

Agenda Item 13
Report RPC 14/13

Report to	Resources & Performance Committee
Date	09 April 2013
Report from	Director of Corporate Services & Director of Operations
Title of Report	Estates Update
Purpose of Report	To provide an update on work in progress to maintain short-term office needs and the development of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) estate to provide an effective working environment for the conservation and enhancement of the South Downs, as set out in the SDNPA Corporate Plan.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- 1) note the report;
 - 2) approve the operating criteria set out in paragraph 4.1;
 - 3) re-affirm the strategy for area offices and potential developments for the Western and Eastern area offices;
 - 4) agree that an update from Officers on progress with the Central and Wealden Heath offices be provided at the appropriate time;
 - 5) agree that regular reports on the progress of this strategy should be made to R&P and, through this Committee, to the wider membership.
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1. Introduction & Summary

- 1.1 This report assesses the current SDNPA estate. It explains the work undertaken to maintain these properties and introduces proposals that secure a long-term solution for an estate that can deliver an efficient and effective service across the South Downs National Park.
- 1.2 The broad strategy for the estate was agreed by the SDNPA in 2010, during the “shadow year”. This set out the aim of having a centrally-based headquarters, with a series of area offices, which together would ensure good geographical coverage and local contact with the community.
- 1.3 The agreed strategy has begun to be implemented, with the purchase of Capron House in Midhurst, along with the creation of four area offices. Initial work has begun on establishing the South Downs Centre in the heart of the National Park, along with active negotiations with partners in both the eastern and western areas of the National Park.
- 1.4 In the east, work has been undertaken in partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council to examine the feasibility of developing an accessible public asset at Stanmer, north of Brighton. This could provide a new public face for the National Park, along with an area office able to act as the main SDNPA contact point in the east.
- 1.5 In the west, discussions have begun with the Forestry Commission and Hampshire County Council to plan for the long-term future of Queen Elizabeth Country Park. This is both as a major public facility and gateway embedded in the western part of the National Park, along with integrated offices to support efficient partnership delivery.

2. Background

- 2.1 Currently, the SDNPA operates out of four temporary offices in Midhurst while awaiting its move to a permanent HQ. Some Planning staff are housed in Petersfield and there are four area offices, used mainly by the Operations teams, occupied alongside a number of key partners.

- 2.2 The original “shadow SDNPA” home was at Rosemary’s Parlour, Midhurst, and as the organisation has grown, particularly since it became fully operational in April 2011, additional offices were acquired at M2, Hatton and Peachey Houses. A further office, mainly for Planning staff, was also established at Penns Place, Petersfield.
- 2.3 The genesis of the current SDNPA operating model was the June 2010 SDNPA meeting. This agreed to taking on an “outward-facing delivery function”. The minute states (extract): *“Approach to the establishment of functions for the South Downs National Park Authority (para.88) Resolved: that the Authority ... (5) configure a flexible National Park Delivery Function based initially on 4 Areas (there was some debate at the meeting about the possibility of 6 areas) and designed to achieve the National Park Management Plan”.*
- 2.4 When the SDNPA became operational in April 2011 the delivery function was transferred from the South Downs Joint Committee (SDJC). It had inherited the countryside management functions of the (Sussex) county councils and developed these over the course of some 20 years. Their role was to protect, conserve and enhance the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and at the time of transfer they operated from area bases, which acted as contact points for the local community and bases for staff and volunteers.
- 2.5 Searches were undertaken to identify four potential area offices and it soon became apparent that there was a lack of suitable available premises. It was therefore decided to utilise the ex-Joint Committee offices as follows:
 - Western Downs – Queen Elizabeth Country Park (south of Petersfield)
 - Wealden Heath – Bepton Road Depot (just south of Midhurst)
 - Central Downs – Weald & Downland Museum (Singleton)
 - Eastern Downs – Stanmer Park (north of Brighton)

3. Current Status of Area Offices

- 3.1 As the locations of the four offices inherited from the SDJC aligned very well with the guiding principles and the four areas agreed by the SDNPA, there was no need to change working arrangements in the short term.
- 3.2 The table in **Appendix I** gives detailed information about each of the current area offices. It notes the work that has been undertaken at each location to ensure each office is adequate for short-term needs, fit for purpose and fully compliant with health and safety legislation.
- 3.3 The Resources and Performance Committee receives updates on estates as a standing item at each committee. The following paragraphs, along with **Appendix I**, offer the latest position at each office.
- 3.4 Western Downs:
 - The current main lease between the Forestry Commission (FC) and Hampshire County Council (HCC) expires in December 2013.
 - Agreement in principle has been reached to extend the SDNPA occupation post-lease while future plans for the site are being worked up between partners.
 - The ability to work in partnership at this site is strong as the office is shared with the HCC rights of way area team.
 - Two storage units used for workshop and tool storage facilities are in place on land owned by and on a lease from the FC. This lease expires on the 31 December 2014 and has a six month notice period.
- 3.5 Wealden Heath:
 - The office and workshop are leased from West Sussex County Council. This lease expires on 31 March 2014 and has a three month notice period from either side to end the lease.
 - The site is currently on the market for sale. Any potential purchaser would need to carry out extensive consultations and planning applications, so the NPA would receive significant warning of any sale.
 - Plans are being worked up to carry out internal and external decorations of the building in the first quarter of the new financial year.

3.6 Central Downs:

- The office and tool store are leased from the Weald & Downland Museum. This lease expires on 31 March 2015.

3.7 Eastern Downs:

- The office, tool store and shared workshop facilities are on a licence to 31 March 2015 from Brighton & Hove City Council.
- There is a tool store at Seven Sisters Country Park, leased to 31 March 2014 from East Sussex County Council.
- Plans are being worked up to carry out internal and external decorations of the NPA office and the front communal entrance area of this building. The works should start in the first quarter of the new financial year.
- The data network system has been improved and there are some issues with the telephone network within the building, to be resolved in the first quarter of 2013-14.

4 Operating Model

4.1 Whilst the current location of the area offices has been largely pragmatic, it has been underpinned by a consistent set of Member expectations and requirements. These have proven robust in practice and have been deployed in this paper to assess the future requirements for area offices and the suitability of the current arrangements. Officers have systematised these expectations and requirements to produce the following set of operational criteria, which are not in priority order:

- a) The provision for the SDNPA of four accessible, local area offices spread geographically across the National Park;
- b) Co-location with partners wherever possible, not seeking SDNPA ownership, but cost efficiency and flexibility;
- c) The provision of a suitable base for rangers and volunteers, and other staff as required;
- d) The provision of storage and workshop facilities plus secure parking for SDNPA pool vehicles;
- e) Where possible, providing a stimulus for the local rural economy and demonstrating high sustainability standards;
- f) Offering the capacity to support current and future growth of volunteers, partners and externally-funded projects;
- g) Providing a local contact point and convenient liaison with farmers/landowners/land managers and other local community contacts;
- h) Encouraging cross-team working opportunities, which means providing some hot desks for staff from other SDNPA directorates, as well as Members and external partners;
- i) Where possible, the potential inclusion of accessible public facing interpretation facilities.

Members are asked to consider and approve these criteria, which will then govern all future work on the estate.

4.2 As noted in Section 3, the area offices are adequate for the short term, being fit for purpose and complying with health and safety and operational requirements, as well as being convenient for the catchment areas of the current Volunteer Rangers. They meet the operating model criteria and provide opportunities for further development, such as meeting emerging South Downs Management Plan priorities, bringing in new partnership projects and encouraging cross-departmental working. However, the short term nature (for a variety of reasons) of these offices has necessitated exploring options for long term solutions. The following section provides further details of the work that has been carried out to date in each area to consider these long term solutions.

4.3 Western Downs:

- The current operational base is highly accessible, being on the A3 trunk road and four miles from Petersfield railway station.
- As a result of the ending of the FC/HCC lease, a new vision for the Country Park is currently being written, involving the key players and the SDNPA.

- Discussions are underway, with the aim of brokering a long-term partnership, with shared office and operational facilities, and a National Park public face with a re-vamped visitor centre.

4.4 Wealden Heath:

- Though the current area base has good facilities in terms of office and workshop space, long term the site is vulnerable to being sold.
- It has not been possible to accommodate the area team at Capron House, as envisaged by the interim SDNPA team, due to the lack of space for suitable facilities for tool and vehicle storage.
- A variety of options are being considered by officers for the future provision of facilities in this area e.g. Woolbeding (National Trust) and Dunford House (YMCA).

4.5 Central Downs:

- The current office is in one of the museum's re-built buildings, with nearby workshop / tool-store and volunteer facilities; they are less than adequate for the storage of tools and equipment.
- There are no ideal sites easily accessible by good public transport in this area, though there is potential on the A286, which has a reasonable bus service from Chichester to Midhurst.
- Options within the museum are possible, but this would be a long-term prospect as the Weald & Downland Museum (W&D) is still considering its future development plans. It is in the process of re-working a lottery bid following the rejection of its original plans by the HLF. Other options being considered by officers for the future provision of facilities in this area include an ex-estate office, which could be associated with a major new biomass boiler designed to provide district heating for the office, estate and village.

4.6 Eastern Downs:

- The large portacabin at Stanmer Park, which currently houses the SDNPA office, is reaching the end of its life. Alternative accommodation will need to be found over the next few years.
- Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) is keen to work with the SDNPA, both in the conservation and enhancement of Stanmer Park, and in finding a solution for the area office.
- Working with BHCC, the SDNPA is looking more strategically at the feasibility of restoring the Home Farm traditional buildings complex and a joint development appraisal has been commissioned. The results of the feasibility work in this area are due in May 2013 with public consultation planned for October / November 2013. This could provide suitable accommodation, along with a public face for the National Park, as part of a new "country park" interpretation centre, perhaps funded by associated enabling development.

5 Next Steps

- 5.1 Future options for both the western and eastern area offices are being investigated through close working between the SDNPA and partners. It is recommended that officers continue to work up these proposals for consideration by Members when firm plans have crystallised.
- 5.2 The Central and Wealden Heath offices require further work by officers to consider with the options and to test potentially suitable premises against the criteria in 4.1. Most of the criteria should be capable of being met. There are, for example, a number of potential partners and a number of relatively accessible premises with the capacity to accommodate future partners / new externally-funded projects.
- 5.3 The strategy for moving forward is through a sequential approach, resolving accommodation issues in line with the agreed operating model as the proposals for each local office develop. It is not possible to set a clear timetable for this process since all of the potential locations depend upon the active involvement of one or more partners. This means that the SDNPA has less direct control over the development of our estate strategy than an organisation which owns and operates its estate on the traditional model; but this is more than compensated by

the benefits in terms of partnership working, efficiency savings and close links with the volunteers and the communities we serve.

- 5.4 In terms of the day-to-day maintenance of the area offices, working with the SDNPA safety advisor, a register is in preparation of all maintenance operations required, to be regularly monitored during site visits. This goes hand-in-hand with the general health and safety, risk assessments and other operational duties.

6 Resources

- 6.1 The Authority has an Estates Maintenance earmarked reserve currently totalling £1.256 million for office maintenance and refurbishment.
- 6.2 It is too early to cost the potential options emerging for any of the area offices, though this will be part of the feasibility work at each site.
- 6.3 Any long term solutions for Area Offices would be reported for approval by Members, to release any funding required from this earmarked reserve and/or to supplement it from currently unallocated reserves.
- 6.4 The SDNPA would also be able to consider using its borrowing capability, which could be utilised if the estates earmarked reserve does not have sufficient funds by the time Members were to take decisions on the next area office development.
- 6.5 As well as developing the area offices over time, day-to-day estates maintenance also needs to be factored in, with sufficient officer time to cover such items as partner liaison, carrying out tender evaluations and managing contractors on site to carry out works. The 2013/14 revenue budget includes £387,000 for the running costs of all SDNPA offices, which includes costs for leasing, utilities, repairs and maintenance.
- 6.6 All of the work set out above will be progressed in conjunction with the delivery of Members' preferred option for the future of Capron House following the 16 April 2013 SDNPA meeting. Different options to be considered at that Meeting would, of course, have different implications for the wider estate and this will be highlighted in the Capron House paper. The operating criteria set out in this paper do however hold good, whatever the decision on Capron House, ensuring that the SDNPA continues to be well represented and accommodated across the National Park.

7 Risk Management

- 7.1 Health and safety is paramount and any concerns with offices have been addressed promptly. All offices now have fit for purpose fire evacuation procedures and fire marshals in place and all staff have attended fire training. As stated in paragraph 5.3, procedures have been put in place to monitor all the offices, with regular maintenance schedules, to minimise any risks.
- 7.2 As part of the operating model, partnership working and co-location are two important criteria. This relies on a productive working relationship with relevant partners in developing future proposals. Considerable work has been undertaken to engage with the key partners across the National Park.

8 Human Rights, Equalities, Health & Safety

- 8.1 These works are necessary to ensure a safe working environment for staff, volunteers and partnership working, as well as the public.

9 External Consultees

- 9.1 Forestry Commission, Hampshire County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council, East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council, Weald & Downland Museum, West Dean Estate.

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Appendices Appendix I – current Area Office details

SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Planning, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Director of Operations, Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer & Legal Services.

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Appendix I
Detailed Information About Current Area Offices

Area Office	Facilities provided	Capacity	Landlord	Lease	H&S issues / improvements
Western Downs Queen Elizabeth Country Park, near Petersfield	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office (above information centre) Site compound with tool store container Parking 	5 staff	<i>Site owned by Forestry Commission</i> <i>Information centre leased to HCC</i> Office: Hampshire County Council Compound: Forestry Commission	31/12/13 31/12/14	Planning application approved for second temporary storage container, which will improve the safety and security of tool storage, as well as providing workshop facilities for staff and volunteers.
Wealden Heath Bepton Road, Midhurst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office Meeting room Large workshop Parking 	5 staff	West Sussex County Council	31/3/14	Recent maintenance includes roof repairs, plumbing maintenance and clearing access routes to the emergency exit.
Central Downs W&D Museum, Singleton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office Small tool store Parking 	5 staff	<i>Site owned by West Dean Estate</i> Weald & Downland Museum	31/3/15	No major maintenance or repairs have been required this year. There are no outstanding H&S issues.
Eastern Downs Stanmer Park, Brighton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office Small meeting room Shared workshop Parking Tool store at Seven Sisters Country Park 	11 staff 4 hot-desks	Brighton & Hove City Council Tool store: East Sussex County Council	31/3/15 31/3/14	Leaking roof fixed earlier in the year and improvements to the ICT systems made. There are no outstanding H&S issues.