.2 FTE), over 30 active volunteers and two activity hubs with a fleet of regular and specially adapted bikes, enabling over 4000 riding sessions per year. The programme of rides offer evidenced wellbeing benefits. The project is supported by the charity Friends of PEDALL which raises funds to run the project, alongside income and grant funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, South Western Railway and several other funders.

5.2 Over the past two years, we have developed our **volunteering** offer to better enable young people and those with additional needs to engage with our programmes. Activity funded through the YouCan programme has enabled youth specific initiatives and also programmes such as the junior rangers. These are bearing fruit with youth board volunteers helping at events, younger volunteers joining our tasks and a new partnership with the local organisation 'Flourish in nature' which support adults with additional needs to join volunteering tasks, through provision of trained staff and additional facilities. Volunteering activity is widely supported and encouraged by funders such as The National Lottery Heritage Fund, as well as being funded through our Landscape Enhancement Initiative projects.

5.3 We deliver a programme of school visits and work experience placements, as well as facilitating schools to access the New Forest through allocation of a travel grant. Annually our education officers facilitate well over 1000 learners. This work is funded though some core budget but then supplemented in recent years from additional funds from DEFRA. For instance, currently we are delivering the **Generation Green 2** project in partnership with the Countryside Education Trust (CET) in Beaulieu, which is providing funded additional visits for over 600 eligible young people living in areas of social disadvantage to connect with the National Park. The Education and Youth Team are working with other National Parks to seek funding for future projects which enable us to upscale our education delivery.

5.4 Over the past five years we have developed our approach to working with young people and youth groups, which is in addition to our educational visits work. We have developed a range of 'pathways of engagement', and funding through the **YouCAN programme** has enabled a diverse range of young people to access opportunities and continue to engage in the longer term in line with individual areas of interest. Opportunities have targeted a wide range of young people including those who are outside of mainstream classes or education, young people with a significant interest in nature and climate, young people with long term health needs and individuals at the

start of their own Green Career. The YouCAN programme has also enabled us to remove a range of barriers to access that can be experienced by young people. The funding has helped to fund resources such as hiring offroad wheelchairs for use by groups as well as paying expenses to enable the New Forest Youth board to attend meetings.

5.5 As part of our **New Forest Voices experiences** work, we seek to develop and provide new experiences for individuals and groups who otherwise are unaware or unable to access the New Forest. Over the past few years this programme has included hosting visits from Southampton communities in partnership with the Southampton National Park City and University of Southampton, University of Bournemouth, Open Sight Hampshire and local refugee and asylum charities. These programmes are covered by a variety of staff from the Access and Learning team and the Ranger team and provide not only health and wellbeing benefits to those visiting but also provide understanding about the landscape and how to care for it. Crucially they also open a conversation about what people think would help them visit in future.

5.6 We are currently just over half of the way through our **health and wellbeing fellowship** programme for 2024/25 which runs August to August. Two Fellows, Laura Pridmore and Jennifer Wyllie, are working on a suite of projects including developing learning and development for NHS audiences and also projects helping older people access nature for a range of health and wellbeing benefits. Projects include working to develop greenspace use and access at Tatchbury Mount and working with the New Forest Heritage Centre to develop health and heritage activities. We have confirmed funding from the NHS to run at least two more years of the Fellowship scheme. We work closely with the public health team in Hampshire on the Fellowship, as well as on HCC's other public wellbeing initiatives which relate to access to nature. We have recently connected with the Wiltshire Public Health team and identified several opportunities for collaboration. The National Park area of Wiltshire is also in the NHS Wessex region when it comes to the Fellowship programme.

5.7 Our partnership '**Green Health Hub**' site highlights our and key partners' offers, as well as stories and evidence on the benefit of access to nature and national parks. The Hub signposts the different groups working in the New Forest and surrounding area. This is a resource we developed following consultation with providers and the NHS, including 'social prescribers' which are based at local GP surgeries and help people access services in their area which can benefit their wellbeing. We are partners in supporting a local Walking for Health scheme, delivering volunteer led walks across the New Forest and administered by Community First.

5.8 In recent years we have given focus to **facilitating and enabling artists and arts organisations** to explore, experience, and develop their understanding of the national park landscape and traditions so that this becomes integral to their practice and more able to share this knowledge with communities. In partnership with SPUD, and funded through Arts Council England, we have developed a national park artist in residence programme enabling artists to spend time with local and nearby communities and take part in Forest-based activities. So far seven artists have used the 4-week residency to work with land managers, commoners, ecologists, other artists, to spend time researching at the New Forest Heritage Centre, St Barbe Museum and Gallery, and to talk to communities where they are based such as within community centres, shops,

cafes, and pubs. Artists have delivered walks and workshops for specific groups and a 4-week exhibition as well as digital content via social media, website, news and blog articles, and newsletters.

5.9 We are also a consortium partner of **Culture in Common** which aims to create more opportunities for communities to see and take part in creative activities. Culture in Common is part of Arts Council England's Creative People and Places Programme which is giving local people the chance to enjoy, commission, and create their own artistic opportunities in the places where they live.

6. Summary

6.1 The NPA has some strong externally funded projects which considerably enhance and uplift what is achieved with core budgets. Projects such as PEDALL, our youth work and volunteering have been successful in developing over many years and have strong multi partner relationships in place. Focus will be to continue to develop and enhance these projects, widening participation further within them. Our health and wellbeing and arts and culture work is also developing well, with strong partnerships in place and current funding in place. We will continue to open up our volunteering programmes to wider audiences as well as develop further strategic partnerships with key partners in nearby areas such as the New Forest market towns, Waterside, Southampton and Bournemouth, as well as from areas to the north in Wiltshire. This paper gives members a brief overview of the range of work we are engaged with and how it adds up to make a difference for our audiences.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Authority note the content of this report.

Contact: **Jim Mitchell Access and Learning Manager**
Jim.mitchell@newforestnpa.gov.uk

Annex 1 – Audience data sources

2021 Census [How life has changed in New Forest: Census 2021](#)

Enjoying the Forest survey ['Enjoying the New Forest' Survey - New Forest National Park Authority](#)

Footprint Ecology report [Research into recreational use of the New Forest's protected habitats – Footprint Ecology, 2020 - New Forest National Park Authority](#)