

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	19 June 2012
By	Chief Executive Officer
Title of Report	Chief Executive's Progress Report
Purpose of Report	To report on progress by the South Downs National Park Authority

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to

- 1) note the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority since the last Report**
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises the progress that has been made since my last report to the 13 March NPA. The aim is to provide a broad overview of the highlights, so each item is a short summary, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail at the meeting.

2. Progress and Highlights

- 2.1 We will be providing a detailed report on the **provisional outturn for 2011/12** to the Resources and Performance Committee Meeting on 21 June but the headline position is an underspend of £0.968m, some of which will be used to meet anticipated expenditure in 2012/13. This was chiefly because of a significant reduction in direct employees costs, due to a number of vacancies being filled later than planned, to an underspend on premises costs, and another on third party payments (particularly in relation to planning) resulting from efficiency savings and the realisation that some work can be more effectively delivered in-house. These savings were partly offset by the shortfall in planning income consequential on the wider economic outlook and greater expenditure than planned on interim staff and the visitor survey to produce the net position quoted above. The carried forward underspend creates some useful flexibility in delivering the budget for 2012/13, particularly in relation to accommodating the budget for Capron House.
- 2.2 The new **finance contract** has been awarded to Brighton and Hove for a three year period which gives us access to their powerful systems of control and review. In particular, a new web based **procurement system** is now in use which will simplify our accounting procedures, tighten controls and increase quality, sustainability and value for money through the use of approved suppliers.
- 2.3 Following Members approval to go ahead with the work at **Capron House** at the 24 May NPA we have now received tenders from three local firms for the main construction contracts. Interviews took place on 6 June and we are currently evaluating the results. I hope to be able to inform you of the outcome at the NPA.
- 2.4 **The Nature Improvement Area (NIA)** contract documentation has been signed off and the initiation of the project has begun. The project delivery plan is being worked up with partners and the recruitment process for the project administration post is underway.
- 2.5 The uniform **IDOX** planning system was launched to schedule on 1 April and, although there have been more teething problems than expected, we are steadily working through them and a close working relationship has been established with the local authorities. A

smooth handover was achieved from the four transferring authorities and we now have a full development control team in place which dealt with some 20 applications in the first three months. The new payments were agreed, with the resulting efficiencies generating opportunities for savings for our partner local authorities, as well as a total saving of some £200k for the NPA. Negotiations on next year's Service Level Agreements (SLAs) have already begun.

- 2.6 The **State of the Park Report** has been extensively redrafted following the discussion at the last meeting. In particular the opening and closing chapters have been completely recast to align them more closely to our statutory purposes, to signpost the structure more clearly and to provide a clear link into the Management Plan. A number of Members are providing help with the re-drafting of individual chapters and we are editing the entire text for consistency to allow the final version to be taken to the 26 July NPA meeting for final discussion and approval to proceed to publication. This is an important milestone which will allow us to shift our full attention to the preparation of the Management Plan.
- 2.7 The framework for our new **vision** which was agreed at the 26 April Workshop has been edited to create a short, inspirational plain English version without losing any of the key points identified by Members. The results will be put to the 26 July Meeting so that a final choice can be made.
- 2.8 A number of **major projects** have been launched since my last report. On 4 April the **electric bike network** pilot became operational, with a fleet of ten bikes available to hire at Alice Holt Forest Centre, Petersfield, Alton and Easebourne. This will encourage traffic-free visits to the National Park and I hope we can expand the fleet in future as part of our planning for the South Downs Centre. The **Our South Downs** project, the first such scheme that covers a whole National Park, was launched at the end of April. The project works with partner organisations and 738 local schools to encourage children to map and explore the world on their doorstep, with particular focus on the rich wildlife, landscapes, history, culture and industry of the South Downs National Park.
- 2.9 Work on the self assessment for November's **peer review** is now underway in accordance with the work plan presented to the 24 May workshop. Member leads and deputy leads are being identified for each of the seven key lines of enquiry (KLOE).
- 2.10 On the organisational side, our **staff team** is now nearly complete, with a Finance and Procurement Officer due to begin work on 6 August and recruitment underway for an Internal Communications Officer, Information and Communications Officer and Enforcement Officer. These new posts, together with the four new posts resulting from the 1 April transfer of planning powers from four authorities, will bring our total headcount (including fixed term and externally funded roles) to 95.2 FTE posts.
- 2.11 The staff **performance reporting** round for 2011/12 is now complete and job objectives for 2012/13 have been set for all staff. Training for development needs identified as part of this objective setting is in preparation. The Health and Safety policy is now in place and all staff have received fire safety training.
- 2.12 An action plan to address issues arising from the **staff survey** is in preparation, based on the discussion by Members and a series of staff feedback sessions. It is important that the action plan is put together by the whole staff team and that we regularly report our progress against it. With this in mind an all-staff session on 31 May prepared the first draft, which we will share with Members once it has been encapsulated in a project plan.
- 2.13 The **IT contract** has been awarded to Advanced365 who have begun work with a series of site visits to assess our current arrangements and help them design an entirely new IT solution. This is planned to "go live" on 2 July. Our new intranet is in preparation and will be ready in late September.
- 2.14 The **communications strategy** is well underway and will be brought to Members for a first discussion on 26 July. The next issue of South Downs View will be available later this month. A communications workplan is also nearly complete which will illustrate the range of our planned communications and engagement activity, allowing Members to identify events

- or announcements in which they have a particular interest.
- 2.15 Following the success of the **SCF celebration** on 23 March we have begun planning for next year and currently envisage two events, a “virtual” celebration through short video clips in the Spring and a full event to mark the opening of the South Downs Centre in the Autumn. A **mid year review** of the SCF and Major Partnerships Panel will be brought to the 27 September workshop.
- 2.16 Our **summer programme of events** is now in full swing. We played a major role in the launch of the Brighton Biosphere bid on 21 and 22 May. Despite atrocious weather our attendance at the South of England Show was a success. The shepherd’s caravan that has been restored by volunteers attracted considerable attention and Richard Benyon, MP, the Defra Minister responsible for National Parks, spent a long time with us, commenting favourably on the reports he had received on our emphasis on partnership and localism. Our stand was awarded second place in the Farming and Wildlife category.
- 2.17 The latest version of the **NPA forward planner** is attached to this note as **Appendix 1**. This covers many of the topics mentioned earlier in this report and allows Members to see how the Authority’s business has been rationalised and structured over the rest of the year to provide greater focus on strategic issues and to allow more opportunities for constructive debate and challenge, as agreed at the 23 February away day. We have, for instance, created a single “main series” of workshops in place of the separate sessions for each Committee that were originally planned and have brought together the early work on developing the Management Plan and the Core Strategy. Please note that this means that the all day Member workshops in your Handbooks for 28 June, 25 October and 22 November have been cancelled.
- 2.18 A first draft of the **pattern of meetings for 2013** using the same format is in preparation. You will see that a number of issues which have arisen in relation to Pulborough Village Hall have led us to change the workshop venue to the Cowdray Hall, Easebourne. This is an experiment on which we would welcome Members’ views before we set the locations for next year’s meetings. After June 2013 we will, of course, be meeting in the new South Downs Centre!

TREVOR BEATTIE
Chief Executive Officer

Contact Officer: Trevor Beattie, Chief Executive Officer
 Tel: 01730 811776
 email: Trevor.beattie@southdowns.gov.uk
 Appendices 1 – NPA Forward Planner
 SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Planning, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Head of Operations, Deputy Chief Finance Officer,