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Statement to NFNPA Planning Committee

21 April 2026

Application 25/01405 – Field west of Tree House Study Centre, Hartford Woods

The Beaulieu Parish Council's Planning Committee carefully examined this application and, at its public meeting on 13 January, voted unanimously to recommend permission but would accept the decision reached by the National Park Authority's officers under their delegated powers.

The Planning Committee conducted a site visit with a representative of the Applicant and the CEO of the Countryside Education Trust on 9 January. This allowed us to see first hand that the current parking provision is unsuitable for CET's revised business model of providing countryside education services to schools and local community groups. We noted that increasing parking within the existing Study Centre would likely require the removal of ancient woodland, whereas the proposed location within Hides Field avoids that outcome. The proposed car park is well-positioned to support drop-off arrangements, parking and will also better support the safe transfer of young children and individuals with physical disabilities to the Study Centre.

The application was subsequently considered in detail at a duly convened public Beaulieu Parish Council Planning Committee meeting on 13 January, which was well attended, with 15

members of the public present, including the Applicant, management from the CET, together with supporters and objectors of the application.

The Committee structured its discussion around the NPA's Parish Briefing, and the following key considerations were used for assessing this application.

We noted that 9 letters of objection had been received and posted on the National Park Authority or Parish Council websites.

The Applicant and members of the CET's management team outlined the proposal, which is well summarised in the NPA Planning Committee Report tabled today by the NPA.

We invited members of the public who supported or objected to the proposal to speak at the meeting, and the key points raised are captured in the following summary:

1. Under Policy SP7 – Landscape Character, the car park would occupy part of an existing field adjacent to the Tree House Study Centre and would be surfaced with permeable gravel rather than urban-style materials. Hedgerow screening is proposed along the western boundary. Some parishioners voiced objections that (a) there was an unproven need for more parking and a lack of consideration for alternative sites, and (b) concerns that the car park could be used for commercial activities unrelated to the Charity's educational role, potentially leading to an expansion of such activities. The Committee concluded that, on balance, the proposal constitutes a modest and landscape-sensitive intervention associated with an existing use, rather than a visually intrusive major development.
2. The impact on the ancient woods adjacent to the site is unlikely to be material as confirmed by the National Park Authority's Tree Officer, who raised no objection, stating that the agreed 6m exclusion zone from the woodland edge is reasonable.

3. Under Policy SP17 – Protecting the Countryside, some parishioners expressed the view that the proposal constituted an inappropriate change of use from agriculture, and represented a gradual process of suburbanisation. Committee members carefully examined this point, and their conclusion was that the proposal is not a standalone development, but an ancillary infrastructure necessary to support an existing educational facility already established on the site. The proposal's limited scale and its direct operational relationship with the Tree House Study Centre were therefore important considerations.

4. The Planning Committee also assessed the proposal in relation to Policy SP15 – Residential Amenity. Concerns were raised during the meeting about noise, light pollution, and potential effects on nearby residents. These issues were carefully discussed, and the Committee concluded that the proposed car park is intended to support the existing use of the site rather than introduce a significantly different activity. The Committee noted that the car park can be seen from a distance by one dwelling. This however will be mitigated over time by the proposed hedging, some of which is already established. We have recommended to the NPA that no lighting on the site should be a condition.

5. The proposed site is located in a field that already has a Lawful Development Certificate for 28 days of overflow parking, which establishes parking in this area. The Committee also noted that non-educational events at the venue are restricted by the Beaulieu Estate and the TENs licensing regime, limiting the potential for expanding commercial use. The Beaulieu Estate has confirmed it will actively consult on any proposed increase in the Study Centre's commercial activities. Additionally, the Beaulieu Estate has specified that the proposed car parking will be used exclusively by the Countryside Educational Trust and will not serve as overflow parking for the Estate's events.

6. The ecological impacts were also discussed in detail. Committee members were aware of the sensitivity of woodland habitats in Hartford Woods. Concerns were expressed during the meeting about harm to residential amenity, the dark skies policy, light pollution, and effects on local ecology and ancient woods. We have noted that, following our meeting, Natural England has confirmed it has no objections, and the Authority's ecologist also has no objections, subject to a number of conditions.

7. We have reviewed the Great Crested Newt Further Assessment dated 13 March 2026, which indicates that the proposed development is unlikely to result in a significant impact on great crested newts, and we are satisfied that the precautionary measures recommended in that assessment represent an appropriate and proportionate approach to fulfil the legal obligation in respect of European Protected Species.

8. Finally, the Committee considered the social and economic development of the Countryside Education Trust. The charity faces significant financial pressures due to cuts in State education funding and has had to cut staff and adapt its business model to continue providing countryside education services to schoolchildren and local groups. Like many charities, it also relies on a certain level of commercial activity for its sustainability. Without successfully evolving its business, there is a significant risk it will struggle to sustain its vital educational activities. In addition to its educational role, the Countryside Education Trust engages with the rural community on various other levels that benefit the village and the wider community including:

- a. Undertaking various conservation tasks in Hartford Woods, such as coppicing and woodland management;
- b. Maintaining the Medieval Meadow and waterways, including Hartford Pond;
- c. Managing livestock;
- d. Helping the South Solent Farm Cluster, a group of about 17 farmers, maintain consistent and beneficial farming practices across their land; and
- e. Supporting Young Farmers and providing local employment.

The Beaulieu Parish Council considers it essential to promote activities that connect and educate people about the New Forest. The CET, a valuable national asset, excels at this and also plays a crucial role in supporting the sustainability of our local community in Beaulieu.

After reviewing both support and objections, we consider that the proposed carpark, which is important for the Study Centre's future, complies with NPA planning requirements.