

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 20 NOVEMBER 2025

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 1.00pm

Present: Steven Ridgeon (Chair), John Cross, Chris Dowling, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Vanessa Rowlands, Lara Sonola and Stephen Whale.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Cameron Macdonald and Arthur Sloman.

Independent Members of the Committee: Tom Fourcade.

SDNPA Officers: Siôn McGeever (CEO), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), James Winkworth (Director of Growth and Organisational Development), Mark Alden (Nature Based Solutions Manager), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Craig Garoghan (Interim Chief Finance Officer), Rebecca Glasby (Performance and Learning Officer), Nick Heasman (Countryside and Policy Manager), Ruth James (Head of Communications and Engagement), Claire Onslow (Commercial and Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters), Anne Rehill (Performance and Project Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Katharine Stuart (Planning Policy Lead) and Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services).

Also attended by a representative from Foley Estate.

OPENING REMARKS

76. The Chair opened the meeting.
77. The Chair welcomed the representative from the Foley Estate.
78. The Chair welcomed all those present and stated that:
 - The meeting was being webcast by the Authority and would be available for subsequent on-line viewing. Anyone entering the meeting was considered to have given consent to be filmed or recorded, and for the possible use of images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purpose.
 - SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthers the National Park Purposes and Duty. Members regarded themselves first and foremost as Members of the Authority and would act in the best interests of the National Park as a whole, rather than as representatives of their appointing body or any interest groups.
79. The Chair expressed the Committee's disappointment at the external audit situation and the bypassing of the P&R Committee for the 'External Audit Findings and Opinion' and 'Audited Statement of Accounts and Letter of Representation'. The reasoning for this was acknowledged but this was not a situation that the Committee wished to see repeated.

ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

80. Apologies were received from Melanie Hunt, Vicki Wells and Catriona Aves.

ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

81. The following declaration was made:
 - Stephen Whale declared a public service interest on Agenda Item 9 as a member of Liphook Golf Club.

ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 18 SEPTEMBER 2025

82. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 18 September 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendment:

- Paragraph 64, last bullet, add “, *and whether a stakeholder group would be convened.*’ To the end of the sentence.

ITEM 4: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS

83. The Chief Executive reported that the recruitment of a Director of Landscape and Operations was successfully concluded and that Alison Potts would be taking up the role in February 2026. The Director of Landscape and Strategy would be staying on with the Authority until then.
84. In response to a question it was reported that no further updates had been received from Hampshire County Council regarding the Droxford Splash Route, but it was understood that work was ongoing.

ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS

85. There were none.

ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

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

87. It was noted that there were two exempt appendices for this meeting, Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 14 and Agenda Item 17. If any Member wished to discuss any matter within one of those items, Members would be asked at the appropriate time during those items whether they wished to consider the exclusion of the public, including the press, from the meeting.

ITEM 8: CHAIR UPDATE

88. There was no update from the Chair.

ITEM 9: FOLEY ESTATE WHOLE ESTATE PLAN ENDORSEMENT

89. The Nature Based Solutions Manager introduced report PR25/26-09 and reminded members of the report content.
90. The representative from the Foley Firle Estate addressed the Committee.
91. The Committee commented:
- The Whole Estate Plan (WEP) embodied the Authority’s values and demonstrated a strong commitment to educating children.
 - The importance of partnership working in delivering the Authority’s objectives was emphasised.
 - Appreciated learning about the estate’s history and found the WEP inspiring.
 - Noted that generating income to support the project would present challenges.
 - The story of re-wetting the Foley Estate was considered significant and should be communicated widely.
 - Questioned what lessons could be drawn from the process of developing the WEP to assist others undertaking similar work.
 - Requested clarification on the importance of key partners and asked what support was needed to put the necessary key partnerships in place to realise the WEPs vision.

- Questioned whether the Authority had a role in facilitating discussions between landowners and interested organisations to accelerate delivery.

92. Members were advised:

- Creating a WEP did not necessarily require significant expenditure or external consultants. Officers provided substantial support throughout the process. While ecosystem services could appear complex, they were not impenetrable. The process of developing a WEP offered tangible benefits for estates of all sizes.
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) could present opportunities for income generation, and flood alleviation initiatives could prove beneficial.
- The Estate needed to engage with National Highways, the Planning Authority, East Hampshire District Council, Hampshire Wildfire Trust and other partners to navigate regulatory requirements and understand the characterisation of estate land prior to implementing improvements. Partners could facilitate access to meetings with larger organisations.
- The Authority was developing a reputation on delivering BNG units. Local government partners were increasingly important stakeholders, enabling the Authority to facilitate conversations and foster relationships to deliver nature recovery.

RESOLVED: The Committee endorsed the Foley Estate Whole Estate Plan at Appendix I.

ITEM 10: SOUTH DOWNS PARTNERSHIP PLAN 2026-2031 – DRAFT PLAN

93. The Performance and Project Manager introduced report PR25/26-10 and reminded members of the report content.

94. The Committee commented:

- Clarification was requested regarding whether proofreading and a final edit of the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) remained outstanding.
- Noted that accommodation was not referenced as part of accessibility and that the absence of accessible accommodation could risk individuals being excluded.
- Traditional crafts were referenced in the target but not mentioned in the accompanying text of objective 6.2.
- Questioned whether the PMP risked becoming outdated prior to publication, given that Strategic Authorities were potentially superseding the role of Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEP)s.
- Asked whether the Authority was a Destination Management Organisation (DMO), and if not, whether it should seek such status to promote tourism and visitors to the Park.
- The distinction between cultural and built heritage was noted, and Members queried why the emphasis on built heritage in the PMP was not perceived by partners and whether any action was required address this.
- Clarification was sought as to whether the target of engaging 2,000 people in nature and landscape through arts and heritage activities by 2031, objective 6.2, was sufficiently ambitious.
- The delivery of the PMP would be critical, and there was a role for the Authority to ensure progress against targets. Clarification was requested on the development of delivery guidelines.
- Noted that many targets were outside the Authority’s direct control. Questioned whether colour coding could be used in the final draft to distinguish between targets to be delivered by the Authority and those to be delivered by partners.

- Clarification was sought regarding whether all partners were content with the timescale for target 3.1a , ‘by 2031, all catchment partnerships to have the resources to develop a pipeline of deliverable projects’ and whether the target was suitably ambitious.
- Further details were requested on how target 3.2a ‘all waterbodies within the National Park to achieve “high” or “good” status by 2027’ aligned with target 3.1a, which has a 2031 deadline.
- Requested clarification as to how long target 2.1a ‘reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in South Downs National Park to net zero by 2040 relative to 1990 levels’ would remain a national target given the evolving political context around net zero. Questioned whether further consideration should be given to the language and tone used in relation to net zero.
- Nature Based Solutions and the creation of carbon sinks were key ways in which National Parks could contribute to achieving net zero. The Authority was encouraged to take a leadership role in the debate and use effective communication to engage the public on this issue.

95. Members were advised:

- Proofreading and a final edit of the PMP were still to be completed.
- Officers could review the text relating to accommodation and accessibility. Access was a broad area and targets in the PMP needed to be sufficiently broad for partners to contribute to without becoming so broad as to lose focus. Visitor accommodation was addressed by a policy within the Local Plan, supported by a published study. Consideration would be given to signposting the link between the PMP and the Local Plan.
- It was acknowledged that any 5-year plan risked becoming outdated. The Corporate Plan provided some flexibility. Final detail on LVEPs had not yet been communicated, but the wording could be amended to refer to ‘other equivalent bodies’.
- Traditional crafts were included under skills development as part of Aim 4, but the text could be reviewed for clarity.
- The Authority was not a DMO.
- The PMP reflected the feedback received through the development process as well as advice from experts and the steering group. Cultural heritage had been defined in a variety of ways by respondents.
- Officers considered that objective 6.2 was ambitious. It was labour intensive and there was no guarantee that the objective would be achieved within the timescale.
- A proposal was in place to develop a delivery plan with partners, including the establishment of a new mechanism to oversee the delivery plan and monitor progress on an annual basis. This would be a collaborative process and would be reported on at the December NPA meeting. Partners had expressed an appetite for the Authority to take a leading and convening role.
- All targets in the PMP were joint targets for the Authority and its partners. Some targets were set by Defra, through the Protected Landscapes Outcomes and Targets Framework, while others were developed collaboratively for the PMP.
- Targets were discussed with all relevant partners, and a water company representative was included on the steering group. Officers considered that target 3.1a was suitably ambitious, noting the delivery processes would be lengthy. The timeframe for the Big Chalk project was estimated at three to four years.

- Target 3.2a was set as part of the Water Framework Directive. The lag time for chemicals and plastics already present in the water system would make this target impossible to achieve, however the Authority was keen to highlight the scale of the challenge in regard to Aim 3 and would measure progress against water quality to find a path to achieve the goal on a longer timeframe.
 - Officers did not propose to alter the language around net zero given the scale of the climate crisis and the importance of addressing it. UK National Parks had signed up to the UN 'Race to Zero' initiative. Feedback from the public consultation indicated that the target was not ambitious enough, rather than sceptical of climate change.
 - Target 2.1a was a science backed target that was considered stretching but achievable. Many activities undertaken in pursuit of net-zero would also deliver additional public benefits, and it was important that these were communicated.
96. A revision to the recommendation was proposed, seconded and resolved to add:
2. *Delegate Authority to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee, to make any minor amendments to the Partnership Management Plan 2026-2031 prior to its consideration by the National Park Authority.*
97. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Recommended that the National Park Authority approve the Partnership Management Plan 2026-2031 at Appendix 3 for publication; and
 2. Delegated Authority to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee, to make any minor amendments to the Partnership Management Plan 2026-2031 prior to its consideration by the National Park Authority.
98. The meeting adjourned for a short comfort break at 2.16pm.
99. John Cross left the meeting at 2.16pm.

ITEM 11: REVIEW OF SDNPA PROCUREMENT STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

100. The Head of Finance and Corporate Services introduced report PR25/26-11 and reminded members of the report content.
101. The Committee commented:
- Questioned whether the PMP target for delivering Green Skills could be incorporated into the social goals requirement.
 - Requested further detail on social value contributions.
 - Asked whether the Procurement Act required all public authorities to adopt such strategies.
 - Raised the question of whether suppliers were required to comply with the living wage, rather than solely the minimum wage.
102. Members were advised:
- Social values formed part of the sustainability target currently under development, and Officers would investigate linking this to both the PMP and Local Plan.
 - Suppliers and providers were required to evidence their contributions to social value, either within their own environment or within the National Park.
 - Any organisation spending public funds was required to comply with the requirements of the Procurement Act, in addition to their own policies and procedures.

- Suppliers to the SDNPA were required to meet a range of conditions, which were specified in tender submissions and assessed accordingly.

103. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted progress against the Procurement Strategy Action Plan during Year 4.
2. Approved the revised Procurement Strategy Action Plan Year 5 for November 2025- November 2026.

ITEM 12: Q2 SDNPA PERFORMANCE AND PROJECTS REPORT 2025/26

104. The Performance and Project Manager introduced report PR25/26-12 and reminded members of the report content

105. The Committee commented:

- Welcomed the data that the new tools would enable and praised the clarity of the report.
- Questioned whether there was an underlying issue given only two new hectares of habitat created for nature, despite 278 hectares being put forward for future nature recovery during 2025/26.
- Concern was expressed that no estates appeared on the WEP pipeline and asked the extent to which earlier WEPs were being monitored to measure fulfilment.
- Noted that estate visits, as part of the WEP process, were rewarding activities.
- Questioned the level of confidence Officers had in achieving HLT1 'To secure an additional 13,000ha, or 33% of land managed for nature by 2030 from a baseline of 25%', given that 35% of the annual target had been achieved in 50% of the time.

106. Members were advised:

- It was confirmed that the separate formal internal audit risk assessment could be shared with the Authority as part of the planning process.
- The creation of only two new hectares of habitat for nature during 2025/26 did not indicate an underlying issue. This figure reflected a ringfenced definition, primarily relating to dew pond and meadow creation, which were limited in scope.
- The Authority was reviewing the WEP process as part of the wider directorate reorganisation. The status of WEP delivery was monitored and could be reported at a future meeting.
- There was a strong pipeline of land coming forward to be managed for nature, with significant delivery forecast for quarters three and four. Officers would review the data and provide an update after the meeting in regard to current confidence in achieving the 2030 target.

107. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q2 SDNPA Corporate Performance and Projects Report 2025/26.

108. The meeting adjourned for a short comfort break at 2.07pm.

ITEM 13: Q2 SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK PERFORMANCE REPORT 2025/26

109. The Commercial and Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters introduced report PR25/26-13 and reminded members of the report content.

110. The Committee commented:

- Paid tribute to Officers for their efforts over the summer period in managing several unexpected issues.

- Welcomed the positive financial position.
- Clarification was sought regarding the impact of the Exeat bridge works and closure on the operations of Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP).
- Queried whether East Sussex County Council (ESCC) were engaging with the Authority or informing the Authority about the Exeat works.
- Asked whether the ragwort work formed part of an eradication program.
- Welcomed the active engagement with partners across the Heritage Coast on visitor management planning and requested that Seaford Town Council be included.
- The implementation of interim signage between Friston Forest and SSCP was noted and Members asked if a longer-term solution was planned.
- Requested clarification on the heating of the barns at SSCP.
- Found the details of communications engagement interesting and raised the notion of community building through social media activity.
- Requested clarity on income generation from electric vehicle (EV) chargers and whether the site was moving closer to being revenue neutral.
- Raised the issue of charges imposed for filming at SSCP.
- Welcomed the increase in visitors and volunteer litter picking activity and asked what actions could be undertaken to address anti-social behaviour.
- Requested an update on grazing licences and reiterated the importance of having these in place.
- Noted that cottage occupancy rates seemed low but were above the target.

III. Members were advised:

- East Sussex County Council had not yet provided final details of the planned works at Exeat bridge. Officers were aware of potential impacts and would work with ESCC once final dates and timings were confirmed.
- The County Council was currently informing the Authority of these works but Officers were optimistic that the final details would be agreed collaboratively.
- The ragwort work was being done as part of a broader land management program and some ragwort would be retained.
- Engagement with Heritage Coast partners was multi-layered and included town councils.
- The path between SSCP and Friston Forest was not under the Authority's control, however Officers were working with Forestry England and Highways on signage.
- It was confirmed that the Turkey Barn was heated while the Pump Barn was not.
- Community building was an element of the Authority's work, and a new Digital and Social Media Officer had been appointed.
- The EV chargers were funded through National Parks England. Financial data was not yet available. Organisational changes had increased some revenue streams, but the financial cycle remained seasonal, with surpluses generated in the summer and losses in the winter. Country Park designation prevented the Country Park from posting a profit.
- Charges for filming at SSCP ranged from £100 to £10,000. The Authority had become more selective in approvals to control branding and messaging.

- New audiences had brought cultural variances, and the hot weather had led to increased alcohol consumption. Mitigations were being implemented to address anti-social behaviour but there were limits to what could be achieved.
- Volunteer litter picking had not developed as quickly as Officers had hoped. Members were welcome to participate and the Authority had engaged with the Litter Partnership in Winchester. Following a successful pilot, there were plans to roll it out across the Park, with donors matching volunteer contributions.
- One grazing licence remained outstanding. Officers were seeking assistance to resolve the matter.
- The cottages were a niche offer due to their location. Bookings were increasing with repeat bookings beginning to emerge. The two-person cottage was achieving higher occupancy rates than the five and six person cottages.

112. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered Q2 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26.

ITEM 14: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

113. The HR Manager introduced report PR25/26-14 and reminded members of the report content.
114. As the Committee wished to discuss matters contained in Appendix 3, the Monitoring Officer asked Members to consider whether, in respect of Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 14, the public, including the press, should be excluded from the meeting on the basis that the appendix contained information which was proposed to be considered exempt since it was related to the financial or business affairs of the Authority and that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exempt information outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information. It was proposed on the basis that whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of Authority proceedings and corporate risks it was felt that on balance this was outweighed by the requirement of the National Park Authority to be able to consider matters in relation to its business and fully consider the implications of its actions or proposed actions particularly in relation to decisions which may have implications on the effective day-to-day running of the Authority without the disclosure of information that could adversely impact the day-to-day running of the Authority and its ability to deliver its services.
115. **RESOLVED:** The meeting would be moved into private session to consider Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 14 and that the public, including the press, would be excluded from the meeting at that point.
116. The Committee commented:
- Questioned whether the Exceat bridge works should be added to the Corporate Risk Register.
 - Clarification was sought as to whether the increase in budget and finance risks indicated a new trend, and what mitigations were in place.
117. Members were advised:
- Officers would review the Exceat Bridge position to determine whether it should be escalated to the corporate risk register or remain on the directorate risk register.
 - The finance and budget risks reflected uncertainty around the government spending review and detail of the Defra grant. The upcoming budget workshops would consider any necessary mitigations.

- 118. The meeting was closed to the public, including the press and moved into private session at 3.30pm.
- 119. The meeting returned to public session at 3.37pm.
- 120. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Corporate Risk Register as at November 2025.
- 121. Mark Potter left the meeting at 3.38pm.

ITEM 15: ANTI-FRAUD AND CORRUPTION POLICY

- 122. The Procurement Manager introduced report PR25/26-15 and reminded members of the report content.
- 123. **RESOLVED:** The Committee approved the revised Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy at Appendix 1.

ITEM 16: BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2025/26: MONTH 6

- 124. The Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced report PR25/26-16 and reminded members of the report content. An updated 'Revenue Key Variance by Directorate – Explanation of Variance' data chart was tabled.
- 125. The Committee commented:
 - Clarification was requested as to whether any of the capital underspends were at risk of being lost if not utilised.
 - Questioned if there was any learnings to be drawn from the predicted overspend.
- 126. Members were advised:
 - The major underspends were funded by external contributions so were not at risk. The Defra capital grant was required to be utilised by 31 March 2026 and was forecast to be used by that date.
 - Budget managers were being engaged with on a monthly basis and forecasting was improving. The overspend was primarily due to a re-evaluation of which salaries could be capitalised. Officers were optimistic that the size of the adverse variance would be reduced by the end of the financial year.
- 127. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
 1. Noted the 2025/26 Revenue Forecast position as at month 6 of a net £0.300m above budget variance and that this is currently being met by a reduction in unrestricted reserves.
 2. Noted the 2025/26 Capital Forecast position as at month 6 being an underspend of £3.150m as explained in paragraph 3.9 and Appendix 2 to the report.
 3. Noted the Reserves position as at month 6, as set out at Appendix 3.
 4. Noted the Treasury Management overview and position as at month 6, as set out at Appendix 4.

ITEM 17: PART II MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES MEETING

- 128. The Part II minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 18 September 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair
- 129. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.45pm.

CHAIR