

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING

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

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Paul Bevan, Antonia Cox, John Cross, Chris Dowling, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Gary Marsh, Stephen McAuliffe, Robert Mocatta, Tom Nevill, Robson, Peisley, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Lara Sonola, Daniel Stewart-Roberts, Vicki Wells and Stephen Whale.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Siôn McGeever (Chief Executive Officer), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), James Winkworth (Director of Growth and Organisational Development), Annie Barnes (Legal Officer), Ben Bessant (National Trails and Countryside Access Officer), Oscar Edwards (External Auditor), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Craig Garoghan (Chief Finance Officer), Andy Gattiker (National Trails and Access Lead), Ruth James (Head of Communications and Engagement), Anne Rehill (Performance and Project Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Katharine Stuart (Planning Policy Lead) and Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services).

Also attended by:

Doug Jones (Chair of the Local Access Forum).

CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

63. The Chair of the Authority welcomed all present and informed them of general housekeeping matters.
64. The Chair welcomed new SDNPA Members Tom Nevill, Robson Peisley, Andy Tree as well as the Chair of the Local Access Forum, Doug Jones.

ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

65. Apologies were received from Janet Duncton, Mark Fairweather, Melanie Hunt, John Hyland and Andy Tree.

ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

66. The following declarations were made:
 - Paul Bevan declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 10 as a member of the Local Access Forum (LAF).
 - Andrew Shaxson declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 10 as a member of the Local Access Forum.
 - John Cross declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as a member of the A29 Bury Traffic Committee.
 - Stephen McAuliffe declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 due to an association with the Arundel Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIP) group, and a non-pecuniary prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 12 as a Trustee. He confirmed he would not participate in Agenda Item 12.
 - Mark Potter declared a non-pecuniary prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 12 as a Trustee and confirmed he would not participate in that item.

ITEM 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

67. The minutes of the Authority meeting held on 16 October 2025 were approved as a correct record with the following amendment:
- Minute 65: Daniel Stewart-Roberts declared a public service interest as a Lewes District Councillor.

ITEM 4. URGENT MATTERS

68. There were no urgent matters.

ITEM 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

69. There were no public speakers.

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

70. The Chair asked the Authority if any Member wished to discuss Agenda Items 21 and 22. As no Member wished to discuss these items the Chair informed the Authority that the meeting would not move into private session to consider the Part II minutes of the 18 September P&R Committee meeting or the 10 June Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meeting.

ITEM 7. AUTHORITY CHAIR UPDATE

71. The Chair introduced the report (NPA25/26-14). Robert Mocatta was thanked for introducing a motion on Protected Landscapes at Hampshire County Council.
72. Members made the following comments:
- Stressed the importance of Protected Landscapes in Hampshire, noting two National Parks were located in the county, and highlighted their role in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
 - Noted that Chichester District Council had recently agreed funding for the conservation of the Amberley Panels.
 - Reiterated the importance of reporting any sightings of wild boar in and around Little Switzerland and Froxfield, Hampshire.
 - Observed that whilst the National Emergency Briefing was not an official government briefing, the content was important.
73. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

ITEM 8. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S PROGRESS REPORT

74. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-15).
75. Chris Dowling joined the meeting.
76. Vicki Wells briefly left the meeting.
77. Members made the following comments:
- Supported the Planning for Nature programme.
 - Requested further details on the Defra Pathfinder programme, including the anticipated timescale.
 - Asked what actions were being taken to address the red RAG status for the Authority's climate action targets, recognising the importance of challenging targets.
 - Asked whether there were any implications from the announced postponement of the planned Mayoral elections.

- Expressed concern at the prospect of weak political leadership and inexperienced councillors involved in the creation of the Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), with the upcoming County Council elections likely to result in a turnover of councillors.
- Questioned whether it would become increasingly difficult to find suitable land for target 3.1 if the 'low hanging fruit' had already been taken.
- Noted the reduced formal role for Natural England's as a consultee for planning purposes and questioned whether local authorities would need that advice from another source. Members also queried whether the Authority could supply such advice and whether this could present a potential revenue stream.
- Commented that Natural England often did not respond to planning developments.

78. Members were advised:

- The Defra Pathfinder programme had begun, but no end date had been announced. Initial meetings had been held with both Defra and Marian Spain of Natural England (NE). Actions were likely to commence ahead of the publication of the Defra action plan, in agreement with NE. Exmoor National Park had withdrawn from the programme due to resourcing issues, leaving the SDNPA as the sole Protected Landscape organisation participating in the programme.
- The Authority had established a Staff Environment Group (SEG) which would produce a statement and emerging policy. Capital projects had an associated carbon footprint, and the recent works at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) had contributed to that footprint. The inclusion of Scope 3 emission reporting had also increased the Authority's overall carbon footprint. The Corporate Plan and Partnership Management Plan (PMP) would address the targets but given the emphasis of Defra's funding focusing on capital projects, the targets were likely to remain red or amber for the foreseeable future.
- Although the mayoral elections had been postponed, preparations for the MSAs would continue. Governance structures would emerge, involving the leaders of County Councils, ready for when Mayors were elected. Budgets for the work would be reduced, and some recruitment had been paused. The Authority would continue to engage as a positive and productive partner, offering expertise and delivery.
- Officers were confident in attaining target 3.1 and sought to exceed it. The supply of land was expected to continue as tools to assist land managers and owners were developed.
- With Natural England ceasing to be a statutory consultee, its advice would no longer be required. It remained to be seen how that would operate in practice. The Authority was well placed with in-house expertise and there could be opportunities arising from local government reform (LGR).

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

ITEM 9. APPROVAL OF THE REVISED SOUTH DOWNS PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN 2026-2031

80. The Performance and Project Manager introduced the report (NPA25/26-16).

81. Members made the following comments:

- Questioned how the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) would promote the objectives of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

- Asked whether the retrofitting of historic buildings could be made more explicit in regard to planning principle 5.
- Suggested that consideration be given to part-funding historic skill courses, as had recently been undertaken through a partnership between Chichester District Council and Chichester College.
- Welcomed the amendments made following the Policy and Resources Committee meeting discussion.
- Expressed concern over the work required to make a Rights of Way accessible and questioned whether target 5.1a of objective 5.1 was sufficiently aspirational, given the Authority's expressed ambition to make the SDNP a National Park for All.
- Welcomed that initial concerns over the imbalance of focus between the natural and built environments were not borne out in the final draft.
- Welcomed the increase in consultation responses and noted that the public and partner organisations were aligned on all areas except climate action. Asked what actions would be undertaken to address public concerns on climate action and to make the language less technical.
- Noted the role for Members in using their networks to help embed the PMP and raise awareness of its ambitions.

82. Vicki Wells briefly left the meeting

83. Members were advised:

- The PMP had adopted the priority areas of the LNRS' into its aims and was well aligned with them.
- The planning principles were high-level. The Local Plan was more explicit and the PMP should be read alongside it.
- Objective 5.1 was a nationally defined target from the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) and officers regarded it as an ambitious target.
- The consultation had indicated that respondents often felt concern that the Authority was not being sufficiently ambitious in addressing climate action. As climate action was quite technical, there were limitations in how far the language could be simplified, but the importance of ensuring the public felt they had agency in this area was acknowledged. Whilst the PMP set the strategic direction, it was the start of the process, and a Communications and Engagement Strategy was being developed to support understanding through the use of case studies and stories.

84. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the responses to the Partnership Management Plan Consultation as set out at Appendix 2;
2. Approved the South Downs Partnership Management Plan 2026-31 as set out at Appendix 1; and
3. Delegated authority to the Director Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to approve the final design of the revised South Downs Partnership Management Plan and publish the Plan.

85. The meeting adjourned for a short break at 1.58pm.

ITEM 10. LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

86. The Chair of the Local Access Forum provided a verbal report.

87. Members made the following comments:

- Expressed their thanks for the work done by the Local Access Forum.
- Noted that the website information on the LAF was outdated and scheduled for updating. Questioned whether more could be done to improve the sites effectiveness in communicating information and promoting the Forum’s work, such as a colour-coded Public Rights of Way (PRoW) map indicating accessibility.
- Raised the role the LAF could play in assessing the PMP’s access-related targets and supporting the project pipeline for the Active Travel Plan.
- Questioned whether the East Hampshire byway issue raised in 2022 had been resolved and requested detail on the actions undertaken by Hampshire County Council (HCC) to address the matter.
- Requested that the Policy and Resources Committee be updated once HCC had approved the new byway operating procedure.
- Asked whether making minor roads more pleasant for walking and cycling was an area of concern for the LAF, particularly in relation to the ‘all-purpose road network’ and the tendency for encouraging the growth of roadside hedges and verges on ‘Quiet Lanes’ which could reduce their accessibility for pedestrians.
- Noted that the PMP did not include a target for improving byways and requested the LAF’s opinion on target 5.1a of the Plan.

88. Members were advised:

- The LAF had held a joint forum with Hampshire and meet together three times in 2024, but there had been no formal meetings since.
- HCC had been drafting an updated byway operating procedure, which would be brought to the LAF, and to the Authority, once approved. The new procedure placed greater emphasis on protecting the National Park and on taking a more proactive approach to preventing further damage. It was noted that this would be an operating procedure rather than a policy.
- The LAF recognised that ‘Quiet Lanes’ had a role to play within the Park and they had been discussed at the most recent meeting, although roadside hedges had not formed part of that discussion.
- The condition of PRoW had previously been a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the Audit Commission. The Chair of the LAF indicated that, whilst the target of 10% in a good condition felt low, the target of 10% being accessible appeared more challenging. The LAF would have preferred these to be separate targets. They acknowledged the difficulties in that different authorities used varying criteria to measure the condition of PRoW, where they were assessed at all, and that individual authority data would not always distinguish clearly between routes inside and outside the National Park.
- Officers were open to working with partner authorities to measure the condition of PRoW, and this could be developed by the Delivery Board to help ensure that PRoW within the Park were in good condition.

ITEM 11. SOUTH DOWNS ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORK PLAN

89. The National Trails and Access Lead introduced the report (NPA25/26-17).

90. Members made the following comments:

- Welcomed the report and requested details of the pathway available to parish councils wishing to realise an active travel opportunity.

- Offered congratulations to officers on achieving the incorporation of active travel into the West Sussex LNRS scheme and supported the aim of using active travel networks to deliver nature recovery.
- Questioned whether there was a mechanism to incorporate the active travel network plan into Planning Committee decisions to ensure advice from Local Highway Authorities did not conflict with active travel needs.
- Noted that active travel comprised both leisure and utility elements, and that the bulk of the PRow network within the National Park was used for leisure rather than utility. Questioned whether conflict between user groups should be a higher priority for the Authority, given the public concern highlighted in the PMP and Local Plan consultation response that '49% flagged dangerous byways that deter walkers and riders'.
- Raised concern that the planning system prioritised vehicular access over active travel networks.
- Considered the balance between encouraging nature recovery and maintaining the accessibility of active travel networks, particularly on multi-use roads linking footpaths.
- Noted the need for future amendments to keep the document relevant until 2040, including consideration of the rural road network. Noted that maintenance pressures would increase if the network expanded.
- Considered how the potential of local volunteers could be unlocked to support the delivery of active travel.
- Asked about facilitating safer and easier crossings for bridleways.
- Noted the need for Local Highway Authorities to maintain Quiet Roads to ensure they remained fit for purpose.
- Raised the need for signage to be consistent whilst avoiding homogenisation so that distinctive local character was not lost.
- Questioned how active travel was monitored and evaluated.

91. Members were advised:

- The Authority was seeking to develop webpages for the Active Travel Network to enable partners to flag potential projects on the live GIS map used during the consultation. The list of potential projects would be maintained for delivery by either the Authority or a partner organisation.
- The Active Travel Plan was tied to both the PMP and the Local Plan which enabled its use as a material consideration in planning decisions.
- Addressing conflicts between users was an important part of managing a PRow network. Issues were identified through the LAF and with local authority partners, and projects capable of addressing multiple issues were prioritised.
- Officers commented on planning applications from an access perspective and approval of the Active Travel Network Plan would strengthen the basis of officer responses on this issue.
- Active Travel England was working with all ten English National Parks to publish new rural design guidelines for active travel routes, which should help address issues such as encroaching vegetation.
- The Authority had entered into a three-year contract with Place Informatics for mobile phone telemetry analysis to monitor and evaluate active travel use.

92. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved the South Downs National Park Authority Active Travel Network Plan 2025 – 2030 set out at Appendix I.
 2. Delegated Authority to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make any minor changes to the Active Travel Network Plan.
93. The meeting adjourned for a short break at 3.28pm.

ITEM 12. AMENDED SOUTH DOWNS TRUST MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING TO SUPPORT THE TRUST IN SETTING UP A TRADING COMPANY

94. Stephen McAuliffe left the meeting at 3.40pm.
95. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-18).
96. Members made the following comments:
- Questioned whether there was any risk to the Authority that the stated shared intention would prevent the trading company from taking advantage of reduced procurement requirements.
 - Sought assurance that the proposed two-stage cost recovery process would not result in unnecessary VAT leakage.
 - Requested clarification on the distinction between the Authority Trading Company and the proposed Trust Trading Company.
97. Members were advised:
- Officers had sought legal advice and had been assured that any risk to the Authority from the shared intention was negligible as the Authority's intention in establishing the trading company was to support the Trust in the delivery of its objectives. As the Trust would wholly own the Trading Company, it would not be subject to public procurement legislation.
 - Whilst there was a possibility of VAT-leakage from the proposed arrangements, it was noted that profit could be gift aided and the distribution of any funds would be at the discretion of the Trustees. Officers would review the VAT position to minimise the risk of VAT leakage.
 - The Teckal company established by the Authority for operating Seven Sisters Country Park was distinct from the trading company proposed by the Trust, which was intended to act as an ecological consultancy, drawing on the Authority's Nature Based Solutions and Biodiversity Net Gain work. Lessons learned from the operation of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL) would inform this work.
 - There was no financial commitment by the Authority to the proposed trading company.
98. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:
1. Approve the amended Memorandum of Understanding set out at Appendix I; and,
 2. Delegate Authority to the Chief Executive Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make and approve any future minor changes to the Memorandum of Understanding, noting that any major changes would be reported to the Authority for approval.
99. Stephen McAuliffe returned to the meeting at 3.53pm.

ITEM 13. AUDITED STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2024/26 AND LETTER OF REPRESENTATION

100. The Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-19).

101. Members made the following comments:
- Requested clarification on whether the underspend would be moved to general or earmarked reserves.
 - Sought assurance from the Senior Leadership Team that Members could be confident in signing the letter of representation.

102. Members were advised:
- The underspend had been moved into the general reserves to be utilised throughout the year, and was being reported to the Policy and Resources committee through the financial management reports.
 - Assurance was provided that Members could be confident in signing the letter of representation.

103. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:
1. Noted the Commentary on the Statement of Accounts 2024/25 as out in Appendix 1.
 2. Approved the Statement of Accounts 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 2 for publication.
 3. Authorised the Interim Chief Finance Officer to make any final amendments to the accounts required, providing that the amendments have no impact on the financial position (outturn) of the Authority.
 4. Authorised the Interim Chief Finance Officer to sign the formal Letter of Representation as set out in Appendix 3 on the conclusion of all audit queries.
 5. Approved the amended Annual Governance Statement at Appendix 4.

104. Antonia Cox and Gary Marsh left the meeting at 3.58pm.

ITEM 14. EXTERNAL AUDIT FINDINGS AND OPINION

105. The External Auditor introduced the report (NPA25/26-20).
106. Theresa Fowler left the meeting at 4pm.
107. Alun Alesbury, Chris Dowling and Andrew Shaxson left the meeting at 4.09pm.
108. **RESOLVED:** The Authority received and considered the findings as set out in The Audit Findings for South Downs National Park Authority, Year ended 31 March 2025 at Appendix 1.

ITEM 15. VALUE FOR MONEY – AUDITOR’S ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25

109. The External Auditor introduced the report (NPA25/26-21).
110. Members made the following comment:
- Requested further detail on the scope of efficiencies that could reasonably be considered for the medium term in relation to the recommendation for formalized savings and efficiencies.
111. Members were advised:
- The external auditor would research the scope of efficiencies that could be considered reasonable for the medium term and provide a response.
112. **RESOLVED:** The Authority received and considered the Value for Money – Auditor’s Annual Report 2024/25.

ITEM 16. REVIEW OF THE MEMBER CODE OF CONDUCT

113. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-22).

114. Members made the following comment:
- Requested clarity as to how a Member could prevent a person from gaining access to information to which they are entitled.
115. Members were advised:
- A Member could theoretically attempt to block a member of the public from gaining access to information that the Authority held and to which they had a right of access, such as through a Freedom of Information request, but there had been no examples of such behaviour at the Authority.
116. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:
1. Noted that a focussed review of the Authority's Member Code of Conduct was undertaken in May 2023 as summarised in paragraph 1.2.
 2. Noted the outcome of the current review of the Authority's Member Code of Conduct as detailed in section 3 of this report.
 3. Approved the revised Member Code of Conduct at Appendix 1.

ITEM 17. APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEE

117. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA25/26-23).
118. Members made the following comments:
- Thanked the Defra appointments team for hastening the appointment process for Robson Peisley.
 - Tom Nevill was appointed to the Authority by Eastbourne Borough Council.
119. **RESOLVED:** The Authority appointed:
1. Tom Nevill to the Planning Committee;
 2. Andy Tree to the Policy and Resources Committee; and
 3. Robson Peisley to the Policy and Resources Committee.

Approved the revised Member Code of Conduct at Appendix 1.

ITEM 18. PLANNING COMMITTEE

120. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 11 September and 9 October 2025.

ITEM 19. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

121. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 18 September 2025.

ITEM 20. APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT AND STANDARD COMMITTEE

122. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standard Committee meeting held on 18 June 2025.

ITEM 21. PART II MINUTES OF THE POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

123. Authority Members noted the Part II minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 18 September 2025.

ITEM 22. PART II MINUTES OF THE APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT AND STANDARD COMMITTEE

124. Authority Members noted the Part II minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standard Committee meeting held on 10 June 2025.

125. The Chair closed the meeting at 4.27pm.

Signed _____