

Item 9 – Recreation Management Strategy Working Group

The RMS Working Group last met on 14 March. At that meeting it was agreed that it was necessary to take stock of how the Group could best move forward, and that NPA Officers would look at how the Group could be more productive with clear proposals for carrying out its work.

A proposed way forward was drafted; this is attached below. To avoid trying to draft by committee, Working Group members were asked whether they were in favour of the proposal as it stands, so that the NPA would know whether to proceed on the basis of the proposal or not.

Given just the two options of to support, or to not support, the proposal as it stands, Alastair, as the NFAF's representative on the RMS Working Group, did not accept the proposal. Alastair's detailed response follows the proposal, below.

**Recreation Management Strategy Working Group
Proposed Way Forward**

Introduction

The Recreation Management Strategy Working Group (RMSWG) was set up in July 2010 to take forward the work collectively of managing recreation in the National Park, based on the Recreation Management Strategy developed by the National Park Authority.

At the RMSWG meeting on the 14th March 2013 it was agreed that, after more than two years of meetings, the time had come to look for a different way forward for the Working Group. All agreed that recreation management was still a vital area of work but that the working group had not made as much progress as had been hoped.

At the meeting the Chair outlined a possible structure for initial comment by members consisting of a small 'steering group' and a larger 'advisory group'. Comments were generally supportive of this type of arrangement and therefore this proposal will build on the structure proposed.

Proposal

It is proposed that the RMSWG become two groups - the RMS Steering Group and the RMS Advisory Group.

The steering group should consist of those bodies with a clear responsibility to take forward recreation management on the ground. It should be as small as feasible to ensure focus and have clear collective responsibility to manage recreation in the whole of the National Park. Implementing the Recreation Management Strategy would form part of the work of the group, but it would be free to work on whichever issues were felt to be most important.

The advisory group would give advice on the work of the steering group, including its direction and key areas of work. The steering group would inform the advisory group on work undertaken and seek advice on proposals that the steering group were looking to take forward. The advisory group would also bring to the attention of the steering group issues of importance.

The appendix outlines the Terms of Reference for each group.

Appendix

RMS Steering Group - Terms of Reference

1. The steering group will have joint responsibility for taking forward recreation management in the National Park
2. Where possible decisions will be made by consensus, with an understanding of the constraints that individuals are under, with regard to their decision making powers, on behalf of their respective organisations. As a last resort decisions can be decided by majority vote
3. It will consult with the RMS Advisory Group on all major decisions
4. Membership consists of the key statutory bodies with collective responsibility for recreation management in the New Forest. Initially this will consist of the Forestry Commission, the National Park Authority, the Verderers and Natural England
5. The steering group may invite other organisations to join it
6. The Chair shall be decided by a vote of the group
7. Meetings will be held every four months or more often if needed
8. To ensure free and frank debate meetings will be confidential and not open to the public

RMS Advisory Group - Terms of Reference

1. The advisory group will advise the RMS steering group about recreation management issues in the National Park
2. Members of the advisory group may bring for discussion any issues relating to recreation management that they wish
3. Membership will initially consist of all organisations that currently sit on the RMSWG
4. The advisory group may invite other organisations to join it
5. The Chair shall be the chair of the RMS steering group
6. Meetings will be held every four months or more often if needed
7. To ensure free and frank debate meetings will be confidential and not open to the public

RMSWG Proposal analysis/comment April 2013

Submission by Alastair Duncan

Chairman New Forest Access Forum

Firstly the list of addressees circulated with the proposal is inaccurate.

Preamble

The area encompassed by the National Park is 56658 hectares.

The area of the Crown lands administered by the Forestry Commission is 25825 hectares.

The area of the land over which the Verderers have some level of jurisdiction is approximately 19692 hectares.

This suggests that the Forestry Commission have some authority and decision making powers over 46% of the area of the National Park.

Similarly, the Verderers have decision making powers over 35% of the area of the National Park.

Comment

Make up of Steering Group

I accept the principle that the members of the Steering Group should represent those organisations that have powers and jurisdiction over areas within the National Park.

I am of the view that the RMS Steering Group's main objective should be to take an over-arching view on Recreation management over the whole of the National Park. It should plan for the future, and seek to be pro-active in developing recreation opportunities away from the Crown lands, in order to alleviate the pressures that beset the Forest. It should also periodically review existing management measures to ensure that they remain fit for purpose, and plan for the accommodation of future recreational trends.

In the light of this, and the statistics outlined in the Preamble, I believe that the suggested membership of the proposed Steering Group is inappropriate, and concerning. It does not bear much relationship to who has powers over the National Park. For instance, Hampshire County Council has powers over all public rights of way and highways, and a number of important recreational sites throughout the area. New Forest District Council has significant powers on a significant area of land and some beaches encompassed by the National Park.

Neither the Forestry Commission nor the Verderers have powers over a significant stretch of land bordering the Solent, which in discussion on recreational matters is usually overlooked.

The National Trust owns and manages a number of significant sites open to recreation.

One could therefore ask why the Verderers and Forestry Commission should make fundamental decisions on over half the Park area over which they have no powers.

History

The proposal takes little account of the history of the establishment of the RMSWG. At the inaugural meeting led by Barry Foley the need for real stakeholder engagement, and for all stakeholders to work together, was recognised. It is worth re-reading page 28 of the Recreation Management Strategy itself, which refers to the need for a Steering Group to include the main land managers and user organisations.

Structure

At the last meeting of the RMSWG it was agreed that it needs a different way forward, and that the formation of two groups may be one option. However, the 'Proposed Way Forward' seems to revert to an older style of 'top down' working. There is a real risk that members of the proposed Advisory Group would become disenfranchised and feel that they had no real role in recreation management – they may even be seen to be a 'thorn in the side' of the proposed Steering Group. The proposed structure is virtually identical to that originally set up to manage the HLS scheme, since abandoned. One would not want to repeat that fiasco. There, a Board consisting of representatives of the Verderers, Forestry Commission, and the National Park, with a Natural England representative acted at decision making level, with a subordinate committee of stakeholders at the next level down. This structure failed dismally.

Perhaps a more acceptable model for two group working would be to form an 'Action Group' and a 'Determining Group'. The Action Group could consist of those organisations that have recreation management responsibilities / capabilities. The Determining Group would direct the work of the Action Group and act as a control mechanism – its membership could be taken from appropriate stakeholders and all main recreation user groups should be invited to have representation. The Determining Group would be the Group which decided which issues were most important. The Action Group could be made accountable to the Determining Group.

It should be recognised somewhere that individual organisations can, and should, already work in various groupings and partnerships to achieve desired outcomes for recreation management on an 'as needs' basis. It is not the case that all recreation management in the National Park hinges on the set up and activities of the RMSWG or its successor(s). The role of the RMSWG, or its successor(s), is to address those issues and RMS actions that otherwise would not be addressed – and potentially it is a place where the really thorny issues can be discussed openly in a spirit of co-operation.

Opinion to date has been that people should be encouraged to enjoy recreation away from the more sensitive areas, such as on rights of way, local green-spaces, etc, so it is difficult to understand the basis of the proposed Steering Group membership. Secondly, the suggested Steering Group membership seems to indicate that the NPA believes that recreation management is best achieved through control and limitation. This is very disappointing, as stakeholders, including the NPA, have previously voiced their opinion that management of recreation should focus on improving the provision of, and information about, recreation facilities in the places where recreation is most appropriate – thereby automatically regulating the numbers of people visiting areas that are less suitable for intensive recreation without the need

to introduce controversial restrictions. It therefore needs representation of bodies with an interest in and jurisdiction over the whole of the Park area.

Advisory Group

I do not favour the proposal that the Chair of the Advisory Group should be the Chair of the Steering Group. It would seem more democratic for the Chair of each Group to be elected by the membership of the Group. It might also be useful to have a caveat that the same person/organisation should not chair both Groups, as to chair both could be seen as having prejudicial interest in the work of one or other of the Groups.

Secondly, I think it is the soft option to automatically “transfer” the membership of the old RMSWG straight in to the Advisory Group. Better to start with a clean sheet of paper and look at the Park holistically, seeking a balance of organisation representation to properly reflect the range of recreational interest across the whole of the Park.

Finally, I would strongly recommend that an initiative is taken to build bridges with the cycling community. With Government policy driving an increase in recreational cycling it is imperative that they come back on board.

Some other, more specific points to be decided upon are:

- Who would facilitate meetings for each Group – organise rooms, dates, notes/minutes, etc
- If the two Groups are to look at all matters to do with recreation management, why have ‘Recreation Management Strategy’ in their titles? Will the focus on progressing the RMS be lost? Who will have responsibility for taking the RMS forward and monitoring progress against actions?
- It is not clear what is meant by ‘collective responsibility’, nor how this would work in practice

I hope the above is read as a constructive attempt to take things forward, recognising as I do that to achieve consensus will be difficult.

Alastair Duncan
Chairman
New Forest Access Forum
26 April 2013