

## **Forestry England presentment to the Verderers Court 18/09/2024 – A proposal for promoting responsible cycling and improving the New Forest off road cycle network**

The management of cycling in the New Forest has been a widely debated subject for many decades. Much has been written and said, and at times views have been polarised. However, less has been done to address the fundamental issues.

There is now considerable evidence that cycling in the New Forest can be difficult due to the existing network being hard to navigate and disconnected. Many routes simply don't make sense and do not connect to the key routes in and out of the forest. As a result, people simply get lost or end up creating more effective routes of their own, often using apps that do this for them. Others simply choose to bypass the network completely. It is clear that the current nature of the cycle network greatly exacerbates these issues.

Alongside this, there is a major focus across the wider area on more sustainable transport that will benefit public health and the environment. Anyone trying to get around this summer and struggled with road traffic, will know how busy the area can get. There is a real need to find alternative ways for people to travel.

We want to address these issues and the growing tensions around cycling in the Forest. In November 2022 Richard Taylor, as chair of the New Forest Cycle Working Group, made a presentment to this court. He asked the Verderers to engage with other stakeholders to move forward the agreed actions in the Recreation Management Strategy to improve the off-road cycle network in the New Forest, and in so doing, promote and encourage protection of the special qualities of the New Forest by responsible cycling and adherence to the network.

Following that presentment, a joint working group was set up to inform discussion of the issues involved from all points of view. This group includes representatives of the Verderers, Cycle Working Group members (from local and national cycle organisations, cycle businesses, local sustainable travel groups and those with environmental concerns), Forestry England, and the New Forest National Park Authority.

A great deal of work and commitment has been put in by all those parties to find a shared solution. Robust discussions from all have created a more rounded understanding of the issues and helped to shape this proposal. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the team from the Verderers and all other parties for their commitment to informing the proposal that we can share with you today.

This proposal has been developed using the principles and objectives of the New Forest Recreation Management Strategy and the New Forest Partnership Plan. It also considers wider long-term discussions with landowners regarding strategic routes, and complements the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan currently being developed for the New Forest by Hampshire County Council and partners.

The proposal provides an ongoing long-term strategic approach to the issue of off-road cycling in the Forest regarding network mapping, waymarking, and maintenance. Its focus on sustainable, robust and better-connected routes also offers benefits to the other users who spend time in the Forest including walkers and those using mobility vehicles.

The effect of the proposal on commoning, and protection of the designated sites of the New Forest has been central at all times. Input and advice from the joint working group has been vital in this process. It has the support of the New Forest Cycle Working Group, local cycling organisations, Cycling UK, Forestry England, and the New Forest National Park Authority who will all provide key supporting actions and resources should this proposal be approved.

Full details of the proposal are included in the additional information supplied with this presentment. The proposal must be viewed as a complete package – not a series of options. I'd like to set out 7 key points, referenced A -G in the full proposal.

- A) An improved off-road cycle network giving better connectivity and useability. This will reduce the number of cyclists who get lost on the existing network or who choose to venture off it, in order to connect to key destinations. Most of the new routes are on existing forestry gravel tracks and would require no additional work to be used. A few would need a degree of upgrading and assessment of their impact on designated sites. The new routes would be introduced in phases reflecting the ease with which they can be added to the network. More detail of the phased introduction and possible timeframes can be found in the additional information supplied.
- B) Improved digital mapping of the off-road cycle routes. The majority of cyclists and other recreational groups use digital maps from various different providers. Investigations by the Cycle Working Group have shown that the open-source base information used by many digital mapping apps has significant errors in it. The Cycle Working Group will correct this data for the whole of the New Forest, maintain the accuracy during the phased introduction of the new routes, and monitor the situation going forwards.
- C) A revised and improved waymarking system for cycle routes and regular updating of paper mapping to help avoid people getting lost.
- D) A revised New Forest Cycle Guide that aligns with the New Forest Code.

- E) The recruitment of volunteer New Forest Cycle Ambassadors from local cycle groups. With suitable training, provided with help from Forestry England and the National Park Authority, they will actively patrol the Forest on bikes. They will provide information on where and how to cycle in the New Forest and how to protect and respect this special place. They will also help provide information on the state of repair of the network.
  
- F) Communicating the revised network in phases as it is introduced. Forestry England and New Forest National Park Authority communications teams will use their significant expertise to facilitate this process. National and local cycle organisations will assist in getting the news to the cycling audience. The message will emphasise the benefits of the revised network and the importance of sticking to it to protect the special qualities of the New Forest and all users of it.
  
- G) Ongoing review and monitoring of this process by the joint working group to allow evaluation of the improved network, compliance with it, and possible improvements. This will include further work and discussion around additional key strategic routes to improve connectivity across the A31 for all users, and East to West connectivity from the Waterside.

Collectively, these measures represent a considerable investment in the Forest and the way recreation is managed. Many require collaborative working and funding. There is real engagement and commitment by local partners to work together and achieve the benefits this proposal offers - for the Forest landscape, and for more sustainable recreation and travel.

We're seeking Verderers consent and welcome discussing this proposal with them.

In conclusion, this proposal represents a once in a generation opportunity, involving all stakeholders, to improve adherence to the network and enhance the off-road cycling experience in the New Forest. It provides an effective way to increase understanding of the need, and how to preserve the special qualities of the New Forest and we believe it will result in real benefits for the Forest and all those who use it.

Thank you.

Craig Harrison,  
Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, Forest Management Director  
Forestry England – South District