

NEW FOREST ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

ANNUAL REPORT - 2014

Once again, as Chairman I am delighted to present this annual report to members of both NFALC and HALC

Our Association meets 4 times a year, and at our meeting in July 2013 we discussed Section 33 of the Localism Act 2011 whereby District Councillors who are also members of a Town or Parish Council can apply for dispensation to enable them to participate in discussions and vote at meetings of their Town or Parish Council at which a matter affecting the District Council is to be considered.

At that meeting, Alison Barnes, Chief Executive of the New Forest National Park talked about the work of the New Forest Land Advice Service. NFLAS is available to landowners and occupiers who would like advice and support on a wide range of issues relating to land management. NFLAS has completed a pilot phase of their biodiversity project to create habitat corridors across landscapes around the New Forest. It has also focused on reaching out to owners of under-managed woodlands, promoting the benefits of woodland management planning. NFLAS also provides project coordination for the NPA water environment catchment project, working in partnership with the Environment Agency, Pond Conservation and Natural England.

In September 2013, we were delighted to welcome Simon Hayes, Police & Crime Commissioner for Hampshire, who explained his roles and responsibilities and the outcomes he was hoping to achieve.

The election of Commissioners marked a change in the Management Policy for policing. As a Commissioner, he had two particular duties: namely direct responsibility to the public and a responsibility to work with the criminal justice system and is required to: ensure the maintenance of effective policing, to hold the Chief Constable to account, to be involved in community safety partnerships, to work with neighbouring Police and Crime Commissioners and police forces, set the budgets and precepts for the police service, to appoint, and if necessary to part company with, the Chief Constable, to deal with complaints against the Chief Constable and to be involved in an indirect manner for complaints against other police officers.

Explaining that in common with other public authorities, funding streams had been reduced in the last five years by £55m and there was a requirement for further savings of about £25m by 2016. In order to achieve the level of savings required he was looking at the police estate to make the best use of its buildings, and with that in mind, some police stations were being sold off but retaining local places in towns where there could be a police presence, but not necessarily at the existing police stations.

Registration of Interests was also discussed and it was noted that despite considerable pressure and a large amount of correspondence, the Government were unwilling to make any changes to the arrangements for Disclosure of Interests of spouses and other relatives. Steven Lugg, Chief Executive of HALC reiterated that the Government were firm in its views and were not interested in making any changes.

At our meeting in January 2014, we heard from Jo Murphy and David Stone of the National Park Authority who gave a light-hearted presentation with video highlighting some of the issues surrounding Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and an overview of legislation governing such requests and its impact on public authorities, including the need for appropriate Publication Schemes, Environmental Impact Regulations, Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act and how to deal with requests generally.

Regarding Electronic Distribution of Council Agenda, Members noted the Minister, Brandon Lewis MP had advised Parliament that: *"We are aware of the support for a change in legislation to remove any doubts about (town and parish) councils' ability to send agendas electronically and we are minded to legislate to enable this by April of 2014."* I am pleased this has now come to pass.

As far as Discretionary Grants to Town & Parish Councils is concerned, the provisional local government finance settlement for 2014-15, together with indicative amounts for 2015-16 was announced to Parliament by Brandon Lewis MP, the Minister for Local Government on 18 December, 2013. The announcement provided a level of certainty in the medium term of the funding available to NFDC largely as expected with government funding cut over the next two years by £1.1m (some 12%). However, the overall settlement is "better" than expected due to extra New Homes Bonus resulting from technical changes.

The District Council grant to Town and Parish Councils in 2014-15 was £300,000, in line with the Minister's statement and is likely to reduce by £100k per annum over the next 3 years.

As noted above, our close links with both the New Forest District Council and the National Park Authority have been maintained. They have both continued to support us and attended all of our meetings. The close liaison we have enjoyed continues to help us considerably in a number of areas. In addition, we have also forged close ties with Hampshire County Council.

At our meeting in April 2014, Neil Beswick - HCC Local Bus & Home to School Transport Manager - explained the rationale behind the latest local transport review that was undertaken. Hampshire County Council needs to save £1.25 to £1.5 million from public and community transport spending by 2015/16. The authority is undertaking a county-wide review of subsidized bus and community transport services, together with a review of the discretionary elements of the Hampshire Concessionary Travel Scheme.

Savings could be achieved by a mixture of Reducing or ceasing support for Sunday services; Reducing or ceasing support for evening services after 7pm; Ceasing the 9am early start for the older persons bus pass; Reducing the frequency and/or days of service; Replacing bus services with taxi-shares or community transport services; Reducing the amount of printed publicity with a greater use of electronic information.

In regard to Broadband, NFALC supported the New Forest Rural Communities Broadband application to improve speeds across the New Forest. Hampshire County Council, in partnership with BT, is set to deliver phase two of the Superfast Broadband Program, to extend coverage of superfast services to an extra 8,000 homes and businesses. Efficient partnership working with other local authorities has also meant that the program team has managed to bring forward delivery of superfast services to Woodgreen and Breamore.

Phase one of the Superfast Broadband Program has already seen the partnership deliver fibre broadband to over 5,050 homes and businesses across parts of Basingstoke, Gosport, Hart and the New Forest. Hampshire's Superfast Broadband program will help fill the gap in smaller, rural areas, which would otherwise be left out because the numbers of people who could potentially sign up are not commercially viable for providers and the engineering challenges involved.

In addition, we have worked closely with the National Park Authority in regard to Cycling Club activities within the New Forest and the difficulties caused when several thousand cyclists descend on our narrow roads and towns. This contentious topic is discussed at every NFALC meeting. We appointed a representative to a Working Party established by the NPA that has recently drawn up a Code of Practice for these events.

Our representative, Neal Martin, has continued to attend meetings concerned with drawing up the Cycling Charter for ratification by the Cycling Liaison Group. A draft was circulated to Parish Councils via NFALC for comment and in a detailed summary of the feedback the two big issues identified were the need to cap the numbers and to provide rider identification i.e. numbers to be displayed on their back.

Neal presented to the NFNPA at the end of June, highlighting these two issues. Subsequently the NFNPA passed a motion insisting that in order to obtain NPA support these two issues must be included in the Charter. I think it is very important that NFALC as an organisation is seen to support the Charter, particularly now that the NPA has voiced its support and the two key changes the Town & Parish Councils wanted to see are included. In essence, NPA Members decided that it was best to have a Charter that included these restrictions even if some organisations and some cycle event organisers didn't agree with them.

This charter was developed during 2013 and 2014, with cycling groups and local organisations, in response to concerns that the increasing size and frequency of cycle sportive events could result in unacceptable impacts on the New Forest and its local communities. It is supported by the New Forest National Park Authority, New Forest District Council, Hampshire County Council and Hampshire Constabulary, and aims to help cycle event organisers minimise negative impacts and maximise the benefits so that their events are welcomed by all involved and affected.

Without an Association, neither the District nor the National Park Authority or County for that matter would have had a vehicle through which they could communicate with and work in partnership with Town and Parish Councils. We believe that all 3 Authorities are now able to utilise the Association to help them.

Cllr Goff Beck, Chairman
New Forest Association of Local Councils

11th July 2014