

PSPO Evidence - Fires & BBQs

Personal Statement

Name	Charlotte Belcher
Organisation	Forestry England
Job title	Community Manager
Role description	<p>I manage the New Forest Recreation Ranger team and Volunteer Service; I am responsible for planning and delivering community engagement and education campaigns and programmes and I take an active lead in joint operations with partner agencies such as joint fire safety patrols undertaken with Hampshire & Isle of Wight Fire & Rescue Service.</p> <p>A core part of my role involves planning, managing and participating in patrols of the Crown Lands managing visitors and visitor behaviour through engagement and education and- where necessary and possible - enforcement, working with Hampshire Constabulary and other agencies to deal with inappropriate activity that has the potential to cause harm to the estate and its visitors.</p> <p>I am trained in Wildfire response and attend and contribute to finding, fighting and damping down wildfires. In addition to my responsibilities as Community Manager I also have a particular Ranging focus around the Waterside area of the New Forest to target known issues around deliberate fire setting; this involves out of hours patrolling around some of the hotspot areas and proactively working with other agencies through the New Forest Arson Forum.</p>

The Activity

Over my 5 years on the Ranger team I have dealt with a vast array of incidents however BBQs and fires are guaranteed problems year after year. We regularly come across a number of people attempting these activities whilst we are out on patrol but are also frequently called out to respond to reports phoned in by concerned members of the public. The activity can range from a small disposable BBQ on the ground, to a full-sized hog-roast, firepits, open campfires directly on the ground burning wood from the forest and eating into the forest floor causing lasting damage.

The team are well versed in what to say and how to engage with people, we all carry water and in many cases are able to resolve the problem, however there have been occasions where we have been unsuccessful in preventing or resolving an incident, for example, I was once called to a report of a disposable BBQ at Hatchet Pond, on arrival I couldn't see anything lit - I spoke to a group and asked if they had seen anyone with a BBQ they said no but then I noticed they had 2 large disposable BBQs underneath one of their chairs, I explained the dangers and that they weren't allowed, the man did not seem receptive to my messaging so I called the local Keeper to warn that a follow up visit would be needed to check on the group (they also had a lot of camping equipment with them). The Keeper attended a short while later and found the man about to light the BBQ, he tried to dissuade him and even had HIWFRS and the local police in attendance but both agencies said they were unable to do anything about it, and so the man was able to persist in his high-risk activity whilst the official bodies looked on unable to act. We have also had instances of repeat offenders, where we have the same group of people wild camping, continually having fires, in some cases we have called on support from our local PCSOs to help strengthen our message here but ultimately, we have had no avenue of action and the individuals involved know that and therefore continue with their activities undeterred.

On my last weekend as duty ranger (6th & 7th August); I was putting a sign on a broken bridge when I looked up and noticed an alarming plume of smoke. I immediately had to leave my task to try and locate the source of the smoke. Driving towards it I ascertained it was somewhere in the inclosures between Hollands Wood and Denny Wood campsites. There are several blocks of woodland here with a myriad of paths and access points and so I knew it would be a challenge to pinpoint the source. I called the Duty Officer who was able to go out and look from another vantage point and fortunately as he knew the ground very well was able to give an estimated direction for me to travel. I asked many members of the public if they had seen any fire; I encountered one cyclist who pulled out an OS map and pointed to a location he had apparently seen a fire around 4 hours earlier. He had seen a fire engine locally and assumed it was going to this fire; it wasn't - it was responding to another campfire somewhere else in another inclosure - so this one went unreported for even longer and so by the time I located it and called 999 there was a significant area alight - the incident required a water carrier to be brought in from Bordon (over an hour away) and tied up multiple HIWFRS resources for several hours that evening

and return visit early next morning. We had to have a team stay overnight to monitor because of how it had burnt into the ground and was at risk of reignition. I left the site around 21:30 that evening, having started work at 08:00 that morning. I returned to the site at 07:00 the next morning to supply breakfast for the crew who had stayed overnight. A series of staff visited the site to monitor throughout the day. That evening I left Lyndhurst to head home around 18:30 and as I drove towards Beaulieu Road Station I could see a plume of smoke on my right and another on my left. I had to call the Duty Officer and ask for help to locate the sources again; there were fires in both Fawley Inclosure and Denny Inclosure at the same time. I went to Fawley and other members of the team to Denny. Whilst I was at Fawley I had a call from the DO informing me there was another incident underway at Burley. The small team available (already an increased number from our usual complement as extra staff had been called in to help) were split between 3 different sites assisting HIWFRS. I believe I finished work around 22:30 that evening, bringing my working hours to 28 for Saturday & Sunday - my average hours are calculated at 8.8 a day and I was 10.4 hours over this, so worked over an extra day in that short space of time.

On the 11th August I was due to be meeting HIWFRS Communications team to do some filming at recent fire sites when I saw smoke coming from somewhere between Kings Hat & Dibden inclosures. I had to again abandon my plans for the afternoon and go in search of the fire. I called 999, drove as close as I could and located it on foot, guiding in the local crew and our incident response officer. There was an area of heathland alight, this had caught from a campfire that had been left smouldering in a small copse of trees. If this had not been spotted and gotten under control quickly it could have burnt towards the inclosure. Personally this was a great concern for me and I know there are other residents who have felt this level of worry when they have had incidents near their homes too.



The Impact

When peak visitor times and high fire risk combine; wildfire becomes the priority for all ground staff. There are many other issues we may get called to, events we may like to run, programmes it would be good for us to be involved with; but everything else pales into insignificance when the conditions are so dry. The whole team, and oftentimes much of the local community, are on high alert, dreading the sight or smell of smoke. It isn't something that can be ignored, the risk of not responding and a large fire breaking out is too much for anybody to accept and so often there will be staff working all hours of the day and night to try and avoid such a situation; proactively patrolling for lunchtime BBQs, responding to tea-time BBQs, patrolling known problem areas out-of-hours, attempting to track down wild campers late into the evening when vehicles are spotted in car parks after dusk; investigating reports early morning from dawn dog walkers, or returning to previous fire sites multiple times to ensure there is no chance of reignition.

Some of the impacts include:

- Staff are working longer days, sacrificing their personal lives to work extra weekends or evenings - compromising work-life balance
- Responding to incidents like this is tiring, people are pushed to their limits, increasing the risk of an accident
- Core business is affected, with people and resources tied up we are unable to deliver our normal work programmes
- Lasting damage to fragile habitats and ecosystems with negative implications for wildlife - this also impacts staff morale and wellbeing as the team are passionate about the landscape they manage and protect
- Community anxiety - local people are understandably concerned about the risk of damage to the environment and threat to their livelihoods and properties - this places an increased expectation on us to deal with the issues

I frequently get emails from members of the public about an array of issues and recently I had a query about why a ground nesting bird car park hadn't been re-opened and the answer is because the team had all been too busy tied up with fire issues; although this was a task on the list to do, there simply wasn't the time or capacity to address this - this then has a negative impact on our visitors as we aren't able to devote the time to managing facilities in the way that we would like to. All the time spent dealing with BBQs and campfires also detracts from the time we are able to spend on pro-active positive engagement - this is the type of engagement that is most rewarding for the majority of our team and so there is also an impact on job satisfaction - Rangers do not want to be known solely as the "fun police".

The local fire stations are all operating with retained crews; being retained the crews rely on the goodwill of their employers - with increasing callouts to unnecessary incidents this

will have an impact on the time these individuals are able to spend at work; and their home lives too.

Timing

Changing visitor behaviour brought about by the pandemic resulted in a much higher number of BBQ related incidents in 2020; the subsequent BBQ “ban” and campaigning helped to reduce the number of incidents; however despite two years of this consistent approach and hard campaigning, with a vast increase in signage and publicity, both on site and through various forms of media, it is astounding that there are still people using BBQs or having campfires, some in blatant view of signage and despite engagement from officials. Visitor patterns have changed; we are seeing sustained levels of visitors throughout the year instead of just at peak times; many more people have discovered the outdoors and are likely to continue with outdoor pursuits moving forwards.



The weather this year may have been extreme, however with climate change projections it is not unreasonable to expect more summers like this with periods of intense heat and drought. We need to take action to minimise the risk of a damaging wildlife which is becoming ever more probable, and to make most efficient use of our resources by trying to target some of the underlying causes of the issues.

Geography

Though there are some reliable “hotspot” problem areas (well known “honeypot” sites such as Hatchet Pond, Wilverley, Bolderwood, Blackwater, Whitefield Moor, Linford Bottom); these incidents are occurring widely over the New Forest, I believe this is evidenced by some of the incident data provided. Whilst the BBQs tend to be in and around the vicinity of car parks, some of the most problematic campfires are deep in the inclosures where people believe they will not be found. There tends to be a concentration of incidents however in those areas which are in close proximity to the train stations, so there are often issues in Busketts inclosure which is just across the road from Ashurst train station, and in some of the inclosures near to Brockenhurst train station too.

