

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	18 September 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 Rapid progress has been maintained over the summer since my report to the 26 July National Park Authority (NPA) meeting. The micro site for the State of the Park Report is under construction and a plan is being drawn up for the launch. The Communications Strategy has been revised to incorporate Members' comments. We have just completed interviewing a strong field for the new Web Officer. The Sustainable Development Strategy is nearly complete and will be coming to Members in October. The bid for stage 1 Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) of the Wooded Heaths programme was submitted as planned on 12 August 2012.

2. Progress and Highlights

- 2.1 At the time of writing we have just heard about the **Ministerial reshuffle** and the new housing and planning package. The Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP has been brought into Defra as the new Secretary of State and the new Minister of State is David Heath who has a strong background in rural policy, including having been Parliamentary consultant for the World Wide Fund for nature. I will be meeting Tom Surrey, the new head of our Defra sponsor division, in Bristol on 25 September and will ask him then how we can best present our plans to his new boss – as well as making clear that he is welcome to visit the South Downs at any time. It is good news that Richard Benyon appears to be staying in post, with a portfolio that has not been specified at the time of writing but looks as if it will continue to include National Parks.
- 2.2 We do not yet have all of the details of the **new housing and planning package** but the new potential to reduce the previously agreed element of affordable housing on schemes if they have stalled for viability reasons and to renegotiate s106 agreements within their first five years could both present some challenges which we are investigating. Our initial view is, however, that the effects within the National Park are likely to be relatively modest. A limited number of schemes come forward where affordable homes are a component since the requirement is triggered on major developments which are, by definition, exceptional within National Parks. In addition land values tend to be high compared to the surrounding areas, so there is often a higher margin and greater willingness to provide affordable homes as part of the process of obtaining residential permission.
- 2.3 The extension of permitted development rights for single storey extensions and certain commercial buildings follows a trend that has become established over the past two years. It is subject to consultation but the changes have had modest effects thus far, despite warnings from the profession, and we anticipate a limited impact on the National Park. The extension of permitted developer rights for householder extensions is for three years only and does not apply to 'protected areas'. We are seeking clarification but currently believe

that National Parks are likely to qualify for exemption as protected areas. I should have further details about all of this at the Meeting and it is clear that there will plenty for the Planning Committee to ponder and the Management Plan to absorb.

- 2.4 The Government's emphasis on public expenditure cuts has been nudged down the agenda over the summer by a new focus on growth. It seems to me that this presents some opportunities for the National Park as we develop our priorities in the Management Plan, particularly the pillar which covers the creation of a thriving, sustainable rural economy.
- 2.5 The structure of the **Management Plan** has been significantly strengthened following comments from Members and the Partnership at the 19 July workshop. There are now nine pillars that are being tested with a wide range of partners. As agreed at the NPA discussion following the workshop, we are now arranging stakeholder dialogues on six cross-cutting issues which will then be brought to Member workshops as follows:
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| 18 Oct: | Climate change impacts |
| 15 Nov : | Renewable energy, energy efficiency etc |
| 11 Dec : | Water, future farming practices and local food |
| 18 Dec : | Sustainable tourism |
| 29 Jan: | Transport, housing and development |
- 2.6 In addition to local authority involvement in the stakeholder events and the technical working groups we will also be involving a number of authorities in the early development of the pillars at senior officer/member level, with the structure of these sessions determined by the requirements of individual authorities.
- 2.7 Our proactive approach to **Neighbourhood Planning** has gathered pace over the summer and is attracting a great deal of interest. A number of partners have asked for a summary of our approach and a copy is attached for Members before further distribution. (**Appendix I**)
- 2.8 When the Sustainable Communities Fund (SCF) Panel met in late August it approved £9k for a feasibility study on the **conversion of the Petersfield to Midhurst railway line** into a route for cycling, walking and horse riding. The study will be undertaken by a local group called "Shortcut". Our Rangers have also been researching the potential for opening up some or all of the Midhurst to Petworth line. In addition to the obvious access and recreation benefits these proposals have great potential to enhance the rural economy and we will be working closely with local farmers, landowners and parishes to develop them.
- 2.9 I am grateful to the many Members who have been involved in our preparations for the forthcoming **peer review**, either by suggesting stakeholders who should be met or by working with the officers responsible for individual Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) to review the gap analysis in preparation for the first draft of the self assessment. This has now been produced and is under consideration by the KLOE leads prior to consideration by the full Authority at its workshop on 27 September. We have held positive discussions with the review team about the timetable, which will also be ready for the 27 September workshop. We have been contacting the selected partners to ensure that they are able to take part and are starting to send out invitations for particular dates. This will include a group session with all Members who are not Committee chairs on Thursday 29 November at 2pm in Capron House.
- 2.10 The performance of the **UNiform Idox planning system** is now stable and has remained so since the 26 July NPA meeting. Registration of planning applications is generally on time and there is no backlog of our own applications from the recovered service areas. There are some remaining issues with a single authority but these are subject intensive joint working and should shortly be resolved. Over 1,900 applications are on the system from across the Park, which is broadly in line with expectations at this time of year. For the first time performance data and process management information from across the Park can be accessed and used to identify areas for improvement, as well as allowing the public to access application information across the Park in one place at any time. Issues remain but these are of a more detailed technical nature rather than relating to overall system stability. The additional specialist resource we have brought into the team is helping us to address each new issue as it arises.

- 2.11 We expect to complete the purchase of the **South Downs Centre** this month but as yet do not have a definitive date – I may be able to inform Members of this at the Meeting. The planning and listed buildings applications for the refurbishment works went live on the planning portal in mid August. The Listed Building Applications will be considered at the September Planning Committee before being sent for approval to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The Planning Application will be considered at the October Planning Committee. A public exhibition was held in the Memorial Hall on 22 August to allow members of the public to view the plans. 60 visitors attended the exhibition and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Subject to the receipt of planning and listed buildings consents in October, the contractor is expected to start on site in early November. We are continuing discussions with Chichester District Council about co-locating the Tourist Information Centre in the new entrance foyer and with various community organisations who may be interested in sharing space to develop a community hub.
- 2.12 On the weekend of 1/2 September the SDNPA sponsored the South Downs Society to host the **annual conference of National Park Societies** at Sussex University. Robert Cheesman and the Society put together a very full three day programme which I was asked to open and which included a presentation by Chris Todd on the story of the designation of the SDNP, a session from Phil Belden about our aspirations for the future and one from Andrew Shaxson about our partnership based development management model. Margaret Paren gave the closing keynote speech which summed up the lessons learnt and posed a series of key questions for the future. The whole conference was an excellent opportunity to introduce these experienced campaigners to the South Downs and to gain their input on our progress to date. All those of us who attended were pleased by the positive feedback we received on the approach, vision, priorities and achievements of the SDNPA.
- 2.13 The **Forum** has grown rapidly over the summer and is now close to 800 members, more than half of whom have read Margaret Paren’s posting about the adoption of our vision for 2050. Hélène Rossiter’s South Downs Centre posting recently broke all records with more than 500 members reading it, which is a measure of just how active the Forum has become, particularly when taking into account that many non-members will have also read the postings.
- 2.14 After a slow and soggy start we are finishing this season’s **programme of events** in our surrounding communities with a strong SDNPA presence at busy events on Brighton seafront (two since the last meeting), Alresford Agricultural Show, Madhurst, Telscombe Tye, Findon Sheep Fair and the Fernhurst Furnace. On the weekend of 15/16 September there will be the living history event at Iping Common that we are delivering jointly with the Sussex Wildlife Trust entitled “Heathland through the Ages”. The season will conclude with the Laughton Ploughing Match on the day after the NPA meeting, Wednesday 19 September. I would like to thank the many Members who have devoted a great deal of time and energy to helping us to represent the SDNPA at these events.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide a broad overview of the highlights, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or which they would like to debate further at the Meeting.

TREVOR BEATTIE **Chief Executive Officer**

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Appendix	I. The SDNPA Approach to Neighbourhood Planning
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Planning, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Head of Operations, Deputy Chief Finance Officer,