

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **9 December 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.**

1. 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 NPA on 16 October 2025.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. Since my last report the main themes of our work seem to have been about partnership, trust, credibility and influence. All in a good way.
- 2.2. Together with colleagues in all the National Parks and National Landscapes and alongside 200 signatories including all the largest and most significant Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) we managed to ensure that an amendment weakening the duty on public bodies and statutory undertakers to 'seek to further' our purposes, strengthened less than 2 years ago was not included in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Not only was this a great example of the sector pulling together but also a huge vote of confidence in the importance of the work we do. It also gave me a lot of comfort that we can really rely on our friends and colleagues to have our backs when we need them.
- 2.3. We have also been selected alongside Exmoor to be part of Defra's Place-based Pathfinder programme. This is aimed at testing what centrally held functions could be passed down to us either directly from Defra or from other Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) such as Natural England and the Environment Agency. Initial meetings indicate that this could significantly increase our role in delivering Agri Environment Schemes, allow us more autonomy on licensing and permitting and fulfilling the role of (previously) statutory consultees such as Natural England in the planning process. Crucially, we've also been invited to be part of the stakeholder group helping to design the newly proposed Nature Restoration Fund.
- 2.4. Alongside this, we hosted Marion Spain, the Chief Executive of Natural England, who was accompanied by senior colleagues. We visited a number of sites to unpack what this might look like on the ground. A huge thank you to all the officers who took part in that and helped make it a really positive event. Marion left with a strong impression of us (and NPAs in general) being a key delivery partner as NE rolls out its new strategy.
- 2.5. And following work we have been leading with Defra on behalf of all the NPAs an amendment to the Devolution Bill has been tabled proposing that National Parks are granted



a general power of competence. This was a key recommendation of the Glover review and something that I personally have been pushing for the last 5 years or so. It is a significant change and will help us to really play a positive and wide-reaching role in the new devolved administrations. It should also help us to grow our income generating activities.

- 2.6. So all in I think that we are seeing some positive policy shifts that have come from a concerted effort by all of us to show what we can do and who we can be. And by we, I mean all National Parks. This feels like a positive change and one we need to keep driving if we are going to deliver the ambitious targets we have set ourselves. A huge thank you to everyone who has been part of this. It takes time out of the day job, but the prize is potentially huge.
- 2.7. Below you will see the now standard report on progress against the corporate plan (a new corporate plan is currently in development to align with the new PMP which is exciting). And under general updates in this report I've included:
 - Planning – an update on our Planning for Nature Work and bringing in Lewes.
 - Devolution and Local Government – we're becoming more formally embedded in the processes surrounding this
 - PMP – a quick update for general consumption as this is a main agenda item of the NPA committee
 - Nature Recovery – an update on the Landscape Observatory, another initiative we're involved in
 - Seven Sisters – winter works going on and plans afoot to get ready for next year working with partners.
 - Climate Change – a bit on how we're all becoming more climate literate. This is fantastic training that I've been part of. I really need to do more to reduce my footprint.

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%.**



	Total to date (2022 start)	Annual 2025/26 Target	Annual total to date	Q2 contribution	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
HLTI	7,224ha 56% of 2030 target	1,300 ha	458ha 35% of annual target	208ha 16% of annual target		

- 3.2. At the end of Q2, 56% of the 13,000 hectares target to be reached by 2030, has been achieved. Despite a measured start to the year, the majority of delivery is expected to happen in Q3/Q4 through the green finance pipeline which currently has a potential of over 3,000 hectares of land to be used for nature. Due to this, the RAG rating has been assessed as 'amber' for this latest quarter but is anticipated to be 'green' by end of year.
- 3.3. This quarter, the SDNPA formally became a responsible body for conservation covenant agreements under section 119 of the Environment Act 2021. In addition, the Sussex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) Supporting Authorities pre-consultation was issued. SDNPA supported the request by the Responsible Authorities to proceed to public consultation.

- 3.4. 180ha of land has been created or improved for nature in Q2. Dew pond creation continues Park-wide, as well as ongoing chalk grassland management, river habitat and heathland restoration. 30ha land has been legally secured for BNG as well as a nutrient mitigation scheme near Winchester.
- 3.5. **HLT#2: Work to maintain, enhance and/or restore 30% of existing Core Nature sites and support key species recovery within the SDNP by 2030.**
- 3.6. This KPI is now monitored through national targets set out in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF):

PLTOF Target	Target	Annual data (Published Q2 2025)	RAG Status
*PLTOF Target 2: Achieve favourable condition for 80% of SSSI features within the National Park by 2042, with an interim milestone of 50% by 2031	50% by 2031	29.7%	
*PLTOF Target 3: Ensure that 60% of SSSIs within the National Park are assessed as having 'actions on track' to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028	60% by 2028	20.8%	





*Data covers period up to February 2025. SSSI condition data is published annually.

- 3.7. The amber RAG status reflects that, whilst progress is being made, current performance remains significantly below the interim targets set for 2031 and 2028. Further improvement is needed.
- 3.8. 29.7% of SSSI features in the National Park were reported as being in favourable condition — a slight increase from 29.3% in 2024. Efforts to improve SSSI condition are ongoing. This is reflected in the latest data, which shows that 20.8% of SSSI features had 'actions on track' to achieve favourable condition — a notable rise from 13.2% in 2024.
- 3.9. **HLT3: To prepare for and implement Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**
- 3.10. BNG data is reported annually in Q4.
Climate Action
- 3.11. **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** 
- 3.12. SDNPA emissions data is reported annually in Q4. However, it is predicted that capital works carried out in 2024/5 has likely generated increased carbon emission. We expect the data to reflect this increase and have assigned a red RAG status for this HLT as a consequence.
- 3.13. **HLT#5: 5% reduction per annum in the overall carbon footprint of the South Downs National Park from the baseline reported in 2019** 
- 3.14. The HLT target data, LULUCF Forestry component data, is reported annually and progress will be included in the Q4 performance report. However, data from the Carbon Disclosure project published this quarter, has shown a rise in emissions against the SDNPA 2019 baseline figure, albeit from 2022/2023 as reporting is retrospective. Therefore, the RAG status for this HLT is currently 'red'.
- 3.15. The Carbon Disclosure project's first results for South Downs National Park show a 0.8% rise in CO₂ emissions from 2022 to 2023, missing the forecasted 5% reduction. This is mainly due to increased domestic energy use (up 10%), visitor travel (up 6%), and industrial processes (up 5%). However, emissions from resident travel and industrial energy use fell by 10% and 5% respectively. Work is ongoing to include carbon sequestration from Nature

Recovery and Woodland Planting, which is expected to improve the overall carbon footprint once factored in.

A National Park for All











3.16. HLT#6: Increase diversity of those engaging with the South Downs National Park

KPI	Annual 2025/26 Target	Annual total to date	Q2 Contribution	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
H6.1 Number of people from underrepresented audiences engaged through engagement & project activities	3,500	3,034 87% of annual target	1,490 43% of annual target		
H6.2 Number of engagement activities targeted at underrepresented audiences	90	111 123% of annual target	72 80% of annual target		







3.17. Progress against targets are rated as ‘green’ due to a continuing programme of events and activities throughout the remainder of the year, though annual targets have been underestimated.

3.18. Examples of engagement this quarter include dark skies events such as heathland bat walks which combined stargazing with biofluorescent wildlife exploration. The Astronomy Festival at Herstmonceux highlighted the Park’s International Dark Sky Reserve status. Community Outreach & Cultural Events included stands at Jalsa Salana and Southampton’s Mela Festival engaging diverse audiences. Walks with Muslim Hikers and pop-ups at Seven Sisters County Park fostered inclusion and awareness of the Authority’s work.

3.19. 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	Annual total to date	Q2 Contribution	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
H7.1 Number of sessions facilitated by mobility equipment*	100 per year	153 153% of annual target	84 84% of annual target		
H7.2.1 Metres of new and/or improved accessible path	1,350 m	6,509 482% of annual target	3,569 m 264% of annual target		
H7.2.2 Number of interventions to improve access	85	74 87% of annual target	61 72% of annual target		
H7.3 Number of visits to the digital Accessibility Hub	10,000	3,482 35% of annual target	1,779 18% of annual target		
H7.4 Number of page views of the Seven Sisters Country Park Accessibility Guide	5,000	2,097 42% of annual target	1,114 22% of annual target		

- 3.20. This year has seen extensive planning, groundwork and delivery towards improving accessibility across the Park including the completion of 1.6 kilometres of shared-use path as part of the Centurion Way extension in Q2. Targets are currently being reviewed for the new Corporate Plan as these were vastly underestimated this year.
- 3.21. A greater number of access interventions have occurred over the Q2 summer months including bridleway gate replacements, signpost repairs, path widening and surface upgrades.
- 3.22. The target for H7.3 is ambitious. Data trends show that visits to the digital Accessibility hub have stabilised since launch with 1-2k visits per quarter. We continue to promote the hub through our socials and media stories though meeting annual targets may prove difficult.
- 3.23. **HLT#8: Digitally engage 100,000 people per year with the SDNP**

KPI	Annual 2025/26 Target	Year to date	RAG Status	Expected RAG Status at Year-End
H8.1 Total number of E-newsletter subscribers	12,000 subscribers	13,705		
H8.2 Total social media audience	100,000	140,213		
H8.3 Total visits to the digital hubs throughout the year: (Nature Recovery, Climate Change, Walking hub, Communities)	65,000 since launch	66,477		

- 3.24. We continue to see excellent growth and engagement across our social media channels resulting in increased traffic to the digital hubs. We will be reviewing the metrics used to evaluate digital engagement when developing the 2026/2027 Communications and Engagement Strategy and the new Corporate Plan.
- 3.25. Targeted campaigns and seasonal activity have grown our social media audience and subsequent visits to our digital hubs. We have trialled new different styled posts and timings and maintain an engagement rate of over 7%.
- 3.26. SDNPA communications channels continue to grow, with 13,705 subscribers to the main e-newsletter and a further 1,276 engaged through the planning e-newsletter. We have steadily increased subscribers to our main monthly e-newsletter by approx. 10% per year.

4. General Updates

Planning

- 4.1. **Performance** - The Planning team have opened over 4500 cases since January 2025. This includes all the different types of applications and casework the team process. Our returns to government show that we have approved 92% of applications in quarter 2. We continuously monitor our appeal success rate which is measured on financial years. For 2024/2025, 84% of appeals were dismissed and since April 2025, 73% of appeals have been dismissed so far this year.
- 4.2. There have been some **big applications decided by committee**, including 85 homes in Petersfield. We also received confirmation that the team have secured £750,000 from Gatwick Airport to be used to enhance Dark Night Skies tranquillity across the SDNP, Surrey Hills, Kent Downs and High Weald Landscapes.
- 4.3. Our host authorities continue to work closely with us on our behalf. **The SDNP team at Chichester** have secured a full injunction for the unauthorised works at Blind Lane, Lurgashall. The team at Chichester are continuing to work with the courts to ensure that the land is restored.

- 4.4. We also announced that by mutual agreement our work at **Lewes will be brought in-house**, rather than be done by Lewes District Council. Colleagues are working closely with LDC to make sure the transfer of services and staff is smooth, with 1 April 2026 being the first day of the new service. We are also working closely with Lewes Town Council and other local councils and groups and look forward to developing those relationships further.
- 4.5. We have our own **Planning for Nature programme**, as part of an organisational wide approach to the 30x30 target and our own PMP aspirations. This includes an internal one stop shop whereby any nature recovery scheme are assessed by a dedicated planner. The Planning team have a dedicated contact for Ranger teams to contact Planning for checks on whether permission is required or whether we can use our own Planning rights as an authority. The team have also been meeting with district Cllrs and a local parish to understand the barriers that the planning system may put in place on nature projects. We are using our contacts across the Park to ask for feedback on real-life examples where the cost/process of a planning application has prevented them from developing the project. We are, following in the footsteps of the Lake District and a general approach amongst all the national park planning authorities, exploring the use of a **Local Development Order** to grant permission automatically for new ponds, fencing and potentially signage. All this is subject to appropriate controls, feasibility and of course involves resource to navigate through the system to implement an LDO. The intention is to make schemes, both our own and communities, easier to deliver, accelerating nature recovery. This is a legal process, and we will keep you updated.
- 4.6. We have recently distributed the **Community Infrastructure Levy** following member workshop and Planning Committee with £1.8million allocated to 31 projects across the Park.
- 4.7. **The Planning and Infrastructure Bill** continues its progress and has recently been back to the House of Lords for the final time. With literally hundreds of amendments proposed, ones that were voted through now go back to the House of Commons. A reduction in the formal role of Natural England in the planning process is emerging, leaving greater scope for planning authorities and case officers to make recommendations and decisions. This is part of a growing trend to streamline advice and empower planners.
- 4.8. Various proposed changes to the nature recovery and **environmental delivery plan (EDP)** part of the Bill were hotly debated. A key vote related to limitations on the EDP such that it could only apply to nutrient neutrality, water quality, water resource or air quality, rather than as proposed, applying to protected species such as bats and newts. The vote, despite a strong defence by the Tory Baroness Steveange leading the Bill, was passed. EDP's must also demonstrably show how the effect of the conservation measures in the Plan will 'materially outweigh the negative effects of development. In summary the ability of EDP's to offset harm to nature via a plan and fund will be limited.
- 4.9. There are suggestions the bill could receive Royal Assent by the end of November, so things are moving quickly now.
- 4.10. A new **NPPF and National Development Management policies** have been promised before Christmas. We shall see what form these take and how they align with our emerging Local Plan policies. Notwithstanding and to some disappointment, these national DM policies are to be advisory rather than statutory. Whilst this does leave scope for local influence, it's unlikely to speed up plan making and the whole system in the way envisaged, as they will be a material consideration. More of this at the **members Planning workshop on 15 January 2026**

Devolution and Local Government Reform

- 4.11. In Sussex, through her role on the Mayoral "Informal partnership board", Vanessa continues to promote the interests of Protected Landscapes. In addition, we can now influence at officer level via the emerging Stakeholder Group, which will have met by the time you read this report. This forum is considering proposals for Sussex's Local Growth Strategy and Spatial Development Strategy, providing a direct route for shaping priorities at an early stage.

- 4.12. In Hampshire, we have now submitted the proposed joint letter with the New Forest National Park Authority to the four upper-tier Chief Executives in November. We have received a Negative initial response to our proposals (which were seeking a role on the “CEO and Leaders group” overseeing preparatory arrangements), and we are now seeking an in-person follow-up discussion to explore the issues further. We continue to influence effectively at officer level within the established policy groups and have played a key role in coordinating the green-growth contribution to the founding documents for the Local Growth Plan, as well as maintaining a valued role within the planning group.
- 4.13. Vanessa is meetings with all Mayoral candidates and has already met with the Conservative candidate for Sussex and Hampshire (dates with other declared candidates are in progress). Together with officers, Vanessa is advocating for the positive role that National Parks can play in helping Mayoral Combined County Authorities meet national targets, balance development with green growth, and place making. My thanks to both Vanessa and the officers who have been involved in these important discussions.
- 4.14. More broadly, our potential role within devolved administrations continues to be recognised. As covered elsewhere in my report, the introduction of the General Power of Competence has now been tabled for legislation, and we have been selected as a potential participant for a “Defra Pathfinder Pilot”. Assuming these additional powers materialise, they will further demonstrate the potential of National Parks to play a key role in devolved administrations.
- 4.15. Local Government Reorganisation is progressing more slowly. Public consultations on the unitary proposals are now underway. Once these are concluded, we expect conversations around future risks and opportunities to accelerate. In the meantime, we are meeting regularly with partners, with particular focus on the future management of public assets.

PMP Update

- 4.16. The final text of the Partnership Management Plan 2026-2031 for adoption by the National Park Authority is elsewhere on this agenda. Following consultation and the final meeting of the Steering Group a number of changes were made to the plan. Much of the feedback asked that the targets in the plan be more ambitious. As a result, the targets were revised and, in some cases, changed for different ones. The text for some aims and objectives has been changed as has the vision.
- 4.17. Following adoption, the plan will be launched early in 2026, with a first meeting of partners sometime later. The delivery partners will develop the delivery plan and monitor it annually. Existing partnerships and networks will be used to help with this where possible. A new digital platform will be used for the online version of the plan, and some exciting new illustrations will be used to provide a strong identity.

Landscape & Nature Recovery

- 4.18. **Landscape Observatory** - Pioneering AI Mapping Begins Across England’s Protected Landscapes. The Landscape Observatory is a national initiative using AI and aerial imagery to map land cover across England’s Protected Landscapes funded through the PLP and NPE. By producing detailed, standardised maps, the project will provide land managers, conservationists, and policymakers with the tools they need to plan habitat restoration, support species recovery, and strengthen climate resilience. The first phase of the AI mapping workstream covers five National Parks and ten National Landscapes including the National Trails within. This will create a consistent evidence base that informs conservation management, tests climate adaptation frameworks such as Resist, Accept, Direct (RAD), and helps to ensure that England’s Protected Landscapes are managed proactively in a changing climate. The exciting new is that the South Downs will be in this first phase! More details to come as the work begins but we should have mapping by spring/summer 2026 which we can use in our work.
- 4.19. **Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)** - The Hampshire LNRS has now been through its public consultation and will be published in December with a launch event

planned for the 8 December. SDNPA has been actively involved in the development of the strategy all the way through via the Steering Group and Local Planning Authority Working Group. The intention is to directly link across from the new South Downs Partnership Management Plan 2026-31 to both the Hampshire (and Sussex) LNRs.

Seven Sisters Country Park

- 4.20. After such a busy summer we are taking stock and implementing capital works. The **New Barn cottage restoration** is finished the house is looking great. The quality of workmanship and re-use of materials on site has been brilliant. We are working with Savills to find an appropriate tenant given the nuances of living off grid.
- 4.21. We are undertaking a crucial works package on **Foxhole Cottages** holiday accommodation, to be finished by March 2026. These works are to address health and safety issues, water ingress and customer feedback. Works to the chimney stacks, hard landscaping, and rainwater draining systems are critical. A number of measures are being taken to improve the guest experience and useability of the cottages as holiday accommodation units, such as much needed patio areas. Collaboration with the Saltmarsh cafe owner who runs the cottages on our behalf has been a key feature.
- 4.22. **The four EV charging points**, part of a wider deal between National parks UK and BMW have been installed in the north car park. At the time of writing we are awaiting the electrical supply to be connected.
- 4.23. Plans for the **north car park** are being worked up, taking into account the EV Charging points. Local community and bus operator representatives have been made aware. Comments on the desirability of making best use of the existing space and clear delineations as well as the approach to limiting coach car parking are being addressed.
- 4.24. We are working closely with ESCC and their consultants on the now agreed (at officer level) option for a **crossing over the A259**. A meeting later this month should establish key details such as nature of refuge in the middle, approaches to lighting and bus stop provision. We are requesting ball-park costings so we can all begin to push for inclusion in ESCC capital programme and source funding.
- 4.25. A first meeting of key landowners of all the attractions in the area is planned for December. This is to seek views and an agreement on a co-ordinated approach to an area wide **Visitor Management Plan**. Whilst we can do some works, comms and messaging to influence visitor behaviours and deal with the some of the pressures and opportunities large numbers of visitors bring, there is a need for co-ordinated action across the various 'attractions' across the whole heritage coast area to make a lasting difference.
- 4.26. The **Seven Sisters Advisory Group** featuring some Members and external advisors continues to guide and offer suggestions to implement the above and continually improve the site and all it offers.
- 4.27. The **application to allow breaches at Chyngton Brooks** nearby the SSCP is in. The main issue emerging is the benefit to nature of the scheme balanced with alterations to access and rights of way, including closure of a footpath. Colleagues are working with National Trust, the applicants, to see if there is a solution that is more palatable to the local community.

Climate Change

- 4.28. **Carbon Literacy Training Update** - By the beginning of February 61 staff will have completed the Carbon Literacy training, taking us to 41% of staff (as listed on the structure charts). This is well beyond the 30% needed to reach Silver and not far off the 50% required to reach Gold Carbon Literate Organisation (CLO) status. To meet the criteria staff, need to have made pledges to reduce carbon emissions to receive a certificate. The climate team are now looking at other actions required to meet Silver CLO status which revolves around gathering evidence of comms work on Carbon Literacy training.

- 4.29. **Update on work towards the Authority’s carbon footprint** - The procurement team commissioned Small World Consulting to produce an important report on our Scope 3 emissions. This work had given us a baseline for scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions for the year 2024-25. It will inform annual reporting work for Defra that we are required to do and will provide comparisons for future years. Scope 3 includes all indirect emissions that occur in the upstream and downstream activities of an organisation, e.g. in the supply chain. Emissions data was collected mainly by using the SDNPA purchase ledger to equate CO 2e from spend. The report showed that Scope 3 emissions account for 95% of total emissions for the SDNPA, and as such they are an area where the SDNPA can have a large amount of influence in reducing these emissions.
- 4.30. On the back of this, a new Staff Environment Group has been set up to provide leadership and enable staff to contribute to:
- Supporting the Authority to achieve its target of net zero by 2030,
 - Improving the environmental activities of the organisation, and
 - Raising awareness of how staff can reduce carbon emissions.
- 4.31. The first action for the group will be to develop an environmental / sustainability policy for the SDNPA, which will be informed by the Scope 3 report to identify key actions.
- 4.32. This group will be led by the Director of Landscapes and Operations and the new Facilities Manager.

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 16 of October 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.

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

