

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **16 October 2025**
By **Chief Executive Officer**
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**
Note

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the report and progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report.

I. Summary and Background

1.1 This report provides a summary of our performance against the corporate plan targets and an overview of some key workstreams that have been underway since the report to the 8 of July 2025 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 It's been busy since my last report, and we continue to perform well against our corporate plan targets. I want to thank the whole team and board members for the brilliant efforts underway across the Park, and in every area of our work. The level of commitment and professionalism is phenomenal.

2.2 Over the last few months, I've started to feel that we are beginning to take on a new shape. By this I mean we are responding to what lies ahead. Some of this is deliberate and is driven by internal choices and some of it is being driven by external shifts. All of it feels good to me, but also understandably unsettling.

2.3 Internally we have seen changes in our Senior Leadership Team, and this will continue with the successful recruitment of our new Director of Landscapes and Operations, Alison Potts, who will be replacing Laura Sercombe and will be joining us in the New Year. We're still really sad that Laura is leaving.

2.4 We are also being driven by the evolution of the Partnership Management Plan (PMP). Feedback from consultation has confirmed that we are focussing on the right things but has asked to be more ambitious. So, we have stretched targets for us and our partners even further. The team are doing such a great job here, and we are still on schedule!

2.5 And we continue to live in an uncertain funding world as we await the next settlement from Defra. So, our work on income generation remains critical. It's great to see this growing to meet the challenge ahead. And brilliant that we are now a 'Responsible Body' able to enter into and monitor Conservation Covenant Agreements (CCAs). This opens up a whole range of new opportunities including on nature recovery.

2.6 Externally, we are feeling the effect of local, national and international politics. Within the next six months we will see the election of two new Mayors who will have direct impact on the Park. So, the work that James Winkworth is leading on Devolution and Local Government





Reform is ever more important. At a national level we are seeing potential impact from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and the Devolution Bill currently going through parliament and this is drawing us into the debate around growth and whether we are blockers or builders. It's going to be crucial that alongside our colleagues in other National Parks and National Landscapes we continue to own this narrative. This joint work is going from strength to strength through our involvement with the Protected Landscapes Partnership.

- 2.7 Internationally we are being affected in two main ways. Firstly, the impact of international conflicts and global trade policy is putting pressure on the exchequer. This in turn risks putting more of a squeeze on us. And secondly there is a rise in anti-net zero/anti-environment rhetoric. This is feeding across the whole political spectrum and risks lowering our profile in the national debate. In both cases the main thing we can do is to continue to make the case that what we do is vital to support a healthy economy and a healthy society, and that a choice between nature and growth is a false one. This is something we can all do in our roles without making it political. Again, combining our efforts across the protected landscape family and with our eNGO (Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation) partners is going to be critical to success.
- 2.8 And then finally of course there is climate change.
- 2.9 All of this means we have to be ready to flex. And this is what I mean about taking on a new shape. Change is uncomfortable. Despite this I'm seeing the Authority adapt and evolve and ultimately, I see this as us growing our resilience. I want to commend everyone for leaning into this as I think it's going to be vital that we are able to adjust when we need to so we can keep delivering our ambitious plans.
- 2.10 Below you will see the now standard report on progress against the Corporate Plan with a few tweaks to the reporting format. And under general updates in this report I've included:
- **Planning** – great to see our stats still going strong and the Local Plan Review forging ahead. Some exciting policy work going on there too. Great work Tim Slaney and the Planning Team. A particular nod to Claire Tester who is leading the Local Plan work.
 - **Devolution and Local Government** – this will be a standing item given how fast this is moving.
 - **Media and Communications** – a huge amount of activity here over the last three months. Big thanks to Ruth James and the team for all the support over the summer.
 - **PMP** – this is at a crucial stage, and the team are doing amazing work. Fantastic effort Laura and all involved. A special mention to Anne Rehill who is at the epicentre of all this work.
 - **Income Generation** – a lot going on here to be proud of and critical to our sustainability. Hats off to James Winkworth and the team.
 - **Nature Recovery** - we're about to be proud parents of a new Nature Reserve. A special mention to Claire Kerr and team for the work here.
 - **Seven Sisters** – which has experienced an incredibly busy summer and is evolving fast. Respect to Claire Onslow and the team there for managing all that and thank you to staff and members for helping out in the Car Park!

3. Progress against the Corporate Plan

Nature Recovery

- 3.1 **HLT#1: To secure an additional 13,000ha, or 33% of land managed for nature by 2030 from a baseline of 25%.**

KPI	Total to date (2022-25)	Annual 2025/26 Target	Actual achieved Q1	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
HLT1: To secure an additional 13,000ha, or 33% of land managed for nature by 2030 from a baseline of 25%.	7,014 ha	1,300 ha	248 ha		
HLT2: Work to maintain, enhance and/or restore 30% of existing Core Nature sites and support key species recovery within the SDNP by 2030.	Data for this target is now reported via the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) which analyses changes in the extent and condition of priority and wildlife-rich habitat. Data for 2024-25 is awaited and this KPI will be reported on using case studies.				
HLT3: To prepare for and implement Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)	N/A	Relevant applications to achieve 10% BNG increase from the pre-development biodiversity value	Reported annually in Q4		
<i>*Please note that all hectares are estimated and these calculations are based on best-available data</i>					

- 3.2 At the end of Q1, a total of **7,014** additional hectares of land have been secured or managed for nature since 2022. This is **54% of the 13,000 hectares target** to be achieved by 2030. The RAG rating has been assessed as ‘amber’ for this latest quarter, reflecting the continued measured approach to delivery in Q1.
- 3.3 During Q1, 91 hectares of land have been improved for nature and 41 chalk grassland sites across the National Park—excluding those designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)—were surveyed to gain a clearer understanding of their condition. Of the 41 sites, only four were in favourable condition. These assessments are now being used in discussions with landowners to inform and improve land management practices, helping to restore the condition of this vital habitat.
- 3.4 Additionally, in Q1 157 hectares of land has been legally secured for nature. A strong pipeline of over 3,000 hectares of additional land promises to deliver positive changes in land use for nature across the National Park this year.

Climate Action

- 3.5 **HLT#4: South Downs National Park Authority to reduce its carbon footprint by 150 tonnes per annum in line with the 2030 net zero target**
SDNPA emissions data is reported annually in Q4.
- 3.6 **HLT#5: 5% reduction per annum in the overall carbon footprint of the South Downs National Park from the baseline reported in 2019**
- 3.7 The annual greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory data is due in July 2025 and will be reported in Q2 2025-26. There is a data lag in reporting against this measure as the data is only issued on an annual basis.
- 3.8 In Q1, reporting to the Carbon Disclosure Project was successfully completed ahead of schedule. A shared licensing agreement for the Carbon Tracker has been established, covering the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and other UK National Parks. The Carbon Tracker is set to launch in October, offering a dynamic dashboard to monitor and visualise quantitative progress towards net zero.

A National Park for All

- 3.9 **HLT#6: Increase diversity of those engaging with the South Downs National Park**

KPI	Annual 2025/26 Target	Actual achieved 2025/26	RAG Status	RAG Status at Year-End
H6.1 Number of people from underrepresented audiences engaged through engagement & project activities	3,500	1,493		
H6.2 Number of engagement activities targeted at underrepresented audiences	90	35		







- 3.10 Q1 saw a dynamic programme of events across the South Downs, reaching 40% of the annual target audience. The targets have been rated as green due to a scheduled programme of events and activities throughout the remainder of the year, which are expected to support the successful achievement of these objectives.
- 3.11 Youth and community groups took part in hands-on conservation, including habitat restoration, meadow management, and bat surveys. Flagship events like the ReNature Festival and Discover Your Heaths Day celebrated biodiversity and nature recovery.
- 3.12 Schools engaged through nature walks, science workshops, and green careers events, while teacher training and youth action days promoted sustainability in education. Public outreach thrived at fairs and festivals, spotlighting climate action, sustainable transport, and wildlife conservation. Initiatives like #PlasticFreePeople and Lewes Climate Hub encouraged eco-friendly living.
- 3.13 Forest Schools and sensory gardens supported mental health and nature connection, especially for vulnerable groups—reflecting a strong, community-led commitment to a greener future.
- 3.14 **HLT#7: Work to make sure the landscape, scenery and tranquillity of SDNP is available to everyone, no matter what their access needs are.**

KPI	Annual 2025/26 Target	Actual achieved Q1	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
H7.1 Number of sessions facilitated by mobility equipment*	100 per year	69		
H7.2.1 Metres of new and/or improved accessible path	1,350 m	2,940 m		
H7.2.2 Number of interventions to improve access	85	13		
H7.3 Number of visits to the digital Accessibility Hub	10,000	1,703		
H7.4 Number of page views of the Seven Sisters Country Park Accessibility Guide	5,000	1,624		

- 3.15 This quarter saw a strong start in improving physical access across the National Park, with extensive planning and groundwork completed to enable a phased rollout of enhancements from Q2 to Q4, positioning the Authority to meet the year’s targets. The target length of new and/or accessible path has been exceeded, and an increased target will be sought. A warm spring has led to a strong uptake in visits supported by mobility equipment. However, engagement with the digital accessibility hub remains low and requires additional promotion, resulting in an amber rating.
- 3.16 13 access interventions have been completed in Q1, including the successful delivery of nine key infrastructure upgrades.

3.17 These upgrades include five newly installed two-way opening gates, a new gate providing entry into open access land, two flights of refurbished steps improving safety and accessibility, and installation of a new cycle rack.

3.18 **HLT#8: Digitally engage 100,000 people per year with the SDNP**

KPI	Annual 2025/26 Target	Actual achieved Q1	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
H8.1 Total number of E-newsletter subscribers	12,000 subscribers	13,438		
H8.2 Total social media audience	100,000	129,204		
H8.3 Total visits to the digital hubs throughout the year: (Nature Recovery, Climate Change, Walking hub, Communities)	65,000	58,511		

3.19 This quarter saw a surge in digital engagement, driven by targeted campaigns and seasonal activity. Walking Month proved especially impactful, generating significant traffic to both the Walking Hub as audiences explored resources and routes across the National Park.

3.20 The ReNature Festival in June also played a key role in boosting interest, drawing visitors to the ReNature Hub and amplifying messages around biodiversity and nature recovery.

3.21 SDNPA communications channels continue to grow steadily, with 13,438 subscribers to the main e-newsletter and a further 1,281 engaged through the planning e-newsletter. Social media growth remains strong, particularly on Facebook and LinkedIn, where community interaction and content reach continue to expand.

3.22 As part of developing the new Communications and Engagement Strategy and the Corporate Plan, which launches in April 2026, we will be reviewing the metrics used to evaluate the Authority’s communications and engagement activities.

4. General Updates

Planning

4.1 **The Local Plan** continues apace. The consultation responses (over 3,000) have been assessed. Together with a growing evidence base this is shaping revised policies and proposed site allocations. Key findings were discussed with the Planning Inspectorate on 23 September. The feedback was largely positive with no ‘showstoppers’ at this stage. The point was made that we need to explain clearly why we are choosing a particular housing provision over the Plan period. The Inspector also highlighted the need for a clear story as to how the Plan Review links to our wider vision, Purposes and Duty, and the Partnership Management Plan, as well as the need for evidence in some areas. The session was incredibly useful and will be a further guide to our work. There is a key workshop with Members on 23 October.

4.2 The content of the final version of the Local Plan for consultation will then be finalised ahead of formal Planning Committee and NPA consideration in early 2026, taking account of the agreed Partnership Management Plan. We are working hard to ensure policies align with the outcomes and targets in the PMP. In this way, and as described to the Inspector, the Plan provides the best platform to leverage the planning system to fulfil the vision for this national park.

4.3 Meanwhile there is a lot of work at sub-regional and national level to make sure that the National Park perspective is heard in discussions around the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. This includes one of the Government ‘advisors’ giving evidence to the House of Commons highlighting that National Parks would be the only local planning authorities not at the decision-making table for Spatial Development Strategies. As it stands, we are a consultee at the end of the process. We are seeking to be a recognised partner in the making of the Strategy. This is important given that the Strategies are likely to decide housing numbers and some major development and potentially be linked to a mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

- 4.4 We are aware there is some pressure to alter or even repeal the hard won ‘seek to further’ the purposes of a national park for public bodies. This pressure arises largely from a number of planning judicial reviews even though the duty is far wider than planning. We continue to work with Defra and others to provide information on the value this strengthened duty has provided both in and beyond the planning sphere, without causing delay. We are working with other Protected Landscapes to promote a pragmatic approach to the new duty when dealing with planning issues.
- 4.5 **The Planning Committee** considered the application for a further temporary permission for five years for the Boomtown Festival at Matterley. Whilst generally supportive of the principle, members were concerned that the full details of enhancements for the Estate had not been forthcoming. They approved the Festival with up to 75,000 people for one year only. A clear message was given to the applicants, to provide greater clarity about the necessary environmental package of measures (Landscape, Biodiversity, Ecology), to off-set the impact, where they apply for future festival(s).
- 4.6 **The Planning statistics** remain strong and similar to those reported last time as the end of year 2024-25 performance. All Government targets are met in relation to determining applications in the relevant 8 /13 week timetable or getting agreement to extend the time frame. The Authority’s appeal performance in the 2024 / 25 financial year was 84% dismissed. To date, seven months into the 2025 / 26 financial year, the Authority’s appeal performance is 73% dismissed. We are keeping an eye on this, and the Planning Committee get quarterly reports to see if there are any patterns in appeal decisions. So far there does not seem to be any, other than traveller appeals tend to have a higher chance of succeeding.
- 4.7 At the end of last quarter, we had 1,135 DM cases either processed or under assessment, and 135 enforcement cases opened.
- 4.8 Discussions have already begun with the Host Authorities, other than Lewes, in terms of taking the hosted arrangements forward post Sept 2026. So far these have been positive. But with all finances stretched and LGR / Devolution these are likely to be more complex than previous negotiations, hence the early start now. Arrangements are being made at the time of writing to keep the service with Lewes until April 2026 and then secure an orderly transition to the service being dealt with by us. This includes looking at staffing, accommodation, communications and other operational matters.
- 4.9 The Planning team have begun their **Service ReDesign** programme. This is a review of the end-to-end processes of the planning system to ensure our services are productive and customer focussed. This is a long-term project, which is currently in the stage of investigating current processes and working through ideas from previous feedback from agents, customer feedback, and our and host authority planning officers. The next stage is to test them technically using our current IT systems.

Devolution and Local Government Reform (LGR)

- 4.10 With a detailed paper on Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation on today’s agenda, I will keep this section relatively brief. Building on my previous update, we have continued to engage with our local authority partners across Hampshire and Sussex. These discussions remain constructive; with growing recognition of the distinctive skills and experience that Protected Landscapes can contribute.
- 4.11 To support this engagement, we are developing an internal evidence base that will enable us to demonstrate clearly how Protected Landscapes can help the new Strategic Authorities to deliver on their statutory duties and wider objectives.
- 4.12 The “Key Asks” reported on in my last update, have now been refined into a set of agreed principles. These have been endorsed by the New Forest National Park Authority with whom we will be sharing space in the new Hampshire Strategic Authority and are presented at this meeting for discussion.
- 4.13 Work is progressing across both Hampshire and Sussex to ensure Protected Landscapes are represented in the emerging shadow structures. In Sussex, we have been formally invited to join the Informal Partnership Board, with Vanessa Rowlands attending her first meeting on 16

October. Our participation now has the endorsement of both the High Weald National Landscapes and Chichester Harbour Conservancy, who we will continue to involve, ensuring that their voice is also heard. In Hampshire, we are finalising a letter to all Unitary Chief Executives requesting a place on their “Portfolio Board”, the closest equivalent to Sussex. Discussions with Hampshire’s Protected Landscapes are scheduled for later this month.

- 4.14 On Local Government Reform, we do not propose adopting a formal position on the options under consideration. Our immediate focus is on understanding the risks and opportunities that reorganisation may present. Specifically, we are:
- Working with local authority partners to consider whether certain assets might be better managed by Protected Landscapes, rather than automatically transferred to the new Unitaries;
 - Maintaining close contact with our Host Authorities to remain aligned with their perspectives and timelines on LGR;
 - Reviewing other shared or subcontracted services to identify where alternative arrangements may be required should these services be withdrawn.

Responsible Body Status

- 4.15 We are pleased to confirm that since we last met, we have been formally approved by Natural England as a Responsible Body. This concludes a year-long process involving the submission of a detailed application and supporting evidence.
- 4.16 This designation places us among a small group of just 30 organisations nationally, which includes the Lake District as the only other National Park Authority currently holding Responsible Body status.
- 4.17 Becoming a Responsible Body provides us with a new and important tool: the ability to enter into and monitor Conservation Covenant Agreements. These are voluntary, long-term legal agreements between a landowner and a Responsible Body, designed to protect and conserve natural or heritage features for the public good. They can cover a wide range of assets, from archaeology and historic buildings to habitats and landscapes, and sit outside the planning system.
- 4.18 In practice, this will allow us to:
- Support landowners in protecting valued natural and cultural features in perpetuity;
 - Enable conservation activity beyond the scope of our planning powers;
 - Provide a formal mechanism to bank and monitor nature-based solutions such as Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), nutrient neutrality and carbon offsetting outside the planning system, potentially extending our reach beyond our own boundaries.

- 4.19 The officer group that led this work will now consider how best to deploy this new tool in support of nature recovery and other priorities, as well as the resources required to manage agreements effectively.
- 4.20 This new power represents a significant strengthening of our ability to support conservation outcomes both within and potentially beyond our National Park.

Media and Communications

- 4.21 It’s been a strong quarter for **media** amid a saturated, shifting and politically charged media environment where nature- or climate-based stories are not often prioritised. Over the last few months one area of focus for our media work has been water. Two key, but very different, pieces of media have helped us to raise awareness of the issues facing water in the National Park and what we are doing alongside partners to make a difference.
- 4.22 Focusing on a single species, we had a real win in our publicity about partner-wide nature recovery efforts for the European Eel, which migrates 4,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean to live in the rivers of the South Downs. The piece, to tie in with National Marine Week, attracted more than 170 pieces of coverage, including BBC and Ealing Times.

- 4.23 Continuing the water theme from a regional, strategic perspective, we published our [Water in the South Downs National Park](#) report ahead of Campaign for National Park's (CNP's) own analysis on the state of rivers in National Parks. This was picked up widely across the UK, including The Telegraph, BBC Online, and I was interviewed live for ITV regional news and BBC Sussex radio. Our monitoring estimates that 100m people have had sight of this story, which really cut through across online media. Great work by Jeff Travis and the Communications team. Following on from the CNP report, I was invited to write a blog for the CNP website, which you can find here: [Water is life: South Downs National Park - Campaign for National Parks](#). It feels great to be working in step with Campaign for National Parks on this.
- 4.24 We had some wonderful and very positive coverage over the summer on the opening of the new section of the Centurion Way, with several large spreads in local newspapers across the region and a segment on BBC South Today. There is very positive interest in seeing the continuation of the route.
- 4.25 Our media work has also responded to immediate needs, such as safety messaging around people wading across the mouth of the River Cuckmere at SSCP due to a viral trend across social media #sevensistershike. We put out a press release to all local, regional and national media outlets about the dangers. Coverage included the Telegraph newspaper, BBC online (which is the most viewed website in the UK) BBC News online: [Seven Sisters walkers warned to avoid wading across Cuckmere River - BBC News](#), BBC Radio Sussex and many local and regional titles including the Herald Series and the Argus.
- 4.26 The results of our detailed 10-year farmland bird study, with some real successes after working with the farm clusters, garnered nine pieces of coverage, including Sussex World, Hampshire Chronicle and the Brighton Argus. This was a scientific report, but we were able to bring it to a large audience across the region.
- 4.27 Planning has also been prominent in the media, including a long and widely read article in the Daily Mail around enforcement against unauthorised development, as well as updates about the Local Plan Review in local and regional news outlets. As a consequence, there has been a lot of behind the scenes work to develop reactive position statements on various planning-related issues.
- 4.28 Our **digital presence** has gone from strength to strength and during August there were over 162,000 visits to our website. The opening of the Centurion Way was the most popular story with over 5,100 visits. Walking pages were also very popular with a combined 25,000 visits for the hub and sections on the Serpent Trail, South Downs Way and Centurion Way. There was also a bit of a bump to the Accessibility hub driven by social media posts around Miles without Stiles and equipment hire social posts. This shows how important practical information and ideas of where to go are to help people get out and explore and begin to forge those connections with the National Park.
- 4.29 On social media, all channels saw strong, moderate growth in new followers, with TikTok being the star performer. The TikTok following almost doubled from 350 to 700 following several high performing posts. In all, content was viewed over 120,000 times on TikTok last month, making it our best month to date on the platform. Engagement was robust across all channels, with Facebook continuing to lead in terms of engagement.
- 4.30 Over the summer, our staff have been busy out **engaging** with the public across and around the National Park. Since my last report the ranger teams supported by Communications & Engagement have led 10 events including everything from pop ups to bat walks.
- 4.31 The Communications & Engagement Team have led/attended six **key events** including attendance at the Jalsa Salana Festival which sees over 45,000 people attend, the Southampton Mela in the heart of Southampton and the Astronomy Festival at Herstmonceux. A great season of engagement was rounded out by a walk organised together with Muslim Hikers last weekend at SSCP, which received funding from the SDNPA.
- 4.32 Altogether these events engaged directly with nearly 1,400 people.

PMP Update

- 4.33 The PMP is on schedule and in its final stages. Thanks to all members, officers and partners for their considerable support in engaging with this process. We have been reviewing the consultation feedback that came in from partners and individuals and working through how to put it to best use.
- 4.34 Engagement has been fantastic from both the public and partners and support for our vision and aims has been strong. One overriding message however was for us to be more ambitious with our targets. We've taken this on board and adjusted upwards for the next iteration. This was well received by our steering group.
- 4.35 We're keen to start building a delivery partnership to take the plan forward as this is a plan for the whole park not just us. So far, we've had strong support from our key partners to be part of this.
- 4.36 Going forwards we have some key dates:
- 16 September - Steering Group
 - 16 October - Member Workshop
 - 20 November - P&R Committee to consider a final draft of the revised PMP
 - 9 December - NPA to approve the final PMP for 2026-31

Income Generation

- 4.37 We have made a strong start to the year, generating just under £1,000,000 through fundraising. This includes a £100k legacy gift to the South Downs Trust, a £75k foundation grant supporting our Apprentice Programme, and a new Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI) Grant for work on the River Rother.
- 4.38 Looking ahead, we have a prospective pipeline of over £3,000,000. This includes a major bid to extend the Energy Champion initiative launched through Ouse Valley Climate Action, the possibility of a significant gift from a major donor, and funding for Centurion Way via the West Sussex Lane Rental Fund.
- 4.39 The Natural Capital team has this year secured or invoiced just over £330k—almost matching last year's total. While these funds are held in a dedicated reserve, this level of success is accelerating progress towards long-term self-sufficiency. In time, it will also allow us to reinvest a portion of this income to support delivery costs.
- 4.40 We are also beginning to explore new opportunities for income generation. A 'Start and Finish' working group, made up of members and trustees, is considering the potential of establishing a company within the South Downs Trust. This could enable us to deliver commercial services that generate income and deliver objectives to support the PMP. Discussions are ongoing to identify which activities present the strongest opportunities, and any formal proposal will be presented to a future NPA for approval.

Nature Recovery

- 4.41 **sNNR (Super National Nature Reserve at Seven Sisters)** - we have now signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between partners. Comms around the Declaration (which has not happened yet) will be held off until March 2026 when we publicly launch. But we will have an internal celebration with partners when we get final confirmation.
- 4.42 **LNRSs (Local Nature Recovery Strategies)** – as a Supporting Authority, SDNPA has supported the Sussex Responsible Authorities (WSCC for West Sussex LNRS and ESCC for East Sussex and Brighton & Hove LNRS) to progress to public consultation. A public consultation of six weeks is expected to start sometime during October.

Seven Sisters Country Park

- 4.43 As we approach the end of Q2, SSCP has witnessed a significant growth in visitor numbers. This is driven by the sustained good weather and an unsolicited viral presence on social media channels promoting the Seven Sisters Hike between Seaford and Eastbourne. As a result, the site has been extremely busy. This has delivered a positive trading position but created capacity

challenges. Especially at weekends, this has highlighted the challenges and balance of nature recovery with visitor numbers, expectation and experience. Staff vacancies are now filled however, so capacity is now back to full strength.

- 4.44 Work is progressing well with our land management responsibilities. Seasonal grazing across the park is evidencing healthy chalk grassland. A variety of species including rare damselflies taking up residence in one of the newer dew ponds, bee orchids and Adonis blue butterflies have all been seen, despite the very long, dry summer conditions. The programme of infrastructure improvements continued with the upgrade of gates along the South Downs Way, country park trail and park entrances, new benches and a water supply to Haven Brown opening up a new area for grazing. The park has also hosted corporate volunteering and youth action volunteering opportunities through the season. We have also been pleased to receive photo submissions from our three photo posts. These provide an excellent citizen science opportunity but have, and will continue, to provide a useful record of the landscape changes.
- 4.45 With the increase of popularity of the wider heritage coast, we continue to see an increase in new audiences from UK based south Asian audiences coming from the Midlands and within the M25 along with the growth of visitors travelling from London by train to access the trail. Our trading outlets have adapted, and we welcomed a new ice concession to site in the summer. A programme of events has taken place over the season with a mix of private hire exhibitions adding to the visitor experience alongside in-house talks and tours focussing on key themes within the park including history, wetland birds, bees and bats.
- 4.46 At a broader scale we have worked with Forestry England to trial an off-road trail between the two sites to keep visitors away from the busy road, started to progress the adoption of a decommissioned telephone box on site for interpretation use in partnership with the South Downs Trust and obtained funding from the South Downs Trust for an interpretation project to make the onsite shepherds hut part of the visitor experience. Our social media channels have deliberately used less imagery of the cliffs, and a greater focus on nature and wildlife to raise visitor expectations of what to expect during a visit to the countryside.
- 4.47 After a busy summer along the whole Sussex Heritage Coast, we are working with partners along the coast to identify how we can cope with these increased visitor numbers. Rightly this involves working with many partners including local councils, landowners and most importantly the County Council. We know there is a need to plan strategically and collectively for the whole area as soon as we can, recognising that there is a need to reduce the issues faced in the local area and by local communities while continuing to provide an amazing visitor experience and showcasing the fantastic nature recovery taking place.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 As with previous reports, the aim has been to provide a necessary snapshot of some of the highlights of the period since the report to the 8th July 2025 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail, or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

SIÔN MCGEEVER

Chief Executive Officer

South Downs National Park Authority

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Appendices	None

SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Landscape and Strategy; Director of Planning; Director of Growth and Organisational Development; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer and Head of Governance; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	N/A

