

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

### **AUTHORITY MEETING**

Held at 1.00pm on 16 October 2025 in the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH.

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Paul Bevan, Antonia Cox, Debbie Curnow-Ford, Chris Dowling, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, John Hyland, Stephen McAuliffe, Jerry Pett, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Lara Sonola, Daniel Stewart-Roberts, Stephen Whale and Vicki Wells.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Siôn McGeever (Chief Executive Officer), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), James Winkworth (Director of Growth and Organisational Development), Annie Barnes (Legal Officer), Natacha Bricks-Yonow (Downs to the Sea Project Manager), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Craig Garoghan (Chief Finance Officer), Ruth James (Head of Communications and Engagement), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), and Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services).

### **CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS**

63. The Chair of the Authority welcomed all present and informed them of general housekeeping matters.

### **ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

64. Apologies were received from John Cross, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Gary Marsh, Robert Mocatta and Mark Potter.

### **ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

65. The following declarations were made:

- Debbie Curnow-Ford declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a Hampshire County Councillor.
- Chris Dowling declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as an East Sussex County Councillor.
- Janet Duncton declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a West Sussex County Councillor.
- Joan Grech declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a Horsham District Councillor
- Stephen McAuliffe declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as an Arun District Councillor.
- Jerry Pett declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a Winchester City Councillor.
- Daniel Stewart-Roberts declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as an East Hampshire District Councillor.
- Vicki Wells declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a Worthing Borough Councillor.

### **ITEM 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

66. The minutes of the Authority meetings held on 8 July and 1 September 2025 were approved as a correct record.

**ITEM 4. URGENT MATTERS**

67. There were no urgent matters.

**ITEM 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

68. There were no public speakers.

**ITEM 6. NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

69. The Chair asked the Authority if any Member wished to raise any point of accuracy in the Part II minutes of the previous meeting at Agenda Item 16. As no Member wished to raise any point of accuracy the Chair informed the Authority that the meeting would not move into private session to consider the Part II minutes of the 1 September 2025 meeting.

**ITEM 7. AUTHORITY CHAIR UPDATE**

70. The Chair introduced the report (NPA25/26-08).

71. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

**ITEM 8. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S PROGRESS REPORT**

72. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-09).

73. Members made the following comments:

- Welcomed the Authority's work on income generation, particularly in light of the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the Defra grant.
- Noted positively that the potential threat to the Section 245 duty had been removed and that the sector had publicly expressed support for Protected Landscapes.
- Requested confirmation that, whilst the Authority was now designated a 'Responsible Body' for Conservation Covenant Agreements, it did not have a 'General Power of Competence'.
- Sought clarification on the respective advantages and disadvantages of the Authority's standing as a 'Responsible Body' compared to holding a 'General Power of Competence'.
- Requested an update on the current situation regarding the Angel Inn in Midhurst.
- Queried the scope of the Authority's carbon footprint reduction targets under Corporate Plan objectives HLT 4 and HLT 5 and requested clarification on how the Authority would address external carbon generation.
- Requested confirmation as to whether the Authority had adopted a strategy and action plan to support carbon footprint reduction.
- Requested further detail on the strategy to improve chalk grassland sites across the National Park.

74. Members were advised:

- It was confirmed that the awarding of 'Responsible Body' status did not confer a 'General Power of Competence'. This power remained within the remit of central government. Discussions with Defra were ongoing over a suitable legislative vehicle, such as the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, to enable the inclusion of this power to statute
- 'Responsible Body' status enabled the creation of Conservation Covenant Agreements, furthering the Authority's conservation work by facilitating the protection of habitat banks outside of the planning system and creating opportunities for income generation.

- The Authority had been working with Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council in relation to the Angel Inn. A portion of the financial contribution provided by the Authority had been returned, and the scaffolding was in the process of being managed by the relevant parties. One of the site owners had begun pre-application discussions with the Authority.
- The Corporate Plan had two carbon footprint reduction targets, one for the South Downs National Park Authority as an organisation, including Scope two and three emissions, and one for the National Park as a whole which covered all activity within its boundaries. Emissions were measured and monitored by Small World Consultants. The Authority used its influence to support delivery of this target through mechanisms such as the planning system and tree planting.
- It was confirmed the Authority had an emerging plan to reduce the carbon footprint of the National Park. Improvements would be considered as part of the next Partnership Management Plan, and there was a desire to accelerate delivery of the strategy.
- The Authority's strategy for improving chalk grassland sites included providing advice to landowners and farmers on land outside its direct control. Discussions were ongoing with Defra on a pilot project using a place-based approach. Work was underway with Natural England to assess the viability of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and their capacity to deliver in the context of a changing climate. This formed part of a strategic approach to habitat management and resource prioritisation.

75. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report.:

#### **ITEM 9.       DOWNS TO THE SEA UPDATE**

76. The Downs to the Sea Project Manager provided a verbal report.

77. Members made the following comments:

- Expressed enthusiasm for the breadth of activities being delivered through the Downs to the Sea project.
- Queried whether a list of venues attended by the Water Champions was available.
- Questioned whether there was scope to expand the project to include the removal of weirs or the installation of fish ladders along the River Rother to facilitate upstream fish migration.
- Requested clarification as to whether funding had been set aside to cover the ongoing maintenance costs of capital projects delivered through the scheme.
- Welcomed the Ponds for Ponds initiative but expressed concern that the ponds could vanish without maintenance. Requested information on funding arrangements for ponds post-2027.

78. Members were advised:

- A list of venues visited by the Water Champions could be shared with Members.
- There was no scope to expand the project beyond the activities agreed under the terms of the Heritage Fund grant. The Western Sussex Rivers Trust were aware of the issues affecting the River Rother.
- The Heritage funding was not being used for maintenance but to reset or initiate projects. Capital funding could not be used for maintenance and would require separate funding arrangements. Partners would assume ownership of these projects through mechanisms such as landowners' agreements and management plans and the Authority would support them in this.

- Consideration was being given to the inclusion of grants for maintenance within the Pounds for Ponds scheme as learning from the project was being reviewed.
- Three apprentices had been recruited as a direct outcome of this project.

**ITEM 10. ANNUAL UPDATE ON SDNPA COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT WORK**

79. The Head of Communications and Engagement introduced the report (NPA25/26-10).

80. Members made the following comments:

- Praised the response to the ‘We Hear You Know’ incident in the summer.
- Welcomed the digital engagement figures and thanked the Communications team for the support they had provided to Members and Officers.
- Questioned whether the issues around Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) were a result of the Authority’s success in promoting and developing the venue and asked whether the authority should be seeking to promote other attractions within the National Park.
- Noted that local businesses were promoting travel to the area.

81. Members were advised:

- The large influx of visitors was to the heritage coast as a whole, rather than SSCP specifically. The Authority was working with partners to develop a visitor management plan for the heritage coast.
- Part of SSCP’s attraction was its accessibility via public transport. Attempts to disperse visitors geographically were complicated when public transport links were not in place. Events such as Dark Night Skies were being used to attempt to disperse visitors across the year to ensure all visitors to the National Park had a good experience.
- Officers were keen to learn from other venues which had experienced similar issues and also to take a leadership role in delivering a co-ordinated response. There were important lessons which could be learned.

82. **RESOLVED:** The Authority received and considered an update on the Authority’s Communications & Engagement Work.

83. The meeting adjourned for a short break at 2.25pm.

**ITEM 11. DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION UPDATE**

84. The Director of Growth and Organisational Development introduced the report (NPA25/26-11) and provided a verbal update, noting the Local Growth Strategy should be included in the key asks identified within the paper

85. The Chair reported on the first meeting of the Sussex and Brighton MCA Informal Joint Committee Partnership Board held on 10 October.

86. Members made the following comments:

- Supported the neutral position proposed in paragraphs 6.5 and 6.6 of the report.
- Requested clarification on how Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) would benefit nature or people within the National Park.
- Asked if there was a short-term strategy to develop the Authority’s work with Hampshire’s in line with the work done with Sussex

- Suggested the inclusion of the Green Economy to the key principles informing the Authority's engagement with Mayoral Combined County Authorities.
- Asked whether anything could be learned from the North Yorkshire Moors National Park Authority's (NYMNP) experiences in working with a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA).
- Raised the benefit of both the New Forest and South Downs National Parks being represented on the Hampshire Portfolio Board.

87. Members were advised:

- There were opportunities to access additional funding and to place the environment as a key deliverable in the new Mayors vision and growth plans. The Authority was keen to have a seat at the table in order to contribute to decision-making, to balance development with nature-based solutions and to add value and strengthen delivery.
- The Authority was working with the Hampshire Portfolio Board and was in the process of drafting a joint letter with the New Forest National Park to request at least one seat on the board for a representative from Protected Landscapes. Initial discussions around this were positive.
- Agreed that the Green Economy would be included the key principles informing the Authority's engagement with Mayoral Combined County Authorities.
- The SDNPA would be the first National Park to sit as a non-constituent member of a MCCA. Lessons could be learned from other National Parks; Northumberland National Park (NNP) had embedded the environment into the North East Combined Authority growth strategy and a meeting was scheduled with the NNP Chief Executive Officer.
- The SDNPA had the endorsement of Protected Landscapes in Sussex to represent them and was in the process of seeking endorsement of Protected Landscapes in Hampshire to do the same.

88. An amendment to Recommendation 2 was agreed adding '*and Local Growth Plan and Green Economy*' after 'guiding principles outlined in section 4 of the report'.

89. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the updates contained in the report on the progress of devolution in Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton;
2. Endorsed the guiding principles outlined in section 4 of the report, and Local Growth Plan and Green Economy, as the foundation for the South Downs National Park Authority's involvement in discussions on the proposed Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authorities; and
3. Endorsed the South Downs National Park Authority's position, set out in paragraph 6.5 of this report, in relation to proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton.

**ITEM 12. AMENDMENT TO STANDING ORDERS - DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY TO ENTER INTO CONSERVATION COVENANT AGREEMENTS**

90. The Monitoring Officer and Head of Governance introduced the report (NPA25/26-12).

91. Members made the following comment:

- Pleased to note that the SDNPA had been designated a responsible body for Conservation Covenant Agreements and looked forward to the first such agreement being signed

92. **RESOLVED:** The Authority amended the Authority’s Standing Orders for Regulation of Authority Proceedings and Business as set out in paragraph 3.5 to delegate authority to the Director of Planning, in consultation with the Director of Landscape and Strategy, to enter into Conservation Covenant Agreements for the South Downs National Park Authority.

**ITEM 13. BUDGET MONITORING 2025/26: CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND BUDGET VARIATION**

93. The Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-13) and updated Members that since the publication of the report, a further review of the capital program funding had been undertaken, the results of which were that the use of reserves to support the delivery of the capital program was not required as variations would be funded from the Defra capital grant instead.
94. An updated recommendation was proposed:  
“The authority is recommended to note the recommendation from the Policy and Resources committee on the 18th of September in relation to the use of reserves as set out in the report is no longer required and that the variations to the capital program will be funded through the capital allocation from Defra.”
95. Members made the following comment:
- Requested clarification that the original recommendation was no longer required and for further reasoning behind the revised recommendation.
96. Members were advised:
- It was confirmed that the original recommendation was no longer required. The revised recommendation was proposed to ensure it was clear the Authority had considered the matter as it was not just an officer recommendation but also from the Policy and Resources committee.
97. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the recommendation from the Policy and Resources committee on the 18th of September in relation to the use of reserves as set out in the report was no longer required and that the variations to the capital program would be funded through the capital allocation from Defra.

**ITEM 14. PLANNING COMMITTEE**

98. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 8 May and 10 July 2025.

**ITEM 15. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

99. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 26 June 2025.

**ITEM 16. PART II MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

100. The Part II minutes of the Authority meeting held 1 September 2025 were approved as a correct record.
101. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.01pm.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_