

**RAPC 590/26**

**NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

**RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 2 MARCH 2026**

**GRANT FUNDING UPDATE – MARCH 2026**

**Report by:** Jim Mitchell, Access and Learning Manager, on behalf of the Officers Funding Group

**1 Summary:**

- 1.1 The New Forest National Park Authority has a strong track record of securing grants to deliver our Partnership Plan work and leverage our own Business Plan / Defra National Park Grant.
- 1.2 This paper requests members' approval for applications to two current grant funded opportunities. The Authority's Scheme of Delegation requires formal bids over £50,000 to be approved by this Committee.

**Recommendations:**

**That the submission of the two applications, as outlined in the report, be supported and that authority be delegated to officers to take all action as necessary to:**

- (i) **continue the application process for the LEP Legacy funds, and if successful, return to RAPC with legal, governance and financial arrangements for approval; and**
- (ii) **submit the Reaching Communities Fund bid and if successful, to complete the project.**

**2 Introduction**

- 2.1 The Authority has always had a strategic focus on securing a wide range of external funding to support our work in delivering our core purposes and socio-economic duty and the objectives of the Partnership Plan.
- 2.2 Our annual target is to achieve 25%+ of income derived from sources other than the Defra National Park Grant – our half-year result for 2025/26 was 39%. Since 2010 we have secured more than £15 million in total. These funds support the work of the Authority and its partners to deliver landscape-scale improvements.
- 2.3 We wish to apply for a further two grants to support the future of the New Forest Tour and to develop our education and youth work. Both of these new opportunities would provide long-term investment in Partnership Plan thematic actions and Business Plan identified priorities. The New Forest Tour opportunity will also provide ongoing and increased income generation streams for the New Forest NPA through business sponsorship of the Tour.

### 3 Local Enterprise Partnership Legacy Funds – Supporting the future of the New Forest Tour

- 3.1 Hampshire County Council is administering the allocation of former Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) legacy reserves to support projects that deliver sustainable economic growth, infrastructure resilience and long-term value for Hampshire. The fund is focused on capital investment that protects and strengthens economic assets, supports decarbonisation, and delivers measurable economic and community benefit. Applications are assessed through a competitive process, including officer panel review and presentation, with emphasis on deliverability, value for money, strategic alignment and long-term impact. The Funds were announced late in 2025 and with a closing deadline for initial Expressions of Interest in January 2026.
- 3.2 The NPA, in partnership with the New Forest Tour operator Go South Coast and supported by NFDC, South Western Railway and Hampshire County Council (Passenger Group), submitted an initial Expression of Interest application to secure capital funding for the replacement of the end-of-life New Forest Tour fleet with three electric open-top buses and associated charging infrastructure. The project aims to safeguard a long-standing, commercially viable visitor transport service operating since 2004, which supports over 40,000 passenger journeys per season and underpins local business turnover, employment and sustainable visitor access. The proposal aligns with National Park purposes, the Partnership Plan and Hampshire's Economic Strategy by supporting decarbonisation, protecting jobs in the visitor and transport economy, and enabling year-round utilisation of the vehicles on the Bluestar 6 route linking Southampton and the New Forest, when not in open-top New Forest Tour operation. The LEP funding would provide the essential capital investment, with ongoing operational costs met through fare income and operator commitment over a minimum 10-year lifespan. Replacement of the current end of life fleet has been an ambition for the last five or so years.
- 3.3 The project comprises a **£2.29 million** capital application to the fund to cover purchase and conversion of three new electric open-top buses, electric charging infrastructure at Lymington, future-proofing electrification of the fleet and new branding, fit-out audio commentary. The capital funding request is matched with £1.45m revenue funding from the operation of the Tour over 10 years.
- 3.4 The project has been shortlisted and representatives of the NPA and Go South Coast have presented to the assessment panel. Following panel consideration, recommendations will be made to the Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Board. If successful, a formal grant agreement will be drawn up with Hampshire County Council and a legal agreement drawn up with Go South Coast. Procurement of vehicles and charging infrastructure can then commence, likely to take place in 2027/28 and 2028/29.
- 3.5 If a successful grant offer is made, a paper to a subsequent RAPC meeting will set out the proposal in more depth with financial, legal and governance arrangements for approval.

## 4 The National Lottery Community Fund – Reaching Communities Fund

- 4.1 The National Lottery Community Fund’s Reaching Communities Fund (regional) provides multi-year revenue funding to organisations delivering long-term, community-led impacts. The programme supports projects that strengthen communities, improve inclusion and empower people to take action on issues that matter locally. The Authority intends to submit an Expression of Interest for up to **£1million** over five years to sustain and grow its nature and climate-based education and youth engagement work beyond the conclusion of the current Climate Action Fund grant in August 2026. This represents a significant opportunity to secure stable, medium-term revenue funding to embed youth and community action on nature and climate across the National Park.
- 4.2 The proposed programme would sustain and build on the specific aspects of our involvement in the Youth for Climate and Nature (YouCAN) project, which has transformed the scale and impact of the Authority’s youth engagement since 2023. Without external funding we cannot continue most of our youth volunteering, green careers initiatives, junior ranger activities, youth action programmes and Youth Board development. The application will focus on enabling young people to access and engage meaningfully with the New Forest National Park, empowering them to contribute to climate and nature action on the ground and to help shape decisions about the future of the Forest. The programme directly supports delivery of the Partnership Plan ambitions for action on Climate and Nature Recovery, for an Inclusive National Park, contributes to green careers development under Team New Forest and Thriving Forest, and strengthens community cohesion by linking young people with parish councils, green groups and local organisations.
- 4.3 An Expression of Interest is currently in preparation. If approved and successful, the Authority will be invited to develop a full application for submission in Spring 2026, with a funding decision expected later in 2026 to enable continuity beyond the current grant period ending in August 2026. The proposed programme would operate over a five-year period.
- 4.4 In March 2025, Members gave approval for the NPA to work with UK National Parks on a separate, National Lottery Community Fund application (the Community Fund operates at both a national level and at a regional level). This work is still ongoing and provides a smaller, albeit complimentary, opportunity for funding of youth focussed National Park work. In January 2026 an Expression of Interest was prepared for submission to the National Lottery Community Fund’s UK Fund, which supports large-scale, systems-level change across the UK. The proposal represents a **£3 million** programme over three years across 15 National Parks, including shared central programme management, communications and financial support, with an estimated allocation of approximately £60,000–£70,000 per year per Park. The programme would focus on embedding and strengthening youth voice and representation within National Park governance and decision-making structures, building on ideas generated by young people at national youth conferences in 2022 and 2024. A full application is anticipated in summer 2026.

**Annexes:**

None

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