

CABINET, 4 SEPTEMBER 2002

STRATEGY FOR THE NEW FOREST - WORKING DRAFT CONSULTATION FROM NEW FOREST COMMITTEE

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The New Forest Committee adopted the first Strategy for the New Forest in February 1996. It has now reviewed this Strategy, and has published a revised Strategy for the New Forest for public consultation. Comments are required by 16 September 2002. The purpose of this report is to agree this Council's response to the consultation.
- 1.2 There is a copy of the 'Strategy for the New Forest - Working Draft For Consultation' in the Members' Room.

2. CONTENTS OF THE DRAFT STRATEGY

- 2.1 The draft Strategy retains broadly the same structure of the previous Strategy in that it is based on a Vision for the New Forest, and retains sections entitled Working Together, Conserving the Forest, Living in the Forest (now entitled Living and Working in the Forest), and Enjoying the Forest. However, the most substantial change is that it now seeks to cover the whole of the area proposed for inclusion in the National Park, as it is intended that ultimately it should form the basis for a National Park Management Plan.
- 2.2 It goes into more detail than the previous Strategy, and has revised completely the way that the policies and proposals are expressed. It also now contains provision for monitoring in the form of headline indicators.
- 2.3 Each chapter is divided into a number of sections, each of which explains the topic, identifies relevant documents, describes the issues identified, and includes a number of proposals. Each section now also identifies the partners likely to be involved in implementation, and where possible, the resources that will be needed.

Vision and Chapter 1, Introduction

- 2.4 The Vision for the New Forest remains substantially similar to that set out in the 1996 Strategy, with the addition of references to tranquillity and an increased emphasis on the special nature of the Forest.
- 2.5 The aims set out in the introduction are substantially re-worded from those in the 1996 Strategy, both to update and clarify them. However, their overall intention remains the same. The introduction also offers an update in terms of the National Park designation process.

Chapter 2, Working Together

- 2.6 This expands substantially the information on joint and partnership working in the New Forest, building on the experience of the New Forest Committee itself in this

regard, including the co-ordination of the work of the statutory bodies and the involvement of other stakeholders. It is important to note that the process of preparing this revised Strategy involved considerable partnership working with the local community. This chapter also incorporates the most up-to-date information available regarding the community planning process.

Chapter 3, Conserving the Forest

- 2.7 This looks at landscape, cultural heritage (the history and archaeology of the Forest, settlement patterns, rights of common and forestry), biodiversity, and environmental quality, including water and air quality, waste management, litter, climate change, renewable energy and energy conservation and water conservation.

Chapter 4, Living and working in the Forest

- 2.8 This covers the practical aspects of commoning, farming generally, Forestry and woodland management, sustainable tourism, sustainable development, affordable housing, business and employment opportunities, and village and town centres. The proposals are directed towards supporting the economic and social well being of communities in the Forest while maintaining the character of the area.

Chapter 5, Enjoying the Forest

- 2.9 This refers to promoting awareness and understanding of the special qualities of the Forest, managing recreational use of the Forest (including transport management and parking), and sustainable transport.
- 2.10 Chapter 6 of the draft Strategy discusses implementation.

3. COMMENT

- 3.1 Overall, the revised Strategy offers a very thorough and useful review of issues affecting the Forest, and a welcome update of the 1996 Strategy. It draws together a number of existing initiatives and policy documents, and offers a useful means of co-ordinating policies and activities. The provision it makes for future monitoring is welcome. In principle, its aims and proposals accord with those pursued by this Council, and generally should be supported.

- 3.2 There are just a few issues where some further consideration needs to be given to the issues covered and the way the draft Strategy's proposals are framed, as follows:

Lymington and Ringwood

- 3.3 Using the proposed National Park boundary brings Lymington and Ringwood into the area covered by the draft Strategy. It is immediately apparent that the type of approach that was appropriate for the New Forest Heritage Area (including the New Forest villages) does not apply to these towns. However, they will have an important role in the National Park in terms of the provision of jobs, services, amenities and tourist facilities. This is recognised in the draft Strategy at Section 4.8, Village and Town Centres, and in some other places; however, it needs some clarification, for example in terms of the approach likely to be taken to development (including affordable housing - see below) and tourism. It would be better to address issues relating to these towns separately from the New Forest villages, as there are significant differences between them in terms of scale, facilities, development potential and pressures etc.
- 3.4 Lymington and Ringwood also have their own history and cultural heritage which should be recognised in Chapter 3.

Affordable Housing

- 3.5 The reported affordable housing policies in Section 4.6 apply only within the New Forest Heritage Area in New Forest District. They do not apply in Ringwood and Lymington, and they do not take into account the policies that apply in parts of the proposed National Park area outside New Forest District. A number of detailed changes need to be made to wording to ensure factual accuracy and to reflect the local plan situation as it is at present. The impact on local house prices of removing discounted Council Tax on second homes is also over-estimated; this is unlikely to have any real impact on housing affordability in the New Forest.

Design

- 3.6 There are references in Sections 3.3 and 4.8 and related proposals to the need for design guidance, e.g. references to conserving distinctive features of the built environment, involving the local community in identifying such features, and promoting a high standard of design in village and town centres. However, there would appear to be some overlap with the Countryside Agency's Vital Village and Village Design Statement initiatives. Also, there is existing design guidance for New Forest District on residential design in rural areas, along with some Conservation Area appraisals and leaflets that also offer detailed design guidance. The adopted New Forest District Local Plan also addresses design issues in the town centres in some detail. Proposals 3 and 4 in Section 3.3 could be combined into a new statement that puts the onus for preparing settlement-specific design guidance on to local communities through the Countryside Agency village initiatives provided proper local consultation and democratic processes can be guaranteed. Proposal 3 of Section 4.8 could refer instead to a possible need to review existing guidance and policies in the light of the impending National Park designation.
- 3.7 A few detailed changes need to be made to statements about listed buildings and conservation areas.

Commoning

- 3.8 It is becoming increasingly apparent that planning is not an adequate mechanism to protect back-up grazing land, primarily because of the certainty that is sought by planning inspectors in terms of the long term use of land for this purpose. Human Rights legislation is also complicating the issue. Proposal 5 of section 4.1 needs amending to reflect this, and to strengthen the commitment to seek other ways both of protecting and ensuring a long term reserve of back-up land.

Tourism

- 3.9 There is much to support in this section, particularly as the draft reflects both the considerable progress made over the last five years and the policies contained in the council's tourism and visitor management strategy 'Our Future Together'. The suggested proposals are also very much in line with the council's tourism service work programmes and are supported. One major area of concern, however, is the lack of commentary and proposed action regarding the very strong and crucial link between tourism, visitor management, recreation and transport. Another key concern is the lack of proposals to create a comprehensive forest-wide research programme, where all agencies agree on comparable and non-duplicated research needs that can be applied to GIS delivery.

Understanding and enjoying the New Forest

- 3.10 This section of the draft Strategy has a strong grasp of the work that has been underway for some time. The main addition that would help with the communication of messages would be the adoption of the "triple bottom line" approach that will be

familiar to members as features of sustainable development and community planning. This would be easily achieved with recognition of the need to consider social, environmental and economic aspects when looking to the future of the Forest. At the moment the text is heavily weighted towards environmental considerations, which is fine in itself but does not convey the message that all these factors have to be considered if the Forest is to continue.

Recreation

- 3.11 This aspect of the draft Strategy stresses the key theme that local people are the biggest users of the Forest. There is, in general, a greater emphasis on agencies being more focussed on working with communities. The clear adoption of this theme and the related action is to be strongly supported. Indeed, there is much to be commended in the draft Strategy and it will provide a strong basis for the future.
- 3.12 There are aspects which can be highlighted where the District Council might be of particular assistance – the creation and delivery of consistent, clear messages about stewardship of the Forest; identification of opportunities for alternative facilities outside the Forest and influencing transport strategies so they integrate with access management initiatives.
- 3.13 This draft Strategy is general and does not address the thorny practical issues of recreation management. The suggestion that more detailed plans are needed is therefore to be welcomed. However the suggestion that this should be done exclusively by a series of area plans is not supported. There should be consideration of management issues at a level that looks across the whole Forest. Subsequent to that, there may be a need for plans in smaller areas.

Environmental quality

- 3.14 Some corrections and additions need to be made to Section 3.5 to reflect the role of the Environment Act 1995 in respect of air pollution, and the ongoing work of the District Council on air quality. Proposal 3 needs to be amended accordingly. In addition, reference should be made to contaminated land, including the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and this Council's Contaminated Land Strategy. It may be that an additional proposal arises from this. This Council's work in respect of monitoring the quality of private water supplies should also be mentioned.

Transport

- 3.15 Proposals to revitalise village and town centres and reduce the adverse impact of motor vehicles in Section 4.8 are welcome, as is the proposal to link recreational footpath and cycle routes with the wider network. However, some clarification is needed of the relationship between this draft Strategy and the New Forest Transport Strategy (NFTS) - there is some repetition of NFTS proposals in Section 5.3. Clarification is also needed of other proposals in this section, in particular Proposal 7 which would seem to suggest cycle routes in remote areas and new footpaths in the open Forest, and the reference to a 20mph speed limit in Proposal 10.
- 3.16 Proposal 4 is to, "Use demand management to reduce the environmental impact of car use, including a routing and signing strategy, car parking strategy, traffic calming, road closures, quiet road network - linked to policies for improving safer non-car transport, managing recreation, seasonal issues and event usage". This is to be welcomed.
- 3.17 In addition, some minor factual corrections and amendments to references are required, and there is a need to clarify the role of NFDC as partner or resource.

Car parking

- 3.18 At paragraph 5.2.31, the draft revised Strategy states,
"At present there is no charge for use of Forestry Commission or District Council car parks, although a voluntary payment system has been successfully introduced at a small number of Forestry Commission car parks. Car park charges can be used as an added tool to determine the destinations chosen by visitors and can also generate considerable revenue to help fund conservation projects. There are however associated problems of parking on road verges, track entrances and (in villages) in residential streets, in order to avoid payment."
This is of interest as this Council has commenced a consultation process to determine the extent to which parking can be managed throughout the Forest for the benefit of local residents.

Coast

- 3.19 The draft Strategy refers briefly to the coast in the context of landscape (Section 3.2) and in terms of the recreational assets of the area in Section 5.2. There are historic links between the Forest and the coast, for example in terms of coastal grazing and the trading history of Lymington, the potential of the coast for recreational use, and its substantial ecological value. The Strategy could usefully explore in more detail the coastal aspects of the New Forest, including reference to this Council's Coastal Management Plan, the Shoreline Management Plan for the Western Solent and Southampton Water and related coastal strategies, and ongoing work on the Solent European Marine Sites management plan.

General

- 3.20 There are some detailed points of wording arising from these general issues, and a number of minor corrections/ points of clarification that need to be agreed with the New Forest Committee in their work on amending the document.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The draft Strategy does not require any material change to the resources already committed by this Council to work relating to the New Forest Committee.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The overriding purpose of the draft Strategy is to maintain and where possible enhance the unique environment of the New Forest. It embraces fully the principles of sustainability. It is therefore fully in accordance with this Council's own environmental policies.

6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 As the draft Strategy covers a number of aspects of the Council's work, there has been full internal consultation and co-operation in the production of this report.

8. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 8.1 The issues identified in Section 3 of this report have been selected and options for response agreed through the internal consultation process.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The 'Strategy for the New Forest - Working Draft for Consultation' gives an excellent overview of issues relevant to the ongoing management of the New Forest. With some minor amendments as suggested in this report it will enable the co-ordination of the activities of statutory and other bodies in undertaking their duties in this area, and provide a comprehensive basis for a National Park management plan.

10. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' COMMENTS

- 10.1 Councillor Kendal noted with interest paragraph 5.2.31 on car parking in Section 5.2, Managing Recreation, and requested that this be quoted in full because of its relevance to the District Council's current consultation on traffic management and parking. He also supported Proposal 4 in Section 5.3 of the draft revised Strategy and requested that the report should refer to this Council's support for the use of demand management to reduce the environmental impact of car use.
- 10.2 In relation to design, Councillor Russell expressed concern about the Vital Villages and Village Design statement processes, because of the danger that these can be hijacked by local activists at the expense of full consultation. He requested that references to these should include qualifying statements regarding the need for certainty about the consultation and democratic processes that they involve.
- 10.3 These matters are incorporated in the report and recommendations.

11. RECOMMENDATION

- 11.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that:

- (i) the New Forest Committee be thanked for their consultation on the draft revised 'Strategy for the New Forest', and congratulated on the production of a useful and comprehensive document;
- (ii) the New Forest Committee be advised of the following general concerns of this Council:
 - a) **Lymington and Ringwood:** the special considerations that will apply in these towns and their particular role in relation to the National Park need to be drawn out more strongly, and the revised Strategy needs to clarify the proposals that would apply within these settlements;
 - b) **Affordable housing:** Section 4.6 needs to be updated and broadened to cover policies applying in Lymington and Ringwood and those in other districts included in the proposed National Park;
 - c) **Design:** many of the detailed design issues raised are covered already by existing published documents. Where they are not, the onus should be on local communities to undertake necessary appraisals through the Countryside

Agency's Village Design Statement and Vital Villages schemes, provided it can be demonstrated that these have been subject to full consultation and proper democratic procedures;

- d) **Commoning (back-up grazing):** in view of inability of the planning process to provide effective protection for back-up land, the Strategy needs to address in more detail alternative ways of protecting and maintaining a supply of such land;
 - e) **Tourism:** a greater focus is needed on the very strong and crucial link between tourism, visitor management, recreation and transport, including a comprehensive forest-wide research programme, where all agencies agree on comparable and non-duplicated research needs that can be applied to GIS delivery;
 - f) **Understanding and enjoying the New Forest:** the introduction to this section should include the need to reflect on the interaction of social, environmental and economic aspects when action is being considered. This theme should be at the centre of any work that raises awareness of the Forest and the issues which face it;
 - g) **Recreation:** the future plan for a detailed recreation management plan should be done at a level that looks across the whole Forest and then it can be decided if there is value in plans based at a more local level;
 - h) **Environmental quality:** there is a need for some amendment to clarify the role of this Council in work on air quality, contaminated land and monitoring water quality;
 - i) **Transport:** some clarification is needed of the relationship between the draft Strategy and the New Forest Transport Strategy (NFTS).
[Note: The proposal to use demand management to reduce the environmental impact of car use is welcomed];
 - j) **Coast:** in view of the length of the Forest's coastline, the historic links between the Forest and the coast and the potential of the coast for recreational and grazing use, the strategy should explore in more detail the coastal characteristics of the Forest.
- (iii) that officers be authorised to negotiate with the New Forest Committee such detailed wording changes to the Strategy as are necessary to resolve these concerns, and to make other minor corrections/ clarify statements as necessary;
- (iv) that the New Forest Committee be invited to participate in the consultation process relating to traffic management and parking currently being undertaken by New Forest District Council, having particular regard to means of overcoming problems arising from those seeking to avoid paying parking charges (e.g. parking on road verges, track entrances and illegal on-street parking).

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Background papers:

Published documents