

# New Forest Commoners' Defence Association response to NFNPA draft Partnership Plan

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## General Comments

We believe this is a pivotal moment for Commoners and Commoning. If strong actions, effective collaboration and leadership are not shown now, public and recreational pressure will bring an end to the Commoning system as we know it. We face many other issues that need addressing but if we don't address this one main issue then all the others become irrelevant as we simply won't be here.

We understand that the New Forest is a public resource to be enjoyed by all, but it should not be at the expense of the very thing visitors come here for: natural beauty, nature and the free roaming animals; nor should our cultural heritage be put at risk. Without Commoners' animals and some significant changes, the Forest will lose its heart and soul, there will be a detrimental impact on nature and the landscape and it will become an extremely expensive mechanically managed and a sterile environment.

On the understanding that the Partnership Plan (PP) is going to have the significant weight stated at the meeting, the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association (NFCDA) needs to have greater engagement and involvement to assist in getting the plan in line so that we can give it our full and unconditional support. This may take more time than has been allowed but it has to be right from our perspective as we don't want to take an opposing position. Ultimately the NFCDA, and all Forest organisations, are only custodians and at present it feels like the life is being sucked out of the commoning community.

We welcome the opportunity of working collaboratively with other like-minded groups. There needs to be a consistent blanket approach to the whole of the New Forest and adjoining commons.

The main issues we face around public and recreational pressure are:

1. Lack of enforcement of bylaws – feeding and petting animals is potentially lethal to those doing it. It changes the animals' behaviour and can lead to having to have the animals removed, or worse still euthanised.
2. Verge and gateway car parking – damages grazing and prevents access for the working Forest and dealing with animal welfare issues.
3. Location, size of and facilities at some car parks.
4. Campsites – camping in the open Forest encourages direct interaction with livestock that leads to conflict. In addition, there is damage caused to important habitats and grazing and there is a continued and sustained flouting of agreements by operators which are ignored, leading to damage to the Forest and increased urbanisation.

5. Control of dogs – some harassing livestock, ground nesting birds and wildlife in general. Concentrated areas of dogs’ waste. There is also an issue with commercial dog walking.
6. Uncontrolled cycling away from designated paths.
7. Mass events.
8. Lack of understanding that it is a ‘working Forest’ and people have both a need and a right to go about their business.
9. Other issues include: fires, BBQs, and free camping.

Most of these points align very well with the New Forest Code which we are wholly in supportive of and illustrates that we are clearly not alone in our concerns.



The NFCDA would like to see the following actions implemented to deal with public and recreational pressure:

1. Campsites
  - Close all that are on the Forest as they are no longer appropriate.
  - Permits should be issued for replacement sites on the land adjoining the Forest. This will remove the direct conflicts with stock and the continued urbanisation of the Forest SSSI, and give more control in terms of number of pitches and location. This will also have the benefit of allowing camp sites to improve facilities more in line with people’s modern-day expectations, and create employment and farm diversification opportunities.

## 2. Visitors' Hubs

- Ideally at the entrance to the Forest M27/A31 & A36, capturing people before they enter the Forest. People can park and be encouraged to stay there and walk/bike out if they choose to. This could also have an information/education centre and possibly have a Park and Ride facility. A lesser option could be at New Park
- Provision for BBQs and activities possibly on similar lines to Moors Valley.
- Consider having some animals within a controlled environment.
- Better signage and connections to those areas outside the forest but which are linked and can be accessed, such as the Avon Valley, Coastal footpath, and the Test Way.

## 3. Car Parks

- Move into inclosures wherever possible and consider increasing the size and providing benches and limited facilities, providing livestock free areas. Giving a feeling of priority and importance towards the open forest, as you leave the refuge of the car park into the wider forest via controlled gates. Wildlife more likely to thrive with less overall disturbance.
- Close some, allowing re-wilding and quiet zones.

## 4. Cycling

- Only to be allowed on designated cycle tracks which must be enforced.
- To facilitate this a holistic cycling strategy needs to be drafted that would make provision for new tracks that provide connectivity between areas and the safe circular and interconnected routes that cyclists desire.

## 5. Enforcement

- Enforcement of byelaws and potentially on-the-spot fines if seen petting/touching animals, verge/gateway parking, fires, BBQs, illegal cycling.

## 6. Dogs (excluding working animals)

- To be kept on leads when on the open Forest.
- Safe areas with no stock to be created within inclosures where dogs can be safely let off their leads.

## 7. Re-wilding/quiet areas

- A combination of the above will allow this to take place.
- Consider closing roads.

## 8. Long term Investment

- Funding needs to be secured in perpetuity to deliver ongoing actions collected through CIL, Developers' Contributions, fines, visitor tax.

As mentioned earlier there are many other issues the Commoning community are facing such as:

- Lack of understanding of Commoning and how the Forest 'works'
- The viability of Commoning
- Animal accidents – (a lot already being done)
- Commoners and affordable housing generally
- Open Forest management
- Encroachments
- Loss of back up grazing, especially with the direction of travel for funding, for example rewilding

These are all very real issues but we have decided as a group that if we don't deal with public and recreational pressures first and foremost, we will not be around to worry about the other challenges.

#### Specific comments on the Draft Plan

If a Partnership board is formed the NFCDA should have at least one representative on this.

#### Proposed Vision

We would ask that the following is added to the 6th bullet point: Communities and visitors are better informed.

We would also ask that the following is added to the Proposed Vision: 'Verderers and Forestry England Byelaws will be enforced, to help restore the balance between recreational use and the need for nature recovery.' This point is really important to us and needs to be part of the vision. Also, a Hub to be created for day visitors that gives them the 'Forest' experience, whilst at the same time reducing recreational pressure on the Forest itself'.

We categorically support the 'Sandford Principle' as detailed on page 7.

Page 9 – as mentioned at the meeting and within the covering letter the detailed actions will make or break the plan and we have to reserve our position until we have seen these.

#### Managing Recreational Pressures

Using examples provided above, we fully support a coordinated and strategic approach to this. However, the NFCDA must have a seat at that table.

As we read it, the key state of play indicators show how things are now, will they be used as a measurement to track progress?

Why is there no section under the indicators for managing recreational pressure, traffic and transport, Commoning, farming and land management?

### Commoning, farming and land management

The following is an excerpt from the current SSSI Citation approved by the Board of English Nature in 1996.

*"The New Forest is probably sufficiently large to ensure the long term survival of the characteristic flora and fauna within the wide range of habitats. Smaller isolated examples of the component habitats are vulnerable to biological impoverishment but here in the New Forest has survived largely because of the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the exercise of common rights of grazing and mast together with protection afforded by Crown ownership. This, and the management of vegetation in the Open Forest through burning and cutting programmes, administered by the Forestry Commission on the Crown Lands, maintains the quality of the grazing, ensures the prevention of natural succession and encourages local diversity in plant communities. The pastoral economy in turn depends on the continued existence of a small community of commoners who make up a discrete social unit and this combination of natural and cultural elements contributes to the maintenance of the New Forest habitats."*

The SAC designation also refers to the need for commoners' grazing to maintain the international interests.

We would like to see this important integral relationship come through more strongly in this section, possibly something along the lines of "The New Forest has survived largely because of the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the exercise of common rights of grazing and mast, together with protection afforded by Crown ownership and effective management practices. All of these elements need to be protected to prevent natural succession".

Under Key State of play indicators, we would like to see the following added:

- The New Forest Pony has been classed as a rare breed, in total there are only 3,000 breeding females (on and off the forest)
- Less than % of commoners keep cattle
- X number of FE dwellings/ holdings have been let to commoners
- X hectares of back up grazing has been safeguarded and let to commoners

### Objectives

#### Nature Recovery

We would like to see reference made to maintain landscapes and habitats under the Local Nature Recovery plan.

We would like to see Continued Land Management Practices included as a separate bullet point.

### Thriving Forest

3.2 add an additional bullet point which refers to safeguarding vital backup grazing which is not lost forever through new funding schemes and the trend towards re-wilding and generally removing land from agriculture.

3.3 Whilst we commend the aspiration to secure the future of commoning, it is quite a broad sweeping statement. We wonder if it would be better to have something along the lines of "work with the NFCDA to protect and promote commoning".

Page 20 – add additional points from above specifically on commoning. 3.3.1 is welcomed but is too much of a generalisation.

Page 21 – 3.5.1 add commoners' housing specifically.

### An Inclusive National Park

4.2 - introduce an additional sixth key area around bringing back the balance of public and recreational pressures on the National Park and adherence to the Sandford Principles. The actions raised in 1.5 could be put in here and built upon as suggestions above.

No group is more passionate about the Forest than the NFCDA and its members and if we are no longer here the Forest will never be the same again.

We hope you have found these comments useful and if you have any questions then please do not hesitate to contact us.