

**SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

**POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 26 JUNE 2025**

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 10.30am

Present: Tim Burr, Peter Diplock, Mark Fairweather, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Steven Ridgeon and Stephen Whale.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Morris Findley, Arthur Sloman.

Independent Members of the Committee: Tom Fourcade and Catriona Aves.

Boardroom Apprentice: Sarah Thompson.

Other SDNPA Members: John Cross, Vanessa Rowlands (Chair of the Authority).

SDNPA Officers: Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), James Winkworth (Director of Growth and Business Development), Mark Alden (Nature Based Solutions Manager), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Oscar Edwards (External Auditor), Amanda Craig (Internal Auditor), Chris Fairbrother (Strategy Lead: Climate Change and Net Zero), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Craig Garoghan (Interim Chief Finance Officer), Liz Gent (Project and Performance Lead), Robert Green (Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager), Nick Heasman (Countryside and Policy Manager - Central), Hayley Madgwick (Procurement Manager), Claire Onslow (Commercial and Strategic Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Nicola Stoddart (HR Advisor), Miriam Swan (Grants Officer), Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services) and Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor).

Also attended by: Oliver Hancock (Westerlands)

**OPENING REMARKS**

507. The Chair opened the meeting.
508. The Chair welcomed Vanessa Rowlands, John Cross, James Winkworth as the new Director of Growth and Business Development, Amanda Craig, Mark Winton and Oscar Edwards.
509. The Chair noted that the agenda would be re-ordered with Agenda Item 21 following Agenda Item 15, due to Officer commitments.
510. The Chair welcomed all those present and stated that:
  - The meeting was being webcast by the Authority and would be available for subsequent on-line viewing. Anyone entering the meeting was considered to have given consent to be filmed or recorded, and for the possible use of images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purpose.
  - SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthers the National Park Purposes and Duty. Members regarded themselves first and foremost as Members of the Authority and would act in the best interests of the National Park as a whole, rather than as representatives of their appointing body or any interest groups.

**ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

511. Apologies were received from Theresa Fowler, Vicki Wells and OlaOlu Adedayo.

**ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

512. There were no declarations of interest.

**ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 20 FEBRUARY 2025**

513. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 20 February 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendments:

- Paragraph 446 should read 'equity' rather than 'equality'.
- Paragraph 472 should read 'grazier' rather than 'grazer'.

514. Peter Diplock entered the meeting.

#### **ITEM 4: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS**

515. The Director of Landscape and Strategy updated the Committee on the River Meon Splash Route in Mill Lane, Droxford. The work of establishing baseline data to identify where efforts could best be applied had begun, a budget had been identified, and analysis work had been arranged through the Meon Valley Partnership to begin roll out later in the year. Portsmouth Water were also commissioning their own research on the river, including assessing invertebrate sampling and ecological monitoring. Further information had come to light that suggested ecological concerns around the splash route were valid, so the Authority were awaiting a response from Hampshire County Council as to what action they would take to address any damage being done to that part of the river.

#### **ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS**

516. There were none.

#### **ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

517. There were no members of the public who had requested to speak.

#### **ITEM 7: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

518. It was noted that there were two exempt appendices for this meeting, Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 15 and Appendix 4 of Agenda Item 20. If any Member wished to discuss any matter within one of those appendices, Members would be asked at the appropriate time during those items whether they wished to consider the exclusion of the public, including the press, from the meeting.

#### **ITEM 8: CHAIR UPDATE**

519. The Chair provided the following verbal updates:

- She noted the Committee Away Day on 22 April and thanked Members for their participation.
- She noted Appendix one to Item 10, the Annual Governance Statement 2024-25, and the actions identified to ensure the P&R Committee was fulfilling its responsibilities to review its performance, including moving the audit items up the agenda for this meeting.
- Along with the Chair of the Authority, the Chair of the P&R Committee had approved two bids for funding that were not able to come before the committee due to time constraints. These were a £450,000 bid from the West Sussex Lane Rental Surplus Fund for Centurion Way, and a £150,000 bid from Southern Water to support the development of an application to the Heritage Fund for the South Downs Big Chalk Landscape Connections Project.
- The South Downs National Park Trust had received £233,000 from the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative and Southern Water for the Rotherlands Nature Reserve, Petersfield as part of the River Rother Partnership.
- She reported that OlaOlu Adedayo would be stepping down as a co-opted Member this summer and thanked him for his support.

- She reported that Morris Findley would also be finishing his period as a co-opted Member this meeting. She noted that he had been one of the inaugural co-optees and thanked him for his work as an ambassador for the SDNPA, including his participation on the Partnership Management Plan Steering Group. He was presented with a small gift.

#### ITEM 9: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

520. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced report PR24/25-31 and reminded members of the report content.
521. The Committee commented:
- Noted the importance of mitigations 12 (Signage) and 13 (Fencing) to Risk 3.2 (Seven Sisters Country Park – Health and Safety) given the large numbers of hikers using the area, as well as visitors from South Asian Communities. Could signage in various languages, perhaps through the use of QR codes, warn visitors against opening gates for horses on site.
  - Hikers had been walking across the river mouth at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) regardless of the tide. Messaging to warn of the dangers would be useful. As the Authority did not own the land at the river mouth so would need to liaise with the landowner. It was noted that there had been similar issues around Rye Harbour, and that lifeguards had been asked to perform a public safety review which might have applicable lessons for SSCP.
  - Supported the separating out of Risks 7.1 (Partnership Working and Partnership Management Plan Delivery) and 7.2 (Delivery of 2025/26 Capital Programme and Strategic Projects).
  - Were there any further updates on Risk 8.1 (Devolution in England and Local Government Reorganisation)?
  - How would the Authority help engage with the proliferation of relationships within government, that were not yet fixed, to deliver the best outcomes for the Park? Had any government departments provided any updates since the spending review that were relevant?
  - Members were happy to serve as a resource for Officers where they could be of use in dealing with local authorities.
  - It would be helpful to have a graphic included in future reports that lined risk against priorities to better capture risk against delivery.
522. Members were advised:
- The work on devolution was ongoing, and there had been good engagement in both counties with the SDNPA which was viewed as a key partner and delivery body in both devolution and local government reorganisation. The SDNPA had been asked to sit on a stakeholder group in Sussex in preparation for the new strategic authority. There would be only one seat on these boards for Protected Landscapes, so the Authority was coordinating with the other Protected Landscapes in both Sussex and Hampshire to ensure alignment in goals and consistency in communication.
  - The Authority had not received any specific guidance on what the spending review would mean for national parks. It had been engaging with Defra on devolution, including on how the board would change with devolution, on the power of competence and the role of national parks as key delivery bodies. The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) team at Defra were currently in the business planning period, which was likely to conclude at the end of the year. They had indicated that the current capital-revenue split was likely to continue and would be extended to FiPL.

**RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Corporate Risk Register as at June 2025.

**ITEM 10: ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT AND LOCAL CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

523. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced report PR24/25-32 and reminded members of the report content.

524. The Committee commented:

- Could further training be provided to Members on Conduct and Behaviour. The training provided to Officers could be used as a basis.
- Welcomed the number of checks and the clarity of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS).
- Did the reference to the Teckal Company, South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL), indicate that there would be further need of it once the operations at Seven Sisters Country Park were brought in-house?
- What was the limit of liability for the Authority in respect of training for volunteers with regard to the new duty to prevent sexual harassment?
- Members had a key role in providing assurance that the Authority's funds were used economically, efficiently, and effectively. How did that work in practise? Members agreed the budget and the financial strategy and received reports on budget monitoring and treasury management performance, but did they now do less evaluation? Was that monitoring limited in scope to the spending of money, rather than the value gained?
- Should the reference to 'shared identify' in paragraph 3.33 of the AGS be 'shared identity'?
- There appeared to be an inconsistent use of the terms 'committee', 'P&R committee' and 'planning committee' in the Code of Corporate Governance.

525. Members were advised:

- Officers were reviewing the Bullying and Sexual Harassment training that was provided to Officers with a view to providing it to Members.
- The Annual Governance Statement was for the financial year 2024/25, and as SDCOL was operational until 9 October it was included in the AGS. The Company was now dormant and future Statements would include this comment.
- The new duty to prevent sexual harassment was on employers in regard to their employees. To protect the Authority's employees, training had been provided to Officers, Members and volunteers. There was no duty on the Authority with respect to volunteers.
- As the Authority had matured and finances had tightened, it had focused on more time-limited external projects and ensuring maximal value from investment. The Authority was now going through organisational changes which would improve the reporting through the project pipeline. It was noted that externally funded projects were time limited which limited legacy.
- The committee had previously seen more project evaluations. Discussions were ongoing as to how project monitoring and learnings could be best reported to the committee in future.
- Paragraph 3.33 should be 'shared identity'.

- Officers would review the use of the terms ‘committee’, ‘P&R committee’ and ‘planning committee’ in the Code of Corporate Governance.

526. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Approved the Annual Governance Statement for 2024-25 (Appendix 1) to accompany the Authority’s Statement of Accounts; and
2. Noted the Local Code of Corporate Governance (Appendix 2).

**ITEM 11: EXTERNAL AUDIT PLAN**

527. The External Auditor introduced report PR24/25-33 and reminded members of the report content.

528. It was noted that Pete Barber would be replacing Beth Bowers as the Engagement Lead for the External Auditors going forward.

529. The Committee commented:

- What did a value of 0 mean in regard to the Significant Risk (Pension Fund)?

530. Members were advised:

- If the pension liability was an asset, rather than a liability, then the asset position cannot be reported on and was capped at 0. The value of 0 meant there was no deficit in the pension fund as the assets were higher than the liability.

531. **RESOLVED:** The Committee agreed the External Audit Plan.

**ITEM 12: UPDATE ON INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIONS**

532. The Internal Auditor introduced report PR24/25-34 and reminded members of the report content.

533. The Committee commented:

- Were there any updates available on the dates of implementation in Appendix 3?
- Were there any concerns over capacity within the Authority’s teams, or known issues that were behind the overdue implementation? Was this related to the lower than target performance of the ‘implementation of management actions agreed in response to audit findings’ noted in Agenda Item 13?
- Expressed concern that Officers were sufficiently resourced and that their workloads were not excessive leading to them becoming overworked.

534. Members were advised:

- No further updates had been received or requested by the Internal Auditors in regard to implementation dates for Appendix 3 but an update would be requested on any which were overdue for implementation.
- The causes behind the lower than targeted implementation of management actions agreed in response to audit findings had been identified and plans were in place to resolve the issue. Recruitment issues at SSCP were being addressed, and capital works were also planned to ensure the plan was achievable. The workload of the Facilities and Property Manager was being reviewed to see where work could be rediverted to allow them to focus on key tasks.

535. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2024/25).

**ITEM 13: INTERNAL AUDIT ANNUAL REPORT AND OPINION**

536. The Internal Auditor introduced report PR24/25-35 and reminded members of the report content
537. The Committee commented:
- Was there a formula involved in coming to the overall judgement of reasonable assurance or was it more nuanced? Would improving the speed of response to priority actions improve the overall judgement?
  - Pleased to note that the suggestions and recommendations raised by the Committee at its Away Day were being considered by the internal auditors against the operational and commercial implications of implementation
538. Members were advised:
- The overall judgement was a nuanced position involving many complex factors including management response and overall internal control framework. Action tracking was a factor in the Authority achieving a reasonable, rather than substantial, assurance.
  - The implementation of medium and high priority actions was an action in the Annual Governance Statement for the next year to work closely with internal auditors and colleagues across the Authority to ensure that this target was met in coming years and progress against this would be reported on.
539. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Received and considered the Annual Audit Report (2024/25) and the Audit Opinion (2024/25); and
  2. Agreed that the Committee was satisfied with the effectiveness of Internal Audit during 2024/25.
540. The meeting adjourned for a short comfort break.

#### **ITEM 14: WESTERLANDS ESTATE WHOLE ESTATE PLAN ENDORSEMENT**

541. The Nature Based Solutions Manager introduced report PR24/25-36 and reminded members of the report content.
542. Oliver Hancock of Westerlands addressed the Committee.
543. The Committee commented:
- Were inspired by the passion displayed within the Whole Estate Plan (WEP) and appreciated the time and effort involved in producing such a comprehensive, inspiring and achievable vision.
  - Felt the layout of the Plan was great, with the vision and the action plan next to each other. This would be a good template for future WEPs as it shows how the estate plans to achieve its vision.
  - Welcomed the desire to give more people more reasons to come and visit and experience the SDNP. To offer visitors more memorable learning experiences, a growing range of recreational and educational activities and too host more guests across diverse spaces and price points, offering people a place to stay at an affordable price.
  - Appreciated that Westerlands had critically assessed its equine heritage and the compaction of soil it had created, that it had retained that heritage, repurposed and reimagined.
  - Supported the stated ambition to become a social enterprise.
  - Applauded the democratising of access as well as opening up local and community access.

- The WEP was commended for its strong Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) focus and use of language throughout.
- Noted there was some overlap between the four pillars. Was there a hierarchy between the pillars?
- What could the Authority do to help realise the ambition of Westerlands?
- Had Westerlands considered advocacy and creating ambassadors to help promote their vision?
- The offer of ‘camping under the stars’ was essential for winning people to the importance of the National Park. Would encourage the Authority to take a thorough stock of the camping facilities available within the National Park.

544. Members were advised:

- Evidence of need was a key element to become a social enterprise, and mental health was the need they were focusing on, as well as the equine and bronze age heritage.
- The four pillars would be given equal weight, although nature recovery was currently the most urgent.
- Resources were needed by Westerlands to help realise the ambition. There was only one full time employee which left a large burden on the family. Financial resourcing was needed whether through access to grants or foundations, as was human resource support. Promotion of activities at Westerlands would also be valued.
- Social media was very important to the project, but there was no marketing budget in the current financial plan to assist with creating ambassadors. The attention economy was very noisy, but trigger points that could gain traction were known, such as nature needing to heal.

545. **RESOLVED:** The Committee endorsed the Westerlands Whole Estate Plan at Appendix I.

546. The meeting adjourned for lunch at 12.22pm.

547. Peter Diplock and Steven Whale left the meeting.

548. The meeting resumed at 12.50pm.

#### **ITEM 15: RECRUITMENT ADVERTISING FRAMEWORK CONTRACT 2025**

549. The Procurement Manager introduced report PR24/25-37 and reminded members of the report content.

550. The Committee commented:

- Would National Parks England (NPE) also be able to utilise this service?
- How would the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) be satisfied given the contract covered a number of discrete entities?
- Were Officers confident that this extra workload would not be excessive?

551. Members were advised:

- Officers would be happy to support the inclusion of NPE to the service.
- All bidders would need to complete due diligence compliance. Each National Park would run its own recruitment process; this contract was to cover advertising of positions.
- This was the first contract entered into under the new Procurement Act so was a useful learning experience. Human Resources Officers would be supporting Procurement

Officers in the delivery of the contract. Officers were of the opinion that the extra workload was not excessive.

552. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Approved the commencement of a procurement process leading to the conclusion of a framework agreement to provide recruitment advertising services to 7 National Parks in the UK for a period of up to 4 years.
2. Approved delegation of authority to the Chief Executive to award contracts for the above, following a competitive process carried out under the terms of the Procurement Act 2023.

**ITEM 21: ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FUND (SCF)**

553. The Grants Officer introduced report PR24/25-43 and reminded members of the report content.

554. The Committee commented:

- The bid advisory panel was working well and made great contributions.
- Welcomed the broad geographic spread of projects across the National Park and found the map of previous projects to be very encouraging.
- Was there any tracking of whether money allocated was spent?
- The Sussex Heritage taster days had been very inspiring and supported skills on the red list.
- Was the impact of projects captured in relation to the Authority's targets for the whole National Park, such as Hectares for ReNature, when delivered by and through the work of the Trust?

555. Members were advised:

- Project spending was tracked and claims were usually paid either at the end of a project or in staged payments. At the end of the project claimants were asked to send in an evaluation of achievement as part of their claim form.
- The impact of projects on improving Access and delivering Hectares for ReNature were captured and reported in the Research and Evidence Officers quarterly logs.
- These projects were often small in size but large in local impact.

556. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the annual review and year-end position of the Sustainable Communities Fund managed by the South Downs National Park Trust.

**ITEM 16: REVISED CAPITAL PROGRAMME**

557. The Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced report PR24/25-38 and reminded members of the report content.

558. The Committee commented:

- It was significant and concerning that the revenue grant received by the Authority in 2024-25 was 50% the value of the grant received in 2010-11. The capital grant was welcome but did not make up the shortfall. Members thanked Officers for the level of achievement in delivery and impact given the financial constraints.
- Why was recommendation 3 set at £200,000 rather than a higher or lower figure?
- Was the Authority expecting larger projects in the future and would an increase in the thresholds assist with the speed of delivery?

- Slight concern that government limitations on funding impacted value for money as urgency meant that even if the money was well spent it was unlikely to be the best value for money. Did the risk need to be highlighted in the risk register?
- Developing a pipeline of projects with appropriate guardrails at pace was a significant but important piece of work.
- The pressure to spend capital revenue was huge, but the Authority might not have the data to analyse value for money until a year or two after the project had finished. The Authority needed to be aware of these restrictions and agree a pathway so that the vision remained consistent. It was incumbent on the Committee to ask the right questions.
- Noted the distinction in risk between bringing forward planned projects and creating new projects from scratch. Would provide assurance to signpost when an existing project had been accelerated and when a project was new.

559. Members were advised:

- £200,000 was the threshold at which items would need to come to the P&R Committee for approval under the Authority's Financial Regulations.
- The project pipeline was a new and emerging piece of work that might require some flexibility. The recommendation would allow the authority to respond to projects with costs above £200,00. Any use of this delegation would be reported by the Chair of the P&R Committee at the next meeting of the Committee.
- The concern over value for money in response to government restrictions was shared by other National Landscapes. The Authority was developing an iterative process to ensure money could be used as well as it could and allow the balance of spend across the Authority's priorities to be kept under review. It was acknowledged that the pressure was significant.
- All bids accepted into the project pipeline must have outcomes tied into the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) and would be evaluated at conclusion to measure delivery against the Authority's corporate priorities.
- The project pipeline process would evolve as it became embedded. Once a project was accepted it would be put on a performance tracker that would help evidence its impact. Centurion Way was an example of an accelerated existing project, and most of the projects currently on the list were accelerated existing projects, but it was expected that future lists would have more innovative projects, though they may be smaller in scale.
- It was noted that some of the projects identified as capital streams may help release funding for other projects. The increased capital allowance did provide the Authority with some flexibility in funding projects.

560. **RESOLVED:** The Committee recommended that the National Park Authority:

1. Approved the revised Capital Programme 2025/26 and additional budget requirement of £0.902m as detailed in paragraphs 3.6;
2. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to vary the Capital Programme 2025/26 and to approve project plans as necessary as required by the SDNPA's Financial Procedures;
3. Delegate authority to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the P&R Committee, to agree arrangements for the procurement of and to authorise the entering into of contracts of a value of £0.200m or greater to deliver the Capital Programme 2025/26;

The Committee:

4. Noted the process for monitoring and evaluating capital projects and the reporting schedule on the delivery of the Capital Programme as set out in paragraph 5.1; and
5. Noted the retention of previously agreed reserves to be held on the balance sheet for a decision to be made on their use as part of the 2024/25 Outturn report to be considered by the National Park Authority in July 2025.

**ITEM 17: PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN DELIVERY 2025-26: SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY NATURE RECOVERY ACTION PLAN AND CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN**

561. The Strategy Lead: Climate Change and Net Zero introduced report PR24/25-39 and reminded members of the report content.

562. The Committee commented:

- How much of the 5% reduction per annum in the overall carbon footprint of the National Park, which includes significant items not within the gift of the Authority, was attributable to the SDNPA?
- How was the Authority ensuring there was no double counting when it was calculating new woodland planting, and how did it co-ordinate planting with partners?
- How does the Authority ensure that where land was used for ReNaturing it could be counted towards the Parks carbon capture targets and also that if it was sold to help someone else offset their carbon footprint, that it was not double counted?
- Was there any wording to help support Members on the Planning Committee in their decision making when land was coming forward for nature-based solutions?
- Pleased to see the activity supporting homeowners in being more climate conscious with their buildings.
- Thanked the Strategy Lead: Climate Change and Net Zero for his work on the national level.

563. Members were advised:

- The carbon footprint target for the Park as an area did include clear recommendations on where the Park could have an influence, such as Nature Based Solutions, but there were areas where the Authority had no levers, such as energy transition and transport. The SDNPA carbon tracker helps provide a comprehensive view of the carbon footprint of the Park and an understanding of where the Authority could make an impact directly and where it had to work with external partners or encourage action from others.
- Until recently, the Authority had had a limited ability to assess the impact of woodland planting, habitat restoration and creation, or regenerative agricultural-type practice projects and how they were impacting the Authority's carbon targets. The Authority had recently piloted a project to assess carbon sequestration potential, and it was hoped that this would be able to be rolled out to assess and capture the contribution made by nature recovery work. This was a complex area, and the Authority had been developing its capability to comprehensively report on the full range of its activities.
- The Trees to the Downs scheme focused on trees outside of woods, trees on roadsides or verges, and those often aren't covered by grants. The Authority was careful to ensure it was not funding projects that could be supported through public pots elsewhere, to avoid waste or duplication. English Woodland Creation, which funds most of the planting and management, does not compensate the landowner for any lost income. The Authority was developing income replacement projects to encourage planting.

- The risk of double counting had been identified and was built into the carbon tracker and was monitored. The main risk of double counting was with local authorities, and they tended to focus on transport and the energy transition rather than nature-based solutions.
- The Climate Change Action Plan referenced embodied carbon and identified that there was an opportunity to improve the understanding of the contribution that planning and development management would be able to make in regards to carbon. There was an opportunity for a pilot project

564. Mark Potter briefly left the meeting.

565. An amendment to the recommendation was agreed replacing 'Note' with 'Note and endorse'.

566. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted and endorsed the priorities for Nature Recovery and Climate Change for 2025-26.

567. Morris Findley briefly left the meeting.

#### **ITEM 18: Q4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024/25**

568. The Project and Performance Lead introduced report PR24/25-40 and reminded members of the report content.

569. The Committee commented:

- Could Officers comment on why condition assessment monitoring at the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) at SSCP had not been forthcoming.
- Welcomed the comprehensive report which contained a number of success stories. It would be useful for the Committee to see what did not go well and what would be done differently in future as a result. This would help the Authority to be more productive in future.
- It was important that the Authority did not lose sight of what it was trying to achieve amidst the high-level targets and Key Performance Indicators (KPI's).
- Would like a qualitative rather than quantitative measure for online engagement to make the important measurable, rather than the measurable important. Keen to see the detail on engagement to help the Authority make better choices.
- Wanted to caution against a prejudice against commercially focused softwood when considering the transition from softwood to native trees. The government target for one million new homes would require a lot of softwood.
- What confidence could the Authority have that Centurion Way could be completed and that the National Trust's concerns would be resolved?
- The National Park for All numbers were great, but could the Authority be more ambitious with its targets? Quantitative social media numbers carry a large risk of double counting as well as the inclusion of bots rather than people.

570. Members were advised:

- Natural England were responsible for condition assessments of SSSIs and their resources were constrained limiting the number of surveys they could perform. The Authority could perform its own assessments, but they would not impact the official condition assessment. NE had recently started to perform a condition survey on the entire SSSI, which stretched from Seaford Head to Eastbourne, and it should be noted that even if the condition of the SSSI within the National Park was excellent, the rating could be dragged down by the condition of the areas outside its control.

- A Performance and Learning Strategy would be coming forward later in the year. One key learning had been that legal documentation around landowners could substantially slow progress on projects.
- The Authority was reviewing its Comms and Engagement strategy alongside the PMP as a strategy that was ambitious five years ago may need review today.
- The National Trust were contributing a significant amount of money to the Centurion Way scheme, so Officers were confident their concerns would be resolved. It was a complicated issue but not an irresolvable one and discussions were constructive at resolving legitimate concerns.

571. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q4 Corporate Performance and Projects Report 2024/25.

#### **ITEM 19: Q4 SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK PERFORMANCE REPORT 2025**

572. The Commercial and Strategic Manager introduced report PR24/25-41 and reminded members of the report content.

573. The Committee commented:

- What progress had been made with the Interpretation Plan?
- Were there any plans to extend WiFi coverage to the Turkey Barn?
- Did the work with the Sussex Film Office occur? Was that service advertised?
- Thanked Officers for their efforts at SSCP.
- How might the SSSI impact operations at SSCP?

574. Members were advised:

- Interpretation improvements were still planned for this year, and more progress was expected after the summer.
- The Turkey Barn had WiFi coverage installation completed on 25 June.
- The photo shoot organised through the Sussex Film Office did occur. The service was not advertised as it depended upon the appropriateness of the activity.
- Officers have considered messaging to assist with visitor flow as a result of the SSSI designation. The Authority was keen that the site was not just open to all but also an examples of exemplary land management and there could sometimes be a tension between those two aspirations. This was kept under constant review and should a significant change occur the operating plans would evolve in response.

575. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q4 Seven Sisters Country Park performance report 2024/25.

#### **ITEM 20: ANNUAL REVIEW OF PLANNING PERFORMANCE: FINANCIAL YEAR 2024/25**

576. The Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager introduced report PR24/25-42 and reminded members of the report content.

577. The Committee commented:

- The number of completed homes felt low, which was a concern given government targets for house building. It was noted that this was not something completely within the Authority's control.

- There were figures for how many permissions had been granted and how many had been completed. Were there figures for how many had been started and if not was there any insight as to why a granted permission may not be completed?
- How long did planning permission last once granted?
- Had any thought been given to shortening the length of planning permission, perhaps down to two years or eighteen months, to encourage development?
- Would the smaller number of developments coming forward have a financial impact on the Authority?
- There had been an issue with Southern Water to upgrading their sewage systems to be able to take the foul drainage which had delayed development throughout the Southeast. Registered housing providers were also having difficulty in securing funding and so were unable to secure affordable housing that had been built.
- Did the decrease in the number of applications and the increase in the number of appeals indicate an increasing litigiousness?
- Were the Biodiversity Net Gain figures based on the number of applications or on the developments delivered?
- Could future reports include aged enforcement figures as the oldest cases tended to be the most irksome to residents.
- Had any impact been seen in the Host Authorities of the upcoming Local Government reorganisation?

578. Members were advised:

- The Authority was responsible for conditions, so there was some measurement of commencement in terms of conditions and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Section 106 agreements were also subject to monitoring. A government consultation would look into why permissions were sometimes not progressed. The Planning Office Society had noted that the number, especially of pre-commencement conditions, could impact funding, and that more ambitious sites identified for development in the Local Plan could sometimes prove difficult to realise. The new Local Plan would bring forward new sites and the Authority was exploring options with local rural homes providers to help deliver affordable homes for the Park as well as exploring the option, at a national level, of a National Parks Community Land Trust.
- The legal standard for planning permission was that work should commence within three years of permission being granted.
- There were currently no financial issues caused by the number of applications being submitted. The decreasing number of applications was in line with the national trend, and there were often peaks and troughs. It was expected that the number of applications would increase as the economy improved, alongside the new Local Plan and future changes to local fee setting.
- Officers were of the opinion that there was no obvious connection between the decrease in applications and the increase in appeals. The appeal statistics indicated that Officer decisions were broadly correct. It was noted that government was intent on changing the planning system, and that in the last two quarters, the number of appeals that were successful at public inquiry was 56%, rather than the baseline 20% which had been the baseline figure. It might prove difficult for the Authority to maintain its appeal success rate against that background.
- The BNG figures were based on the permissions granted.

- Officers would look to include aged enforcement figures in future reports.
- Next year would be a busy period for local government reorganisation and three of the current host authority contracts were scheduled to end in September 2026, and there was a need to look beyond the devolution settlement to the new authorities that were being created.

579. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Annual Review of Planning Performance report.

580. The Chair closed the meeting at 2.29pm.

**CHAIR**