

Report to	<b>South Downs National Park Authority</b>
Date	<b>19 February 2013</b>
By	<b>Chief Executive Officer</b>
Title of Report	<b>Chief Executive's Progress Report</b>
Purpose of Report	<b>To report on progress by the South Downs National Park Authority</b>

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**Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to:**

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

- 1.1 We are now deeply engaged in the preparation of the first National Park **Management Plan**. This is the main topic for the meeting with the South Downs Partnership and the Authority which follows on 19 February 2013 so I will not dwell on it here. I would, however, like to thank Members for the work they have put in to the intensive process of consultation by electronic survey that followed the 28 January 2013 workshop and has allowed us to further refine the outcomes and shape our emerging policies. This is a crucial stage in the life of the Authority since these policies will shape our Local Plan and our entire programme of work for at least the next five years, as well as locking in a range of other organisations.
- 1.2 Once the input from today's meetings has been incorporated, the survey will be sent to Forum members and other key stakeholder groups so that they can make an input alongside the seven engagement workshops taking place over the coming month. A revised draft of the Management Plan will then be brought back to the 16 April Authority meeting.

**2. Progress and Highlights**

- 2.1 We have made a series of interesting **announcements** over the past few weeks which have captured considerable attention in the local media. These include the launch of our new Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) funded small grants scheme to encourage sustainable travel, the creation of the South Downs Forestry Partnership to provide free advice to woodland owners, and recognition of the long service of 24 members of the Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS).
- 2.2 The most recent of these announcements has been the mass participation of "citizen scientists" in the **National Star Count** which is taking place from Friday 8 February to Saturday 16 February 2013. This will supplement the evidence in the State of the Park Report about the quality of the National Park's night skies in preparation for a possible bid to gain Dark Sky status for some key locations.
- 2.3 The Government's announcement on 30 January 2013 of a £62m investment in **cycling infrastructure** included £12 million for National Parks. Our work on the LSTF, including the extension of the Centurion Way, leaves us perfectly placed to exploit this important new source of funding. Initial contacts with Sustrans and the Department for Transport (DfT) have suggested many possible options, some of which would allow us to draw more widely than the National Park allocation.
- 2.4 Our joint **LSTF programme**, now known as "2 National Parks LSTF", is on track to spend its first year's allocation. With the assistance of Barry Lipscomb, the Member champion for

the LSTF, signage for the first three railway stations (Lewes, Petersfield and Arundel) has just been approved. We have appointed an LSTF project manager, and two other LSTF funded posts, the Travel Campaign & Identity Manager and the Sustainable Transport Officer, will start in March. A programme of schemes for design and delivery over the next two years has now been approved, including a number of foot, bridleway and cycle routes across the South Downs National Park and a small sustainable travel grants scheme. Some LSTF funds, mainly revenue, remain to be allocated and the Project Boards in each National Park will consider new projects in the first quarter of 2013/14. Of key interest to the Authority following the discussion at our 28 January 2013 workshop is community transport and how to improve bus services for visitors and residents

- 2.5 The draft **Corporate Plan** for 2013/14 to 2015/16 is now nearly complete following the discussion at Resources and Performance Committee on 13 February 2013. This will be the Authority's first complete three year plan that analyses our expenditure by our Management Plan objectives, showing exactly how we spend our resources on direct delivery, as well as identifying the challenges and uncertainties that we face over the next three years. The Plan will go to the 19 March Authority meeting for approval but we will be drawing Members attention to the presence of the latest draft on the intranet long before then so that you have plenty of time to consider this important new planning tool
- 2.6 Members. An important part of the Corporate Plan is our **Improvement Plan**, which has been thoroughly updated in line with the recommendations of the recent **peer review**. Further changes are likely to be necessary following the sessions that have been booked for detailed recommendation by recommendation consideration of the peer review by the staff on 26 February 2013 and by Members on the morning of the 28 February 2013 workshop,
- 2.7 Members will be aware that, since 2005, Ofgem, the gas and electricity regulator has granted electricity network operators a special allowance to **replace overhead lines with underground cables** in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks to enhance the appearance of protected landscapes. The Authority has been making maximum use of this provision. A small scheme at Cocking has just been undergrounded and the network operators are currently preparing to underground 2,964 meters of line in the Cuckmere Valley at Frog Firle and the Rathfinny Estate. The works will start in March/April 2013 and finish in May 2013, subject to favourable weather. Schemes are also in preparation at Telscombe Tye (approximately £700k) and Lewes Levels (£250k). Two further projects have been approved for Monkton and Tichborne that will bring major improvements in 2014/15. This work received a welcome boost when the Government recently announced plans to increase the national budget available through Ofgem from £100m over 5 years to £500m over 8 years. We are currently investigating how we might draw on this additional resource in manner that maximises the wider environmental and landscape benefits.
- 2.8 On 31 January 2013 the Government published its official response to the **Independent Panel on Forestry's Final Report**. There is still a lot of detail to be developed but government has promised to give the nation's forests the recognition and policy backing they need. The statement confirms that the Public Forest Estate will remain in public ownership, and announces that a new body will be established to hold the estate in trust of the nation and manage it for the long-term benefit of the economy and the environment. The remainder of the existing functions of the Forestry Commission, such as the issue of grants and licences, will be considered as part of the current triennial review of Natural England and the Environment Agency. We are following this rapidly changing policy area closely to ensure that the interests of the Authority are fully represented. We continue to work in close partnership with the Forestry Commission, both on their estate and on policy and research. In this regard it is welcome news that there has been an increase in the Forest Research budget in recognition of the increased risk of pests and disease, particularly Ash dieback.
- 2.9 Members are well aware that the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 established **Access Land** and that the South Downs was one of the first areas of the country to be mapped. We have over 300 parcels of land available for public access (although many were accessible before the legislation) and we are the Access Authority for this land. The Act

stated that these areas had to be reviewed within 10 years, then at not more than ten-yearly intervals. Since the first such review is due next year the South Downs Local Access Forum wrote to the Minister seeking further details so that we can be well prepared. On 4 February 2013 Defra responded that, “due to the budgetary situation”, this work cannot now be undertaken and they will shortly be making regulations to extend the period to 15 years, with subsequent reviews within 20 years. This is unsatisfactory, but will not affect our own long term programme of work to improve information about, and access to, our Access Land and to deliver our recently agreed Rights of Way Accord.

- 2.10 The new people counters along the **South Downs Way** are now installed and sending back live data on the number, type and direction of users. This live data will complement information from the visitor survey and our on-line user feedback questionnaire.
- 2.11 The **intranet** is currently being redeveloped in response to recent surveys of the needs of Members, staff and volunteers. The new intranet, which will be launched in April 2013, will include a discussion board with blogging function, an extensive searchable archive, an improved staff and Member directory and a social section. Full training and support will be provided to all users.
- 2.12 Alongside our internal portal, a **new Authority website** is also in preparation for launch in July 2013. The Communications and Engagement team plan to evolve the look, feel and navigation of the website and will shortly be seeking input from Members, stakeholders, staff and other parties. Our website has recently been increasing in popularity as we have engaged with new audiences, with the star count generating a new upsurge in its use, so now is a good time to provide something fresh, current and engaging. We will showcase more of the special qualities of the South Downs National Park and provide a clearer navigation structure to enable us to highlight important news, features and events as they occur. Members will be updated with a full project plan at the next workshop.

### **3. Conclusion**

- 3.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide a broad overview of the highlights of the two months since the 11 December 2012 Authority meeting, avoiding topics (such as planning) that feature strongly on the current agenda and 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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