

CABINET –6 APRIL 2005

PORTFOLIO : ECONOMY & PLANNING

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – DELIVERY OF PLANNING SERVICES IN THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AND THE REMAINING NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA








### Summary of Purpose and Recommendations:

To consider options for the provision of planning services when the New Forest National Park Authority takes up its functions. It is recommended that discussions are held with them about the creation of a partnership unit

**Cost to Council:** £N/A

**Within existing budget?** Yes/No/TBA

### Contribution to Corporate Plan (Minor/Moderate/Major/Neutral):

	+		-		+		-
	Major			<b>Priorities</b>			
	Major			Clean Streets and Public Space		Neutral	
	Minor			Crime and Disorder		Neutral	
	Minor			Housing	Minor		
	Major			Managing our Finances	Major		

### Comments on Impacts on Corporate Objectives and Priorities:

If a partnership planning unit is created it would make a significant contribution to all of the corporate objectives. It would also have significant financial benefits and joint planning could help to deal with important housing issues.



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### DELIVERY OF PLANNING SERVICES IN THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AND THE REMAINING NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The New Forest National Park Authority will become the sole local planning authority for the national park from 1 April 2006. In doing so it will take over the local and strategic planning authority powers from the existing local authorities in the area. Table 1 shows the existing authorities and how the National Park planning application determination work would have been split between them in 2003/04.

Table 1.

<b>AUTHORITY</b>	<b>No. of Applications 2003/04</b>	<b>% of Applications</b>
New Forest District Council	1157	84
Salisbury District Council	197	14
Test Valley Borough Council	18	1
Hampshire County Council	13	1
Wiltshire County Council	0	-
Total - Application workload of New Forest National Park Authority	1385	100

- 1.2 In addition to development control, the National Park Authority (NPA) will be entirely responsible for the plan making functions in its area. It will have a seat on the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) and will be responsible for the preparation of the Local Development Framework (LDF). It will also take over from the two County Councils the responsibility for minerals and waste planning. It can choose to carry out some or all of its plan making functions independently or jointly with other authorities. New Forest District Council has submitted a Local Development Scheme (LDS) with a programme of future plan making to the Government Office for the South East. This LDS includes proposals for some statutory Local Development Documents to be prepared jointly by New Forest District Council and the National Park Authority. While this will have to be formally considered by the new NPA, the Acting Chief Executive to the NPA has provisionally supported these proposals as being an arrangement she would recommend to the NPA.
- 1.3 Given that New Forest District Council is most affected by the creation of this new authority it has set up a Members Working Group to consider the implications on a range of services. This group has considered the delivery of planning functions on two occasions and this report reflects its findings, conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. DELIVERY OF PLANNING SERVICE

2.1 In essence there are three main options for the future delivery of planning services in the New Forest National Park and the remainder of the New Forest District Council (NFDC). They are :

- (a) that each authority has its own planning department to carry out the planning service functions
- (b) that there is a partnership arrangement in which the two authorities share a joint officer team to advise the two independent planning authorities.
- and (c) the National Park Authority contracts with the existing local authorities to deliver the majority of planning services on its behalf. This could include allowing for some planning decisions to be delegated to an existing authority.

### 2.2 Option (a) Separate planning units

2.2.1 Table 2 sets the staffing levels likely to be required by New Forest District Council now and in the future if the NPA carry out their planning service separately. It has been derived by considering how many staff New Forest District Council will require to retain its residual planning responsibilities. The table also shows the core staffing level the National Park Authority would require. The NPA figures are assumptions based on planning staffing levels in other National Parks and national guidance on development control staffing levels. These figures include all staff: professional, technical and administrative.

Table 2

	Residual NFDC	NF NPA	NFDC Now
Regional/Local Planning	8.5	7	8.5
Development Control	24.5	20.0	35
Specialist Skills	13.5	4.5	15
<b>Totals</b>	<b>46.5</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>58.5</b>

2.2.2 In this option New Forest District Council would transfer 12 of its existing staff to the National Park Authority. The National Park Authority would then be likely to employ an extra 19.5 staff to complete its planning establishment. Two of these 19.5 might be transferred from Salisbury District Council. The NPA may also wish to recruit other related specialists, such as ecologists, to be available within the overall NPA staff establishment.

### 2.3 Option (b) Partnership planning unit

2.3.1 The principle of this approach is that both authorities remain fully independent planning authorities setting their own policies and standards of service, but would share the technical resource of a single officer team responsible for advising both authorities. Table 3 sets out the staffing levels which it is believed that a joint team would need to offer an efficient service to both authorities. Built into this figure is the assumption that the National Park Authority would want to enhance planning services in the National Park area.

Table 3

	NPA/NFDC Partnership
Regional/Local Planning	10.5
Development Control	42.0
Specialist Skills	15.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>

2.3.2 This total figure is 10 less than the establishment of separate planning teams in each authority. This saving arises from:

- (a) economies of scale in planning for one large area as opposed to two smaller ones.
  - (b) avoiding some duplication of work in dealing with other bodies, for example the Regional Assembly and government departments.
- and
- (c) avoiding the need for officers in the separate authorities to assess proposals of interest to each, for example where cross boundary consultation is required.

### 2.4 Option (c) Contracted planning services for NPA with additional option of Development Control delegation arrangements

2.4.1 This was an option which the Countryside Agency considered worthy of more detailed analysis when it was recommending a much larger park and a much busier National Park Planning Authority.

2.4.2 It has been explored in detail and this work showed that it was possible and economic. However circumstances have changed significantly since it was first proposed. These changes are:

- (a) the Park's planning workload will be much less than originally thought and on the same scale as the largest existing National Park Authority. It will not now include a substantial amount of urban/suburban planning.
  - (b) the Inspector who conducted the National Park Inquiry saw no merit in the National Park Authority delegating any of its decision making powers to other bodies. It does not happen in other National Parks and he saw no benefits (with the boundaries he recommended) in it happening in the New Forest.
  - (c) it has become clear that any such arrangement is likely to be strongly opposed by influential national bodies such as the Association of National Park Authorities and the Council for National Parks.
- and (d) there is an issue about whether fully democratically elected local authorities should be making potentially controversial planning decisions on behalf of a National Park Authority.

2.4.3 For these reasons it is extremely unlikely to find favour and it is not recommended that this option be pursued. The clarity of the future discussions between NFDC and the NPA would be assisted if it was withdrawn from consideration.

### 3. THE MERITS/DISADVANTAGES OF OPTIONS A AND B

3.1 The New Forest National Park Authority Establishment team is evaluating their options for the delivery of planning services against the following set of criteria.

- **Cost** in terms of money and member/staff involvement
- **Accountability** to the National Park Authority members
- **Certainty** of delivery
- **Stability** of arrangements put in place
- **Flexibility** eg to accommodate new ideas, additional pressures etc.
- Effect on **corporate** (i.e. internal) **identity** and functioning from an internal identity point of view - (members and staff)
- Effect on **public perception** - external image/profile
- Impact on **relationships with partners**
- **Quality** of function delivery

For the purposes of this report, these criteria are simplified down to the following main headings:

- (a) the cost to both authorities (and the public purse generally)
- (b) the accountability to both authorities
- (c) the certainty of delivery
- (d) accessibility to the public

and (e) the quality of the function delivery

### **3.2 Cost - Financial Implications**

- 3.2.1 Option (b) partnership, has significant financial advantages over option (a) to both authorities and to the public purse generally. The economies of scale set out in paragraph 2.3.2 are significant and could be of the order of £1m annually. They are related not only to the staffing costs, but also to the overhead costs of both authorities. The exact apportionment of the savings will need to be the subject of detailed negotiations between the two authorities.
- 3.2.2 New Forest District Council would benefit from option (a) as it would have less planning work to do and hence would need less staff. It would however benefit more from option (b) as a result of both economies of scale and the ability to deal with fixed overhead costs. The National Park Authority would also benefit from option (b) as it would need to commit less of its total budget to planning to achieve a similar standard of service to that which it would obtain under option (a). The saving to the National Park Authority might be between £0.25m and £0.5m.

### **3.3 Accountability**

- 3.3.1 If both authorities, under option (a), employ their own planning units each is then totally accountable to its employing authority.
- 3.3.2 The detailed management arrangements for the joint technical unit will be crucial to both authorities having confidence that it can deliver the requirements of each authority. Further detailed work on this aspect is required. The management and structure of the technical unit would be designed to ensure clear accountability to each authority for the issues within the functional responsibilities of the two planning authorities. In general terms much of planning is a technical, non political, function where officers give independent professional advice, with options where appropriate, to local authority members. It is also likely that both authorities will share broad planning objectives for the wider area.
- 3.3.3 With a partnership for planning service delivery, both NFDC and the NFNPA remain totally autonomous planning authorities, making decisions on planning applications and planning policy matters independently of each other.

### **3.4 Certainty of Delivery**

- 3.4.1 One of the main issues which will be faced by both authorities is the shortage of professional planning staff. This has the ability to substantially prejudice the certainty of delivery of planning services. Option (b) offers the best alternative for both authorities.

It uses existing expertise to plan across the whole area and requires less recruitment of qualified planning staff to the area. It also ensures that the National Park Authority has the direct benefit of the substantial resource of local professional knowledge held within existing officer teams.

- 3.4.2 The National Park Authority will face a considerable challenge in setting up a new planning service of the scale required by 1st April 2006. Option (b) significantly reduces this risk.

### 3.5. **Accessibility to the Public**

- 3.5.1 Both options can delivery good accessibility with co-operative joint working between them. Option (b) anticipates that planning information for the whole area would be available through all of the existing information offices as well as at the National Park Authority headquarters. A single office contact for all planning enquiries throughout the area is also likely to be of assistance to the public.

### 3.6 **Quality of Function Delivery**

- 3.6.1 It is widely acknowledged that there will be considerable benefits from the two authorities working jointly on a range of planning policy matters for example, the protection of back-up grazing, which cut across the Park and District Council boundaries.
- 3.6.2 There is no reason under option (a) why the two authorities cannot work closely together or jointly on the preparation of Local Development Frameworks. It is at least arguable however that a joint officer team serving the needs of both authorities can more efficiently and effectively pursue the separate and shared planning policy objectives of both authorities.
- 3.6.3 In relation to development control it is possible that the two authorities might wish to take slightly different approaches to the processing of applications. Option (a) clearly makes this possible (see paragraph 3.3), but under option (b) management arrangements could be tailored to facilitate any different service specification or approach.
- 3.6.4 Option (b) offers the best opportunity for integrated working with related functions in a way that other National Park Authorities have found difficult fully to achieve. These include, building control, national park management planning, transport policy, capital schemes for environmental enhancement, and local needs housing. It will also greatly assist the delivery of closer spatial policy formulation through a local strategic partnership and the community planning process, while preserving the corporate policy independence of both the National Park Authority and the District Council.

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.
- 4.2 The Financial implications are set out in broad terms in paragraph 3.2, although the details would need to be negotiated between the authorities.
- 4.3 The Environmental implications depend on an assessment of how effectively the two options can deliver good planning services across the National Park and the remainder of the New Forest District Council area.
- 4.4 Working with Partners is an important corporate objective of New Forest District Council as well as an increasingly important part of the good governance agenda. Partnership in the delivery of planning services in the New Forest area would seem to fit in very well with this agenda.

#### **5. OVERALL ASSESSMENT**

- 5.1 Your officers, along with the Members Working Group believe that many advantages could be gained by the adoption of option (b) and the setting up of an independent joint technical officer team to work for both authorities. There are some disadvantages, but it is believed that these can be largely overcome by the detailed consideration of management arrangements and the way in which the partnership team is set up. Overall the benefits of a partnership approach are considered to substantially outweigh the disadvantages from both authorities' points of view.
- 5.2 If this recommendation is agreed, the next stage will be for the New Forest District Council formally to ask the National Park Authority to enter into detailed discussions about how the partnership could work. A conclusion to this work and a formal decision from each authority will be necessary by the summer of 2005. This is because the alternative of the National Park Authority employing its own planning team will need considerable work before it takes up its responsibilities in April 2006.

#### **6. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS**

- 6.1 It is important that the New Forest District Council and the National Park Authority work together in delivering the planning process. While it will be appropriate for different service standards and planning policies to be set by the two authorities, the whole area of the National Park and adjacent parts of the District requires a cohesive approach to both policy and the determination of applications to ensure that development, or resistance to development, does not have a detrimental effect to adjoining areas. It must be in both our and the National Park Authority's best interest to provide the highest service in the most cost effective way.



## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That New Forest District Council request the New Forest National Park Authority to enter into detailed discussions about a partnership approach to the provision of planning services with each authority sharing a joint team of planning officers and support staff.

### **For further information contact :**

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### **Background Papers**

None