

**9 MARCH 2023**

**NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

Minutes of a meeting of the Environment and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 9 March 2023

- \* Cllr Steve Rippon-Swaine (Chairman)
- \* Cllr Sue Bennison (Vice-Chairman)

**Councillors:**

- \* Ann Bellows
- Jacqui England
- \* Allan Glass
- Andrew Gossage

**Councillors:**

- \* Stephanie Osborne
- Tony Ring
- \* Derek Tipp
- Malcolm Wade

\*Present

**In attendance:**

**Councillors:**

Diane Andrews

**Councillors:**

Steve Davies

**Officers Attending:**

Tim Guymer, Chris Hodsman, James Smith and Joe Tyler and Claire Upton-Brown.

**Apologies**

**37 MINUTES**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2023 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**38 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were none.

**39 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

No issues were raised in the public participation period.

**40 PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORTS AND PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD**

The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure addressed the Panel. She gave an update on the following:

- Cabinet had, at their October meeting, agreed the allocation of CIL monies report. In compliance with this, to conserve habitats, CIL money would be spent on reducing the impact of New Forest and Southampton Water designations.

- A range of projects had been delivered using existing Council funds. Eleven projects intended to increase pedestrian activity, in areas with public access that were currently underused, had received £850,000 of funding and covered locations in Hythe, Totton, Lymington and New Milton. Details of these projects were contained in the report considered at the 1 March Cabinet meeting.
- The Totton community engagement results showed that the key themes, highlighted by the 250 contributors, were: to reduce congestion, improve connectivity and to increase walking and cycling. Issues with the railway crossing and the area surrounding the library were also highlighted.
- A Spring 2023 project was underway to provide advice on urban design, retail and employment needs within the District. The Town Regeneration Officer would work with all partners on these matters.
- A consultation on the new Climate Change SPD would be produced shortly, as an important part of the Council's work following its declaration of a climate emergency. This document would provide clear and easy guidance on best practice approaches and standards for developers to achieve in their new developments.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Coastal Services addressed the Panel. He gave an update on the following:

- Several Electric Vehicle charging points were being installed, however there were delays to the delivery of 3 of the points. Members heard that the supply of electricity to the charging points continued to be sustainably sourced.
- The Portfolio Holder had attended the Climate Change and Nature Emergency (CCNE) presentation in Lyndhurst by the Council's Climate Change Manager. The event brought together a wide network of interested parties across the District and beyond.
- The Environment Agency held a session on the Coastal Protection Plan for the Hurst-Lymington Strategy. This strategy is an Environment Agency lead piece of work that plans for the protection of coastal areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- The Portfolio Holder joined the Coastal Service Manager and his team to inspect the District's beach huts, in both Hordle Cliff and Milford.

#### **41 NITRATES, PHOSPHATES AND BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN UPDATE**

The Panel received a short update on the Nitrates, Phosphates and Biodiversity Net Gain from the Executive Head of Planning, Regeneration and the Economy. The main points highlighted from the presentation were as follows:

- There were two prevailing issues within the District. These are the River Avon phosphorus levels and the Solent nitrogen levels. There is excess quantities of these chemicals going through the waste water plants within the area from these two points.

- Future development within the District is required to demonstrate that it is either/both nitrate and phosphate neutral in order to meet current regulations.
- There are different catchments/zones that are designated on this issue. Regarding nitrates, there are four areas and waste-water treatment plants, managed by four respective strategic approaches. For Phosphates, the situation is simpler, and work had been undertaken with Wiltshire Council to find solutions, dating back to 2018. Bicton Fish Farm was highlighted as an example of developer action whereby the site was in breach of all Environmental Agency measures prior to acquisition of the site and halting its use.
- There are several ongoing phosphorous mitigation projects, across various gradings of land quality, as highlighted in the presentation. There is one nitrate mitigation project close to development/delivery stage in Keyhaven.
- Overall, this ongoing, collaborative work aligned with the Council's biodiversity, nature emergency and environmental obligations.

A member asked a question on the monitoring of nitrate levels in the river Solent. The Panel heard that the Solent has protected habitats and is monitored by other bodies, outside of the District Council.

The Panel were informed that, as discussed at a joint committee and work with the Government, the Council had requested that money received by the Environment Agency through fines to water treatment companies should be reinvested into the District. Through the Environmental Agency and DEFRA the Solent and PUSH saw £200,000 grant funding provided to the District Council. This funding has enabled the Council to recruit two officers to work on this issue area across the entire region.

A member questioned why the aim was mitigation rather than reduction and cleansing of the chemicals to which the Panel were told that to achieve the current model of mitigation has required decades-long changes to agricultural practice and even then, the licenses provided to the water treatment companies enable them to process water at lower levels than desired.

#### **42 NEW FOREST VISITOR STUDY UPDATE**

The Panel received a presentation on the New Forest Visitor Study from the Senior Policy Planner. The main points of the presentation were as follows:

- The issue of visits on the New Forest protected habitats and species as a result of new residential development from areas surrounding the New Forest was focused as a key concern. Members were reminded that the protection of the New Forest Nature Conservation Sites sits within the Planning framework through the provision of mitigation projects funded by new development. The Council have had policies in place to address this since 2014 and the Local Plan Part 1, adopted in 2020, sets out the broad approach that will be applied to residential development in order to secure appropriate mitigation.
- A telephone survey with occupiers of properties within 25km of the New Forest designated sites was undertaken and results showed that 70% of those surveyed had visited the New Forest in the last 12 months.

- In addition to the telephone survey, a number of report updates had been written.
- The telephone survey found that walking was by far the most popular recreational activity for visitors to the Forest.
- Parking locations in central tourist areas were usually filled closer to capacity than other carpark locations elsewhere, of which there are 270.
- The New Forest Visitor Survey of 2018/2019 summarised the 5000+ interviews across 60 car park locations and other access points. 55% of the interviewees were dog walkers or just walking.
- Dog walking was highlighted as a popular activity, and the interviews found that the majority of dog walking takes place on the periphery of the New Forest.
- The waterside areas received more visitors on average than elsewhere in the District. The frequency rates of visits were higher for the Waterside too, with many people returning there often more than once in a day, daily or most days.
- Overall footfall within the New Forest designated sites was between 5-6 million visitors per year.
- Visits to the National Park total around 15 million per annum. This figure is up by 12.4% since 2004.
- Estimates suggest that up to 130,000 new dwellings may be built within 25km of the New Forest by 2036, representing a 16.4% increase. Research predicted that this would result in an increase of 11.4% in the number of visits to the New Forest.
- The New Forest 'Zone of Influence' report was commissioned in 2021 which used research from the initial findings to define a catchment area within which new development would likely have a 'significant' impact on the designated sites due to visitor pressure.
- The range of potential impacts from the projected increase in visitors to the New Forest, stemming from the planned new development in the wider area, includes: disturbance, fire, contamination, trampling/wear, harvesting, grazing and visitor expectation.
- A variety of avoidance and mitigation measures are identified, and the report recommends that a strategic, proportionate and co-ordinated approach be developed requiring the partnership of work across the range of local authorities and stakeholders.
- The continuation of joint working to progress this strategic approach to mitigation is reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding. A consistent methodology for Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) for Councils within the Zone of Influence will be sustained, an example of this will be the provision of alternative recreational greenspaces.
- Rangers would rotate around designated car parks to remind members of the public about certain impacts on these areas and the aim was for there to be clear and consistent signage in high-visitation areas.

#### 43 GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE UPDATE

The Panel received a presentation on the Green Infrastructure Local Strategy from the Ecologist. The main points highlighted were as follows:

'Green Infrastructure' (GI) is a term that was captured in the National Planning Policy Framework 2021, is aimed at planners and developers to create a network of

multifunctional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, that is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local & wider communities and prosperity. The pilot study of the local strategy, in New Milton, was split into four 'character areas', these being:

- A. Accessibility and connectivity
  - B. Attractive and appealing places
  - C. Supporting biodiversity and the ecological network
  - D. Promoting health and wellbeing.
- A baseline assessment of all District GI was undertaken using Council maps, alongside the national GI mapping and Census data.
  - Additional data sets were evaluated, such as Strava heat maps, which provided specific detail on the behaviours and routes of activities such as bicycle rides.
  - Field surveys were also undertaken in the New Milton area, resulting in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis table. The key findings showed that there was a significant amount of well-maintained GI in New Milton, with attractive tree lined avenues and green corridors as well as New Milton Town Council initiatives to enhance the GI. There was some disparity of GI available and the lack of connection to the coast was also highlighted as a weakness. However, signage strategies, strategic development to provide additional public GI and a link to the high value habitats on the settlement boundary through green corridors were all highlighted as opportunities to improve the GI in New Milton. Vandalism and dog fouling were noted as potential threats to GI in the area.
  - The outcome of this field study was a list of 8 opportunities, these included the signage of walking routes, improved accessibility, enhancing local biodiversity and the enhancement of water features.
  - A tiering system was created to prioritise actions and make opportunities more manageable in their number; many opportunities were grouped into a wider strategy goal. From this, example opportunity concepts were designed, in areas such as Fawcett Field, Millers Close and Hollands Wood Drive,
  - There is now a framework from Natural England on GI design and processes launched in 2023, along with a set of GI standards.
  - Members were informed that feedback on this process could be provided at a future meeting and that there were options at present to determine the scope of the District's project and its funding.
  - Following the presentation, members asked questions. It was explained that this process was an opportunity to create a feeling of 'place' and enhance the existing community GI. The enhancement and involvement of communities would be an integral part of the process. The Panel were told that the field assessment would allow the Council to forge a process to be rolled out across the District and guide the Council on best practice approaches.

#### 44 WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel were informed that there were no major updates to the Work Programme. The Assistant Director - Place and Operations explained that there was no update to the Waste Strategy Programme and that, in the event that the

Council receive any information from the Government between now and the next panel, an update would be given to members.

Furthermore, as the Local Elections would take place on 4 May 2023, the Work Programme and the area's priorities going forward would be considered with the new membership, Chairman and Officers.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Work Programme be approved.

**45 THANK YOU TO EXECUTIVE HEAD OF PLANNING, REGENERATION AND THE ECONOMY**

The Chairman thanked Claire Upton-Brown, who was attending her last meeting of the Panel, for loyally and industrially keeping the Panel up to date on all relevant matters and for her continuous hard work. The Chairman wished her all the best for the future.

CHAIRMAN