

The National Park Authority now wants to come out to play ball, but one has to ask if this is a genuine and meaningful attempt to close the divide; or is it just a PR exercise to placate those who have opposed or criticised their draft plans?

The new series of working group meetings were set up in an attempt to revise the Park Plan and RMS consultation documents, but one such working group (Socio-Economic), reached a deficient conclusion when an entire section of the working papers were not discussed. Although brought to the attention of the group's Chairman towards the end of the meeting, no time was left to discuss the "Policies and Objectives for land-based businesses". A possible second meeting date was diarised (as was the case in most working group meetings), and I have now been advised that a second meeting will not be forthcoming because participants did not consider it necessary. The NPA required a majority vote from participants (17 plus 8 NPA members and officers). The resulting documents "Draft for Agreement" and "Conclusions for further consideration by the National Park Authority" will tick the right PR box, but may not reflect further revisions that could have emerged from the benefit of a second meeting.

I believe only 2 groups from the 6 categories will have second meetings, (Recreation and Recreational Horse Keeping) the latter of which has uniquely benefited from a more proactive meeting format with the utilisation of outside facilitators and a second meeting without the need for a majority vote. So, another PR box is ticked – but more worryingly, if the revised park plan does not reflect the equine fraternity's suggestions, revisions or changes; has the NPA effectively removed themselves from their accountability by outsourcing to a third party?

Another example in offloading responsibility is by using Parish Council meetings as a venue for public participation in discussions to "consider the way forward". I understand that these will be scheduled parish council meetings where one or two NPA representatives will attend by invitation. I was assured by the NPA on 12 February that *quote Arrangements for meetings with parish representatives and parish led meetings later in the process are being finalised but we will be aiming to give a month's notice of all events. Other elements of engagement with the public before the documents are presented to the Authority are also being finalised and will be published as soon as they are agreed. As soon as the agreed strategy for these arrangements is in place it will be published and I will ensure that you are informed. Unquote.*

It is now mid-April and no further information has been forthcoming. Allowing for one month's notice, these meetings could probably take place some time in June or July. Under the timescale for taking the revised park plan to the Authority for approval (currently June) it will be impossible to collate any suggestions or comments made during these Parish Council and other meetings for inclusion in the revised park plan. But hey! Another PR box has been ticked! So, yet again, the residents of the New Forest have been led up the garden path with promises of inclusion and meaningful discussions to help shape their future. Is it any wonder that I have no confidence in an authority that is driven by PR exercises and 'spin'?

Perhaps the NPA Annual Meeting in June will offer perfect timing for a 'vote of no confidence' by those members who privately disagree with the proposed policies or the need for an Authority when the Verderers, Forestry Commission, local councils etc. have managed the New Forest harmoniously for many years. Let the existing multi-agencies work together on attaining National Park Status as an alternative to a National Park with an Authority.

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