

South Downs National Park Authority

Annual Governance Statement 2024-25

Review Date	Annual
Responsibility	Chief Executive
Approved by	Policy & Resources Committee

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT FOR SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY 2024-25

1. Scope of Responsibility

- 1.1 Through carrying out its general statutory duties and responsibilities in connection with the two national park purposes, the South Downs National Park Authority (the SDNPA) seeks to work for and with the local community to foster the social and economic wellbeing of communities within the National Park.
- 1.2 The SDNPA is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively.
- 1.3 The SDNPA also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 1.4 In discharging this overall responsibility, the SDNPA is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of the Authority's functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.
- 1.5 The SDNPA has approved and adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE guidance Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework. The Local Code of Corporate Governance sets out agreed criteria against which the effectiveness of the governance framework will be assessed. This statement explains how the Authority has complied with the Local Code and meets the requirements of Regulation 6(1) of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 for the Authority to prepare an Annual Governance Statement.

2. The purpose of the governance framework

- 2.1 The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the SDNPA is directed and controlled. The framework also includes the Authority's activities through which it is accountable to, engages with, and leads the community. It enables the SDNPA to monitor the achievement of its strategic priorities and to consider whether these priorities have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services. It is also a driver for the delivery of the Authority's outcomes and objectives, by contributing to the Authority's culture and empowering staff and members to act.
- 2.2 The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness.
- 2.3 The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Authority's aims, objectives, and policies, to evaluate the likelihood and potential impact of those risks being realised and to manage them efficiently, effectively, and economically.
- 2.4 The governance framework, which has evolved and been strengthened over many years, has been in place within the SDNPA for the year ended 31 March 2025 and up to the date of approval of the Annual Report and Statement of Accounts.

3. The Governance Framework

- 3.1 The key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the SDNPA's governance arrangements are summarised below.

Vision and Leadership

- 3.2 The SDNPA's purposes, vision, and intended outcomes for residents, visitors and other service users are identified in a range of policy documents set out in our Local Code of Corporate Governance. The overarching vision for the management of the South Downs was agreed in July 2012 and is included in the Partnership Management Plan (PMP), which was launched in 2014. The review of the PMP was completed in 2020 and an updated PMP published. The plan was originally developed with partners and delivery partnerships have been put in place to ensure the objectives are met. The Authority also established a refreshed South Downs Partnership in 2021, with updated terms of reference, an independent Chair and representatives from across a wide range of key sectors, linked to the PMP in order to support delivery of the PMP, review progress against it and embed the PMP across those organisations and sectors operating within the National Park. The Authority is currently reviewing the PMP in order to adopt a new five-year management plan in December 2025. In order to support the review of the PMP and fully engage with relevant stakeholders, a new PMP Steering Group was established which has been working closely with officers on the review of the PMP.
- 3.3 The Policy and Resources (P&R) Committee has received a comprehensive update on the delivery of the current PMP and considered and approved the proposed approach to the review of the PMP. It also recommended a number of matters to the Authority for approval in relation to the review of the PMP, including the establishment of the PMP Steering Group and the issuing of the relevant notices of the review. These recommendations were subsequently approved by the Authority.
- 3.4 The Local Plan sets out how the National Park Authority will manage development until 2033. This is based on the statutory purposes and duty for national parks. The Local Plan builds on the framework of the South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan. The PMP sets out an overarching strategy for the management of the National Park and the Local Plan policies deliver many of the outcomes and policies set out in the PMP.
- 3.5 A review of the Local Plan is ongoing and a revised Local Development Scheme has been approved for consultation. The Local Plan review will, alongside reviewing local planning policies in relation to climate change, park for all and renature, also consider the impacts of changing national planning legislation and a new plan-making system. A number of workshops have been held with Member during this period to inform the development of the Local Plan.
- 3.6 The SDNPA's Corporate Plan 2020-25 establishes the high-level objectives and priorities for the organisation and includes an action plan setting out detailed proposals for the forthcoming financial year. The Corporate Plan also sets out our values and includes the climate change action plan. As the review of the PMP will lead to a new five-year Corporate Plan the Authority approved a bridge-year Corporate Plan for 2025/26 which largely carried forward the objectives and priorities from the previous Corporate Plan.

Service Quality

- 3.7 Progress against the SDNPA's objectives, and the National Park Authority performance indicators is identified via performance reporting to the P&R Committee and, where appropriate, Planning Committee. The Performance Management Framework reflects the development of high-level objectives for the Partnership Management Plan. Performance is monitored by the P&R Committee with policies and strategies in place to ensure that the SDNPA makes best use of resources. The performance of the Sustainable Communities Fund, which is delivered by the South Downs National Park Trust, is subject to annual reporting to the Committee.
- 3.8 The P&R Committee receives an annual report on the performance of the SDNPA's planning function. This includes an overview of a wide variety of areas of the Authority's

planning function which are monitored regularly by officers, including appeals, enforcement, speed and quality of decisions, and the performance of the local authorities who deliver planning services on our behalf. A more detailed report on planning appeal outcomes is considered by the Planning Committee on a quarterly basis.

- 3.9 Key data sets, as specified by Defra are reported to allow for national data comparison.
- 3.10 The service quality and performance of the Authority's Teckal Company in its management of Seven Sisters Country Park against the agreed Operating Agreement, KPIs and Business Plan was also monitored by P&R Committee through a quarterly performance report up to the termination of the operating agreement with the company on 9 October 2024. Following that, P&R Committee continued to monitor the performance of SSCP and the management of its operations within the Authority through reports from officers.

Decision Making

- 3.11 The SDNPA's Standing Orders, Scheme of Delegation, Financial Regulations, Contract Standing Orders and other procedures prescribe how the Authority operates and how decisions are made to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. The Standing Orders are reviewed regularly and changes recommended to the Authority at least annually to ensure these reflect best practice and latest legislative requirements. During this period, following a review, a number of amendments and updates were made to the Standing Orders. These included, amongst other minor amendments:
- Clarity on delegations to committees to ensure the efficient and effective consideration and approval of Minerals and Waste Plans by the Authority.
 - Clarity on the P&R Committee's role in monitoring and reviewing the Authority's communications and engagement activities.
 - Removal of references to the Coast to Capital Joint Committee, including its Heads of Terms, as the Joint Committee was no longer in operation.
 - Delegations in relation to Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- 3.12 The Authority makes use of virtual and hybrid meetings in its informal meeting arrangements, including for Member training, workshops, and briefing sessions as appropriate. These on-line and hybrid meetings continue to have advantages in terms of enabling Member attendance and reducing travel across the National Park. Where it is considered more conducive to detailed debate and discussion, for example budget and strategic workshops, meetings are held in person. The Authority will continue to use virtual/hybrid meetings where it considers it appropriate and within its powers to do so.
- 3.13 During this period the Government consulted on introducing powers for local authority members to attend formal authority meetings remotely and vote by proxy in certain circumstances in its consultation "Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings." The Authority responded to this consultation and indicated its general agreement with the introduction of Members being able to attend meetings remotely, whilst acknowledging that in person attendance would remain the preferred method of attendance. The Authority did not support the introduction of proxy voting.
- 3.14 Member training and engagement activity continued using a blend of in person, hybrid, and on-line 'virtual' meetings. Member training, knowledge and skills development, and other workshops have been held on the following subjects:
- Partnership Management Plan
 - South Downs Local Plan
 - SDNPA Budget
 - SDNPA Corporate Plan

- Development Management
 - Community Infrastructure Levy
 - Corporate Risk Register
 - Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
 - Local and National Energy Production and Distribution
 - Nature Recovery
 - Rivers and Streams
 - Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation
 - Committee Away Days
 - Audit
 - Whole Estate Plans
 - New Member Induction
 - Code of Conduct Training
- 3.15 There is a programme for reviewing and updating key documentation. We have a research and evidence strategy, which ensures that comprehensive, good quality data is available to base our decisions on and allow us to monitor progress. Committee reporting templates ensure these capture all relevant information to inform member decision making and promote consistency. These templates are periodically reviewed and updated as required to ensure they are effective and provide Members with the necessary information for them to deliver their decision-making responsibilities.
- 3.16 Each of the SDNPA's committees has distinct terms of reference, which are kept under review and, where necessary, updated by the NPA. The P&R Committee has five co-opted members that serve on the committee, two Independent (CIPFA) co-opted members and three to further diversify the range of voices the Committee hears as part of its decision making and consideration of issues. During this period a third co-opted member was appointed by the Authority in July 2024 following a successful recruitment process.
- 3.17 During the period the Authority has agreed to participate in the Boardroom Apprentice Scheme, sponsored by MHCLG. The scheme aims to develop a pipeline of talent for future appointments across the UK. In January 2025 the Authority welcomed its first boardroom apprentice who will attend meetings of the Authority and the P&R Committee along with Member Strategic Days and workshops.
- 3.18 The Authority has appointed two independent persons to advise on standards matters.
- 3.19 Meetings of the Authority and its committees are held in public (save for individual items of a sensitive nature properly considered in private session, in line with LGA 1972) with publicly available agendas and minutes published on the Authority's website. Members of the public may ask questions and make representations on relevant matters at meetings in accordance with a defined protocol for public engagement, which enshrines the rights of the public to address meetings.
- 3.20 The Authority continues to webcast meetings of the Full Authority, and its Planning and P&R Committees. A review of the Authority's webcasting provision was undertaken during this period with value for money a particular consideration. The Authority has subsequently moved from the use of an external webcasting provider to an in-house solution. Since the start of 2025 meetings have been webcast via YouTube and an archive of webcast meetings of the last 6 months continues to be maintained and is publicly available through the Authority's YouTube channel.

- 3.21 The Authority's governance framework is kept under review by the Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer who are responsible for ensuring that the framework complies with changes in legislation, regulations, codes or guidance issued by government departments, regulatory bodies or relevant professional bodies. Committee and Officer Delegations and terms of reference are also kept under review and have been updated to ensure that the governance framework reflects changes in roles and responsibilities of committees, Members and/or Officers. During this period the terms of reference of both the Planning Committee, P&R Committee and the Appointments, Management and Standards Committee have been updated. These updates included ones to provide clarity on the Planning Committee's consideration of the Local Plan and Minerals and Waste Plans, and on P&R Committee's role in monitoring and reviewing the Authority's communications and engagement activities and their role in monitoring the performance of Seven Sisters Country Park and the management of its operations within the Authority.
- 3.22 The roles and responsibilities of the Members and officers are defined in Member/Officer job descriptions and there is a Local Protocol for Member and Officer Relations. The roles of Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer are filled.
- 3.23 During this period the Authority successfully recruited its second permanent Chief Executive, Siôn McGeever. The Authority made the appointment at its meeting on 22 August 2024 with Siôn McGeever taking up the post of Chief Executive on 25 November 2024. Until that date the Director of Planning continued to fulfil the role of Chief Executive. Once the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee had completed the recruitment processes for the Chief Executive its membership was amended to reduce it to the previous size of three members. The additional two members had been added to the committee to ensure an effective and comprehensive recruitment process.
- 3.24 The SDNPA has a range of contracts for key support services. This includes the provision of the Chief Finance Officer (CFO). In reaching this decision the SDNPA took into account the governance requirements of CIPFA's Statement on the role of the CFO in Local Government (2010). The CFO accordingly has full responsibility for reporting on financial performance and presenting financial performance updates and the annual budget report to members, as well as Internal Audit reviews and the Statement of Accounts.
- 3.25 There is a contract in place with Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) for the provision of financial services and CFO support. Under this contract the Authority has appointed its CFO who has a nominated Deputy CFO. During this period the Authority's CFO retired and, under the contract with BHCC, the Authority appointed an Interim CFO at its meeting on 10 December 2024.
- 3.26 During this period the Authority appointed a new Monitoring Officer (MO). The Authority's previous MO provided through a contract with Hampshire County Council (HCC) stepped down from the role due to increased governance work at HCC. The Authority undertook a review of best practice in the sector and what approach for the future would be in the best interests of the Authority. It was recommended that a MO internal to SDNPA be appointed in the future and the Authority appointed the Head of Governance as the MO at its meeting on 9 July 2024. An amended contract with HCC was subsequently agreed for the provision of a Deputy MO and specialist legal advice. The contracts for legal services with West Sussex County Council and the provision of a Deputy MO are managed by the Head of Governance and MO.
- 3.27 There are arrangements for consultation with the MO or Deputy MO, and CFO or Deputy CFO on key decisions and advice to the Authority and its Committees.
- 3.28 There have been significant changes over this period to the way the Authority manages its operations at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP). During this period a thorough review of the operating arrangements for SSCP was undertaken. Whilst developments undertaken on site at SSCP were very positive, with significant improvements to both the landscape

management and the visitor experience, the review considered in depth the benefits and challenges of continuing with the arrangements of managing SSCP through the Authority's Teckal Company, South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL), or of bringing the management of operations at SSCP within the Authority. The review benefited from two years of full operations at SSCP and had input from Members, officers, and the Board of SDCOL.

- 3.29 In a report to the Authority in July 2024 which presented the outcome of the review, Members considered a variety of matters on the operations at SSCP, including financial impacts on the Authority and efficiency improvements which could result, and concluded that in future the operations at SSCP should be managed within the Authority rather than through the Authority's Teckal Company. The Authority agreed that the operating agreement with SDCOL should be terminated with effect from 9 October 2024 and agreed a new operating model for SSCP within the Authority. The Authority also agreed that the Company Business Plan would become the Operating Plan for SSCP following the termination of the operating agreement. A new Operating Plan for SSCP was considered and agreed by the Authority in March 2025.
- 3.30 As a result of the Authority's decision, during this period, between 1 April and 9 October SSCP operations were managed by SDCOL under the terms of the operating agreement with the Authority and in line with the agreed Business Plan. Then between 9 October and 31 March 2024 the operations at SSCP were managed within the Authority and continue to be managed this way to date.
- 3.31 The Authority also considered the future position of its Teckal Company, SDCOL, and as a result of the Authority's decision on operations at SSCP, the Authority, in its role as Shareholder of SDCOL, agreed that as SDCOL undertook no other business at this time other than the management of SSCP the company would be made dormant. Arrangements to facilitate this were considered and agreed by the Authority at its meeting in October 2024.
- 3.32 To support future decision-making on potential land acquisitions by the Authority, an Environmental Land Acquisition Framework was considered and approved by the Authority in October 2024. The framework sets out a two-stage approach which considers the best use of Authority resources and will ensure any acquisition being considered meets the agreed acquisition principles and that due diligence is undertaken before any recommendation for the acquiring of land comes before the Authority.
- 3.33 The Authority has continued its relationship with the South Downs Trust – which is an independent charity established by the Authority. The Authority continues to have a licence agreement for the use of the shared identify and seconds staff to the Trust. The Authority appoints two Authority members as trustees. The Trust provides an annual update to the Authority, with the update being presented in public. The Trust complies with the reporting requirements of the Charity Commission and Companies House, has undertaken a thorough audit of the its account, and keeps its governance and policy framework under review to ensure it is robust and fit for purpose.
- 3.34 The annual review of governance has been undertaken, particularly taking into consideration the actions from the 2023-24 AGS implemented during this period which are summarised in section 5 of this AGS.
- 3.35 The P&R Committee held an away day to consider their effectiveness and the Chair of the P&R Committee has reported on this and their finding in **Annex A** to this AGS.

Risk management

- 3.36 The SDNPA has a well-established systematic and robust strategy, framework, and process for managing risk. These are set out in the Authority's Risk Strategy and Guidance which also includes the Authority's risk appetite statement. A corporate risk register is maintained

and has been reviewed on an ongoing basis at meetings of the Policy & Resources Committee as well as being subject to regular review by Operational Management Team (OMT) and Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The Policy and Resources committee has opportunities for members to better engage with the corporate risk register through a series of meetings – enabling committee members to dig deeper into issues on the risk register in advance of the Committee meeting and better inform the discussions which take place in Committee. This enables relevant risks to be identified and evaluated, with consideration given to appropriate mitigation strategies. Directorate level risk monitoring is in place and has been reviewed to ensure consistency across the organisation. Risk is also monitored at project level and there is an escalation process from project and directorate risk registers to the corporate risk register.

- 3.37 The Authority's Risk Strategy and Guidance has been reviewed during 2024 and was approved in September 2024. This was the subject of an initial workshop with Members in early 2024 to engage them in a consideration of the Authority's appetite to risk and future risk strategy to inform the Risk Strategy and Guidance document which included a revised risk appetite statement. To further support risk management at the Authority the Head of Governance will undertake with the Senior Leadership Team an annual radar / PESTEL analysis of overarching risks to the Authority. A central record of all key risks being managed through both the Corporate and Directorate Risk Registers will also be created to ensure simpler monitoring of all risks managed at these levels.
- 3.38 The Authority's insurance arrangements have been kept under review and updated as required.
- 3.39 The Authority has a Procurement Strategy 2021-26 in place which sets out how the SDNPA will take a proportionate view of risk in procurement, to strike a balance between mitigation and accessibility for small and medium sized enterprises. The Procurement Strategy Action Plan was reviewed and revised during this period. The action plan will ensure compliance with the Procurement Act 2023 and new Procurement Regulations and looks to measure scope 3 emissions for SDNPA contracts to support sustainable procurement in the future.
- 3.40 During the period the Authority has also undertaken the procurement process for the provision of ICT infrastructure and support services to the Authority. The provision of suitable and secure ICT services and systems is vital to the effective running of the Authority and to ensuring we operate in a safe and secure way. The contract was awarded in February 2025 and the systems and services with the new provider is expected to go live no later than 1 July 2025.

Conduct and behaviour

- 3.41 There are Codes of Conduct for Members and officers in place and performance appraisal processes for both. Training is given to new Members on the Code of Conduct as part of the induction process and biennially by external experts. There is a Register of Members' Interests. The Authority operates standards arrangements for the conduct of Members in accordance with the Localism Act 2011. The Appointment Management & Standards Committee is responsible for monitoring the ethical framework of the Authority. The Authority has appointed two independent persons to oversee the investigation of complaints about the conduct of Members.
- 3.42 A thorough review of the Officer Code of Conduct by the Monitoring Officer commenced during this period and is expected to conclude with an updated Officer Code of Conduct in Q2 2025/26. Following the Member Code of Conduct training undertaken in this period a review of the Member Code of Conduct will also take place with a particular focus on ensuring expectations around behaviour is clear and to support the Authority in complying with the new duty to prevent sexual harassment. This will in turn inform reviews to various protocols which support the Member and Officer Codes of Conduct, including the Local Protocol for Members and Officer Relations.

- 3.43 An annual update on complaints received, and matters referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is considered by the Policy and Resources Committee, so that the Authority can seek service improvement. The SDNPA Whistleblowing Policy, confidential reporting arrangements in place to enable internal and external whistleblowing, has been reviewed during this period and has been recently approved. There is an Anti-fraud and Corruption Policy in place which will be reviewed during 2025/26.
- 3.44 The Authority has in place a performance and development review process for staff which incorporates clear competencies across the grades to assist with staff development. The Authority also has in place a set of corporate values which were developed through collaboration with both staff and Members. A comprehensive online EDI training and development programme for both staff and Members has been implemented. An action plan based on the results of the full staff survey undertaken in 2023/24 is in the process of being implemented.

Financial accountability

- 3.45 The SDNPA's Financial Regulations and Procedures, provide a framework for the management of the Authority's financial affairs. The SDNPA has an approved Capital Strategy, Treasury Management Policy and Annual Investment Strategy detailing its approach and risk appetite for managing financing, treasury, and non-treasury investments. Monitoring of the operational budget is conducted during the year and findings incorporated into the budget planning process.
- 3.46 The Scheme of Members' Allowances was subject to an independent review during this period resulting in a new four-year scheme which was approved by the Authority at its meeting in March 2025.
- 3.47 Members have a key role in providing assurance that the Authority's funds are used economically, efficiently, and effectively in accordance with agreed policies, and the Authority's general Duty of Best Value under the Local Government Act 1999. The financial strategy and budget are agreed by the Authority following scrutiny by all Members via a series of workshops. The P&R Committee receives regular reports on budget monitoring and treasury management performance and has a membership that includes two independent co-opted members who have relevant finance and governance experience. This committee undertakes the core functions of an audit committee. This ensures the provision of appropriate skills and experience in the scrutiny of the Authority's arrangements for financial control and risk management and enhances transparency.
- 3.48 The Authority's project funds are allocated through the budget setting process by the NPA and are administered on a day-to-day basis by the Authority's Operational Management Team (OMT). The projects the Authority undertakes continue to be driven by the objectives set out in the PMP and Corporate Plan and in approving these projects OMT aims to reflect the priorities of the Authority.
- 3.49 During this period the Authority has continued to carefully consider how it can best prepare itself to respond to future grant settlements. During 2024/25 the Authority continued work on the approved invest to save package. Members were engaged in budget planning through two budget workshops with officers, which included scenario planning. The robustness of the Authority's processes was tested when officers were informed of a change in the expected budget settlement from Defra which, rather than being a flat cash settlement, was likely to include a reduction in the Authority's revenue funding, but an increase in capital funding. The Authority considered this matter as part of the approval of the budget, capital strategy, and capital strategy at its meeting in March 2025, including the reduction in the National Park revenue grant of 8.2% to £0.860m and the increase of the National Park capital grant to £2m. A revised capital programme is under development to ensure the Authority is able to maximise the use of the increased capital grant during the current period.

- 3.50 The Authority's accounts are subject to external audit on an annual basis and reported to the P&R Committee at a public meeting. During this period the P&R Committee also received and considered the Value for Money Audit which identified no significant weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements and set out four improvement recommendations around the medium term financial strategy, forecasting and tracking external grants and income streams, mapping of corporate priorities on the risk register, and changes to the performance, financial, and risk reporting schedule.
- 3.51 An Internal Audit service is provided under a service level agreement by Brighton & Hove City Council's Internal Audit Services. The Internal Audit strategy and annual plan is agreed by the P&R Committee. The outcomes of internal audits are reported to the P&R Committee and the full reports are sent to the Chair and Deputy Chairs and the Independent co-opted Members of the committee. Quarterly progress reports are presented to the P&R Committee summarising the audits undertaken in the period, the reports also contain information on the performance of the Internal Audit Service. An Annual Report and Opinion is presented to the P&R Committee which summarises all the audit work in the period and provides an annual opinion on the effectiveness of the internal control environment. The report also outlines the effectiveness of the Internal Audit Service. Internal Audit Reports to P&R Committee support the committee in discharging its responsibilities in terms of enduring the effectiveness of the internal control environment and the effectiveness of the internal audit service.
- 3.52 The Authority has also embedded processes to oversee the delivery of the Infrastructure Business Plan and for allocating monies generated through the Community Infrastructure Levy.
- 3.53 Authority contracts have, since June 2013, been procured through e-sourcing using the Intend system or national frameworks as appropriate. In exceptional circumstances a waiver has been agreed in compliance with Contract Standing Orders.

Constructive working relationships between officers and Members

- 3.54 Compliance with relevant legal requirements and the SDNPA's procedures is facilitated by a range of controls. Policies are in place to regulate how the Members and Officers use the resources available to them.
- 3.55 The SDNPA receives legal advice and support as appropriate via separate contracts with West Sussex County Council and Hampshire County Council. This includes the provision of a Deputy Monitoring Officer and input into significant Committee and Authority reports.
- 3.56 SLT and Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs meet monthly in an informal capacity to horizon scan and consider the forward management of Authority business. Although this is not a decision-making body it allows for a constructive dialogue between officers and Members and ensures activities are informed by a wide range of views.
- 3.57 The induction of new Members continues to be delivered using a variety of in person events with SLT and other officers, along with Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs, to ensure that new Members joining the Authority are able to fully engage in the work of the Authority.

Skills and Learning for staff and Members

- 3.58 Member and Officer learning and development needs are identified and met through induction programmes, the Performance and Development Review process, individual staff learning and development plans, and the Member Engagement Protocol. There are annual Member discussions between individual Members and the Chair of the Authority which include a consideration of any development needs.
- 3.59 An e-learning platform is maintained as part of a blended approach to training delivery. This includes a series of mandatory courses to be undertaken by all staff as well as optional

courses focussing on personal development and growth. These courses are also available to Members. For staff, completion of courses is linked to the annual Performance and Development Review process.

- 3.60 The learnings from mid and end of Project evaluations are reported to the Policy and Resources Committee and key organisational learnings are used to inform the development of future projects and ways of working.
- 3.61 Budget managers have access to one-to-one support for budget management and also briefings on financial procedures and administration, further budget management, and closedown procedures. All financial guidance and procedure notes are available on the Authority's Intranet. Contract management training has been provided to relevant staff.

Clear relationships with Partners and the public

- 3.62 A key element in the SDNPA's guiding principles is working with partners and community groups. The SDNPA has therefore developed and maintained a range of relationships and arrangements with other agencies in the public, private, and voluntary sectors to ensure that they are able to engage with and contribute to the work of the Authority. The SDNPA has an Accord with Natural England and Memoranda of Understanding with the South Downs Network and South Downs Land Management Group. A Memorandum of Understanding with the Association of Local Councils within the South Downs is also in place and the Authority communicates with parishes and local communities through parish workshops. These workshops include in person events alongside on-line webinars and Q&A sessions. The Authority has continued Member appointments to a number of local and national partner organisations and groups including the South Downs Local Access Forum, Campaign for National Parks and the South Downs National Park Trust.
- 3.63 The independently chaired South Downs Partnership, established in 2021, has continued to champion the outcomes in the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) by supporting. As the Authority undertakes the review of the PMP, the role of and partners and stakeholders across South Downs National Park becomes even more important in informing the direction of the PMP. To support this work a PMP Steering Group has been established to ensure key partners and stakeholders are integral to the development of the PMP.
- 3.64 We continue to work with neighbourhood planning groups across the National Park, to prepare neighbourhood plans that respect the purposes and duty of the National Park Authority and enhance the special qualities of the National Park. The Planning Committee receives regular updates on neighbourhood planning across the National Park.
- 3.65 The Authority has continued with the review of the South Downs Local Plan and the Local Plan was approved for regulation 18 consultation in December 2024. During this period a revised Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) was also approved to support the review of the Local Plan. The SCI sets out how the Authority will consult with all stakeholders, including local communities, businesses and public bodies, on planning matters.
- 3.66 To support the reviews and consultations of both the Local Plan and the PMP the Authority has undertaken significant engagement activities during this period to encourage input from partners, stakeholders and the wider public. A wide variety of events were delivered including ones open to the general public and other focussed on engaging diverse groups or a range of partners and stakeholders with some of these events looking to engage people on both the Local Plan and the PMP, thereby maximising the exposure of our two key policy documents and making best use of available resources. Over 1100 people and groups engaged with the review of the PMP and over 20000 comments have been received on the regulation 18 consultation of the Local Plan.
- 3.67 The Authority has also been working with a number of partner authorities on the West Sussex Joint Minerals Local Plan, and the East Sussex, South Downs and Brighton and Hove Waste and Minerals Plan. The West Sussex Plan has been considered by the Authority,

including the second five-year assessment on the relevance and effectiveness of the plan and it was agreed that a formal review was not required at this time. The East Sussex, South Downs and Brighton and Hove Plan has been adopted.

- 3.68 During this period negotiations on the S101 agreements with the 5 Planning Host authorities have taken place with 4 of those 5 authorities renewing the agreements. These agreements define the relationship with the host Authorities who deliver planning services on behalf of the SDNPA and include quality and performance measures which are reported to the Policy and Resources Committee as part its performance monitoring. Horsham District Council has decided in the previous period not to renew the S101 agreement with the Authority; the planning service was successfully recovered from Horsham during this period. The Authority has also entered into a S101 agreement with West Sussex County Council to manage a cross-boundary planning application for water recycling pipeline between Ford and Hardham.
- 3.69 Whole Estate Plans (WEPs) are seen as a key way of deepening engagement with estates and landowners. These plans are subject to consideration by the Policy and Resources Committee and involve visits to the estate to help Members and officers understand the context of these plans and the issues facing landowners in the National Park. These visits have proved to be effective in ensuring improved Member engagement with emerging WEPs at the most appropriate time and have been a valued tool to increase the knowledge and understanding of Members about land ownership and land management across the National Park.
- 3.70 The Authority uses a range of methods to maintain regular contact with its communities and wider public, including through its two regular newsletters and its presence on social media on the work of the Authority and its activities in the National Park. Engagement through in person and virtual events across the year also form an important aspect of the Authority's engagement programme and the Authority has actively worked to increase the diversity of the audiences, both locally and nationally, of these events.
- 3.71 The Authority has in place appropriate policies to ensure it complies with its duties under the Equality Act 2010. Every report considered by the NPA, or its committees includes a consideration of whether the decision would impact upon groups with protected characteristics, with full equality impact assessments being undertaken where this is considered necessary. The EDI training platform for both staff and Members also contributes to the ongoing organisational development in this area. The Authority has continued to seek to engage with communities across the national park and beyond and, through its comms, engagement and outreach work, improve awareness of the National Park across a wide range of groups.
- 3.72 The P&R Committee has, as part of its membership, co-opted members from communities in and around the National Park with the aim of diversifying the range of voices the Committee hears as part of its decision making and consideration of issues. A recruitment process for a new co-opted member had been undertaken and the Authority appointed a new co-opted member to the Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting in July 2024.
- 3.73 The Authority has maintained youth ambassador roles to strengthen engagement with young people across the National Park and has in place the appropriate safeguarding policies and mechanisms, all approved through the Authority's HR Team.
- 3.74 The Authority has engaged with partners across a range of consultations and other matters including in relation to the Rampion 2 offshore wind farm, highways matters at Seven Sisters Country Park, the River Meon, reforms to national planning policy, and changes to local government originating from the English Devolution White Paper.
- 3.75 The English Devolution White Paper, published in December 2024, sets out a path for the resetting of the relationship between central, regional and local government. The proposals

set out the establishment of Strategic Authorities led by a Mayor with a variety of new powers, along with the abolishment of two-tier local authorities and a move to unitary authorities across the country. This will impact the South Downs National Park in the immediate future as both the Hampshire and Solent, and Sussex and Brighton areas have been accepted onto the Government's devolution priority programme, meaning that devolution and local government reorganisation will progress on an accelerated timeframe. Officers and Members have been liaising with colleagues in local authorities across the National Park and with officials in Defra and MHCLG to represent the interests of the National Park and the National Park Authority as this substantial change develops. The Authority also responded to the Government's devolution consultations for both these areas.

- 3.76 During this period the Authority has also been working closely with a range of partners on the establishment of an extended National Nature Reserve – a Super National Nature Reserve (SNNR) – extending from Lullington Heath to include land at and surrounding Seven Sisters Country Park. The SNNR is expected to be called the Seven Sisters Nature Reserve. The Authority has also continued working with partners to deliver the Centurion Way from Chichester into the National Park with the aim of joining the route with the South Downs Way at Cocking.
- 3.77 The Authority has also been working closer with partners to take forward various legislative provisions set out in the Environment Act 2021, particularly in relation to the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the impact of the strengthened Biodiversity Duty. Also, on the impact of the strengthened duty set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 for relevant authorities to seek to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes. The Government released statutory guidance in December 2024 on the Protected Landscapes duty and officers have been working closely with local authorities and other public bodies on how they are able to meet this new duty.

4. Review of Effectiveness

- 4.1 The SDNPA has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Senior Leadership Team and other officers within the Authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the work done to review the Local Code of Corporate Governance, and also by responding to comments and recommendations made by external auditors and others. In 2025 the P&R Committee met to consider the effectiveness of the Committee and this is summarised in the report from the Chair at **Annex A**.
- 4.2 The annual review exercise, which incorporated a review of the Local Code of Corporate Governance, was initiated by the Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer and included consultations with the Senior Leadership Team, the Chief Finance Officer and the Chief Internal Auditor.
- 4.3 The Internal Audit Annual Opinion is that Reasonable Assurance can be provided that an effective system of internal control is in place at the SDNPA for the year ended 31 March 2025. Of the six audits undertaken, there were four substantial assurance opinions given, one reasonable assurance opinion, and one partial assurance opinion given as set out below.
- Substantial Assurance – Creditors / accounts payable
 - Substantial Assurance – Health and Safety
 - Substantial Assurance – Payroll
 - Substantial Assurance – Main Accounting and Budget Management
 - Reasonable Assurance – Asset Management

- Partial Assurance – Financial Management of Project Budgets

- 4.4 The substantial assurance in the four audits covering financial matters and health and safety evidences the Authority's good and well-established accounting practices, processes and procedures and the emphasis the Authority places on Health and Safety in general. The reasonable assurance on Asset Management identified that the majority of controls were operating as expected. An improvement in the some reconciliations between records has been recommended; also it is recommended that an Additions and Disposal Policy be adopted. The partial assurance on Financial Management of Project Budgets identified a lack of standard budget monitoring processes for projects and limited access to financial information for projects officers. Two actions were raised to address these matters and implementation of one already having taken place.
- 4.5 In addition to the audit opinions, the Chief Internal Auditor also noted as part of their annual opinion that during the 2024/25 financial year they had seen an increased number of high and medium agreed actions not being implemented in-line with the target implementation dates. Whilst not felt by the Auditor to be of significant concern at this time, following discussions between the Auditor and officers, it is felt appropriate that this be addressed through an action in this Annual Governance Statement.
- 4.6 The SDNPA's Chief Finance Officer and Monitoring Officer have also provided assurance that there have been no significant control issues which have:
- Required the need for formal action or reporting in their respective roles,
 - Required the need for significant additional funding not already provided for within the approved budget,
 - Had a material impact on the accounts; or
 - Resulted in significant public interest, damaging the reputation of the Authority.
- 4.7 Although a review of the effectiveness of the Governance arrangements is reported once per year to the Authority, the process of gathering evidence and monitoring performance is continual and is managed through reports to the Authority and its Committees, and through the improvement planning process. Management action required to maintain effective governance arrangements is evident from reports and from other management reporting processes taken throughout the year.
- 4.8 We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework. The areas already addressed and those to be specifically addressed with new actions planned are outlined below.

5. Governance issues

- 5.1 No significant governance issues have been identified. The following key areas of work have been conducted during 2024-25:
- **Review of the Authority's Fraud and Anti-corruption and Whistleblowing Policies.** The Whistleblowing Policy has been reviewed and revised to bring it in line with ACAS and Government guidance. The work to review the Authority's Fraud and Anti-corruption Policy is ongoing and will be completed in 2025-26.
 - **Continue to ensure good governance mechanisms are in place to support the Authority's evolving work in the area of Green Finance.** Green Finance has continued to be a fast-moving area of work and officers have worked closely to ensure the good governance of the Authority's work in this area. The Authority received an update at its meeting in October 2024 which considered the Authority's powers to deliver the Green Finance work, the financial management of the service, and possible future work, including the voluntary biodiversity credits markets which the Authority

exploring further. Opportunities for the Authority to work in this area will continue to evolve and officers will continue to work together to assess them and ensure the good governance of the work in this area.

- **Review the Authority's Risk Strategy and Guidance, including the Authority's risk appetite statement.** The Authority's Risk Strategy and Guidance has been reviewed during 2024 and was approved in September 2024. This was the subject of an initial workshop with Members in early 2024 to engage them in a consideration of the Authority's appetite to risk and future risk strategy to inform the Risk Strategy and Guidance document which included a revised risk appetite statement. To further support risk management at the Authority the Head of Governance will undertake with the Senior Leadership Team an annual radar / PESTEL analysis of overarching risks to the Authority. A central record of all key risks being managed through both the Corporate and Directorate Risk Registers will also be created to ensure simpler monitoring of all risks managed at these levels.
- **Review the Authority's protocols, including the Local Protocol for Members and Officer Relations, which support the Member Code of Conduct.** Work has commenced, but not yet concluded, on reviews of both the Authority's Officer and Member Codes of Conduct. The reviews have been informed by recent training sessions on the Code of Conduct and bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. The reviews will be completed during 2025/26 and will include the various supporting protocols.
- **Take appropriate actions to ensure the good governance of Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) following the review into the operating arrangements at SSCP which will report to the NPA in July 2024.** The outcome in the review in the operating arrangements at SSCP resulted in significant governance changes for the management of SSCP. Following the decisions taken at the Authority's meeting in July 2024, a further report was considered by the Authority at its meeting in October 2024 which provided further clarification on the operating arrangements for SSCP within the Authority, including the operating model, staffing, decision-making, and financial matters. It also set out the arrangements for the future administration of the dormant company, SDCOL. The work to bring all operations within the Authority has now been completed.
- **Given the changes in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), additional support, as appropriate, through liaison, advice and training, to maintain good governance of the Authority.** During this period the Authority has recruited a new permanent Chief Executive Officer and a Director of Landscapes and Strategy on a fixed term contract with a particular remit to deliver the PMP. Officers with particular responsibilities for the financial arrangements and the good governance of the Authority have had induction sessions with new members of SLT and continue to provide updates to SLT and to brief them on individual matters as they arise.

5.2 Actions for 2025-26 include the following:

- Review of the Authority's Fraud and Anti-corruption Policy (ongoing from 2024/25)
- Review of the Officer and Member Codes of Conduct and the associated protocols (partially ongoing from 2024/25)
- Work with Internal Audit and colleagues across the Authority to ensure that high and medium priority agreed actions from internal audits are implemented in-line with the target implementation dates.
- Work closely with officers and SLT, in particular the new Director of Business Development and Growth, to ensure the good governance of the Authority's work to grow its sources of income.

- Given the internal changes at the Authority, including changes in SLT and directorates, a review of internal delegations will be undertaken, following on from any changes to Standing Orders, to ensure decision-making responsibilities are clear, transparent and easily understandable.

5.3 We propose over the coming year to take steps to address the above matters to further enhance our governance arrangements, and delivery against these will continue to be monitored by the P&R committee.

5.4 We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Chair

VANESSA ROWLANDS

Chief Executive Officer

SION MCGEEVER

Date: 9/12/2025

On behalf of the SDNPA

Chair's Report

Policy and Resources Committee Effectiveness Review 2024-25

Members of the Policy and Resources met for their annual away day on 22 April 2024 at the Weald and Downland Museum.

In order to conduct the review, the Chair had asked all members to complete a short questionnaire which considered the different aspects of the Committee's Terms of Reference, and asked members to rate how effectively they considered the Committee was fulfilling them. Additionally, members were asked for suggestions for improvement, along with a brief training needs analysis.

On the day, the Chair presented the findings from the questionnaires, and members of the committee discussed with officers the actions that could be taken to drive continuous improvement in the operation and impact of the Committee.

The following is a summary of the key areas discussed:

Audit Responsibilities

Positives

- Presentations from both internal and external auditors are invariably of high quality and presenters open to reasonable questions
- Strengthened risk management due to our informal discussions prior to meetings
- Good relationship between Chief Internal Auditor and the Committee
- Some members have recognised expertise in this area providing assurance to the wider committee

Suggestions for improvement

- Informal audit meetings to consider full internal audit reports, instead of summaries which are presented to Committee, to build understanding of the work of internal audit
- Place audit items earlier on the committee meeting agenda
- Internal Audit should present the committee with options for consideration for the internal audit programme rather than be presented with a *fete accompli* for approval
- Audit training could assist members without recognised expertise to feel more confident to contribute

Strategies and Policies

Positives

- P&R is strong in this area. Good discussions and probing questions.

Suggestions for improvement

- The committee could exercise more positive challenge to the Chief Executive and his team
- We should enhance our focus on future financial security given the current policy and financial environment

- We need an enhanced focus on brand and identity and a wider communications strategy, possibly kicked off by a Member workshop, to ensure audience buy-in to the NPA's work and a greater understanding of the benefits for residents in the Park and for visitors to the Park (we are a 'National' Park)
- We must ensure – with the new PMP - that the Committee can redirect efforts and priorities based on project outcomes, changes in the external environment and audience feedback
- Whole Estate Plans – consider the effectiveness of resource deployment, direction and rigour of WEPs in the light of the emerging PMP and PLTOF

Grants and Projects

Positives

- Introduction of Project Bulletin makes updates more readable and easier to share more widely
- Items reporting on project progress with regard to the Corporate Plan are detailed and comprehensive
- Committee's responsibilities are satisfactorily discharged

Suggestions for improvement

- Consider alternative ways to present large volumes of data, rather than only in complex spreadsheets
- Greater scrutiny of projects to ensure alignments with the Authority's aims and objectives
- The process for approval of grant bids should be reviewed, along with the committee's terms of reference (ToRs), as short timescales for grant bids preclude serious consideration by the committee, as should the balance between small and large funding allocations in the ToRs.

Performance and Procurement

Positives

- Confident that SDNPA is well placed to deliver due to pragmatic budgeting by SLT following Members' Budget workshops
- Committee's responsibilities are satisfactorily discharged

Suggestions for improvement

- The Committee needs to understand how SDNPA intends to improve health and safety, and not just monitor performance
- The Committee should have more challenge and involvement in SSCP strategy and performance now it has been brought in-house
- The Committee should have a greater focus on organisational learning from project evaluations and their impact - might be a good area for internal audit to consider

Mechanisms – suggestions for improvement

Formal Committee meetings

- Re-order agenda to consider finance and audit items first
- Shift the emphasis to debate and decision rather than clarification
- Consider more use of visuals and site visits to enhance appreciation of the issues under consideration

Papers for Committee meetings

- Earlier release of papers would be helpful
- Officers to identify what they need from the Committee (how can Members help?) We should be doing more than 'noting' papers

Officer presentations

- Encourage all officers to see Members as allies and that our questioning is designed to help not intimidate. We all share the same goals and want to succeed.

Training needs analysis

The training needs analysis highlighted Audit, Key Authority Plans and Policies, Access Land and Public Rights of Way, and Project Reporting and Evaluation as priority areas the committee would like training on of to gain a greater understanding of. The Committee made the following comments under these priority areas:

Audit

- Would be helpful to base this around fictional good / poor audits and identify the sorts of questions that Members should be asking. Also a greater appreciation of the risks being addressed.
- Similar to above – identify what has gone wrong elsewhere and how the Committee can ensure this doesn't happen at SDNPA
- The Committee's role in getting the best from our auditors
- Update on counter fraud measures is overdue

Key Plans and Policies

- Broad discussion on the scope to open up the Park to a wider range of activities and pursuits that would attract a broader visitor population – away from the 'honeypots'.
- Noted the great value of having partners involved in training sessions / seminars
- Explanation of how plans and policies are turned into deliverables for staff

Access Land and Public Rights of Way

- Probably a short briefing session to provide clarity on the role and responsibilities of the Authority - and landowners - regarding access land and PRowS

Project reporting and evaluation

- How projects are managed with and without partners, how the objectives are set; how evaluation takes place against those objectives; timescale for evaluation; one-off or continuing evaluation

Other areas

- A session reviewing **WEPs** would be helpful – especially in the light of PLTOF and new PMP priorities. We should consider: the value of WEPs, duration, expected content, approval, review, and recording outcomes.
- A brief session, possibly as part of budget setting workshop, on **finance** - How to read and interpret accounts and helpful questions that members can ask.
- A seminar with a focus on partnerships – making them work effectively. How can we encourage / ensure that partners deliver on the new **PMP**? How does SDNPA work with and look to nurture partners?
- Explore the **Communications** Strategy – especially in the light of a new PMP and Local Plan. Is our Comms function for the Authority or the Park?
- **EDI** in communications – how to reach an audience of different cultural and language backgrounds, socio-economic status and physical and cognitive abilities.
- A brief session on the main **Health and Safety** risks for staff, volunteers and visitors – and mechanisms in place to mitigate those risks.

These priority areas and comments have been taken forward with officers in planning for future away days and workshops

Melanie Hunt

Chair, SDNPA Policy and Resources Committee

26 June 2025