

Report to	<b>Resources &amp; Performance Committee</b>
Date	<b>17 September 2013</b>
By	<b>Director of Operations</b>
Title of Report	<b>South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service – supplement</b>
Purpose of Report	<b>Following the general overview of inputs and outputs at the last Resources &amp; Performance Committee, this paper provides some specific detail of various volunteer services delivered and superseded.</b>

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**Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:**

- 1) note the changes to the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service that have taken place since the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) came into operation; and**
  - 2) to be aware of potential developments, dependent on future local authority working.**
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**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The presentation to the committee, “South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service – what we put in, and what we get out” (20 June 2013), summarised the total volunteer resource and the costs to the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) of running this service, along with the many benefits of the action delivered by the volunteers, with an estimated financial value of over a third of a million pounds a year.
- 1.2 In summary, there are 320 active volunteers working on a regular basis, providing over 5000 days across the National Park. The South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) works with 15 partner organisations, mainly undertaking practical conservation tasks. There are 17 practical groups working both week days and weekends, plus dedicated South Downs Way volunteers who monitor the National Trail and carry out minor maintenance. There are two site-specific groups affiliated to the VRS, along with Mosaic, championing ethnic minority involvement, office volunteers and others, including archaeological monitoring.
- 1.3 A number of comments were made, along with questions asked and answered; related queries were also raised at the subsequent SDNPA meeting. Amongst these were questions about wider VRS roles, which used to exist pre-SDNPA. This paper updates Members on this matter.

**2. VRS groups – then & now**

- 2.1 The forerunner to the SDNPA, the Sussex Downs Conservation Board / South Downs Joint Committee (SDJC), had a number of functions delegated to it from the constituent local authorities that made up the organisation. The main ones were rights of way, sites (local nature reserves, picnic sites etc) and Dutch Elm Disease control. To help deliver these, the VRS took a significant role in certain aspects of the management. With the arrival of the SDNPA, these functions were taken back in-house by the relevant local authorities, which resulted in changes to the nature of the management and the use of volunteers.
- 2.2 As a result of the decision by the local highway authorities (LHAs) to retain rights of way

management in the new National Park, meetings took place between the LHAs and SDNPA, along with a Members task group; this resulted in a protocol, with the SDNPA adding value to the statutory responsibilities of the LHAs. The VRS still does rights of way work, but the LHAs have different working practices, so overall there are fewer opportunities for support by the VRS, albeit with some variation in practice across the National Park. There is also no role for the VRS in monitoring the network (pre-NPA, there were volunteer parish path rangers, who covered all the parishes across the Sussex Downs).

- 2.3 Following Natural England's review of National Trails, it was decided that the "South Downs model" was the way forward, with the South Downs Way (SDW) co-ordinated by the SDNPA and the LHAs contributing towards the maintenance (to deliver their statutory duties); the VRS element continues, with dedicated SDW wardens keeping an eye on individual stretches, undertaking small-scale maintenance of the trail and VRS groups undertaking practical work.
- 2.4 Access Land is the responsibility of the SDNPA, which has compensated Volunteer Rangers for some of the lost rights of way work. This work covers both monitoring and maintenance.
- 2.5 The VRS was involved in work on many sites, owned by local authorities, being managed by the SDJC. Now, the owners manage these sites in-house, with limited use of the VRS. Most significant is Seven Sisters Country Park, which saw a high level of VRS activity and could be relied upon to provide work if a task with another leader / organisation had to be cancelled. There was also a dedicated group of visitor centre volunteers managed by the SDJC until its ending, when they were transferred to the county council for their direct management, but many have since left and the visitor centre is now open less frequently.
- 2.6 Pre-SDNPA, the VRS support of the Dutch Elm Disease control programme was two-fold, with summer elm wardens looking out for any signs of disease and practical help on smaller and less dangerous tree works throughout the year. Elm wardens were also offered the chance to transfer to East Sussex County Council (ESCC) to support disease monitoring when the control programme was taken back in-house; VRS support to the project is now limited to minor felling, bark-stripping and burning diseased elm for landowners, mainly on partner sites (eg Forestry Commission and National Trust).

### **3. Future working possibilities / potential**

- 3.1 The VRS has moved on since the pre-SDNPA days, adjusting to the different management regimes and working practices. The resulting "gaps" in delivery offer future possibilities for developing volunteering, but this is subject to the local authorities. The current squeeze on public finances make the concept of volunteer support an attractive one, but this does rely on providing resources to manage this valuable resource, and development and growth take time.
- 3.2 The outcome of the Volunteering review and follow-up Member discussions have set a course of action in diversifying our work in this area (eg facilitating volunteers across the SDNPA and helping co-ordinate and channel potential volunteers to the most appropriate organisations), being addressed through the current re-structuring proposals. Partly as a result of the financial situation and modernisation, local authorities are changing and there may be opportunities in future to encourage more volunteering. For example, West Sussex County Council (WSCC) embarked on a process of embedding volunteering into rights of way management, following a parish pilot; the VRS is actively involved and supports this on a regular basis. Hampshire County Council also draws on the VRS for rights of way work.
- 3.3 It is worth noting that a culture of shared services, partnership working etc, is pervading across the local government sector, so it may be that we, in the SDNPA, are asked to participate in traditional local authority functions. Of late, both ESCC and WSCC have been discussing sites management with the voluntary sector and Brighton & Hove City Council is considering the future management of its downland estate. The NPA will be encouraging volunteers at the South Downs Centre, across the breadth of the organisation and with partners based there.

- 3.4 There is considerable scope for developing volunteering across the SDNP with partners, either through the VRS doing more work directly or establishing new volunteering models and opportunities. This is largely dependent on the direction partners choose to go and the way they decide to work in future.
- 3.5 This report alerts members to the possibility that we may need to seriously consider new working arrangements and relationships with key partners in the future. This may provide significant opportunities for volunteering development, which we will need to be aware of and prepared for such an eventuality.
- 4. Resources**
- 4.1 There are no resource implications arising from this report.
- 5. Risk management**
- 5.1 There are no specific risks as a result of this report.
- 6. Human Rights, Equalities, Health and Safety**
- 6.1 There are no implications from this report.
- 7. Sustainability**
- 7.1 The work of the VRS helps deliver a positive result to the first principle of considering the impact on the environment and contributes towards a sustainable economy (principle 3); it strives towards social cohesion and well-being (principle 2); the active participation of volunteers addresses principle 4; the work follows SDNP policies and evidence (principle 5).
- 8. External Consultees**
- 8.1 None.

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Appendices:	None
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