

**Agenda Item 7**  
**Report NPA25/26-24**

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **20 March 2026**  
By **Authority Chair**  
Title of Report **Authority Chair Update**

**Note**

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**Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.**

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 This report outlines the activities of the Chair and the Members of the SDNPA since the NPA meeting on the 9 December 2025.

**2. Update**

2.1 As well as attending the formal meetings of the Authority, (full NPA meetings, Planning and Policy & Resources committees), members are expected to attend workshops and strategy days where we have the time to explore in depth topics, issues or policy documents to ensure that we have been informed of the evidence and had opportunities to input into policy making.

2.2 Since the last NPA meeting in December, Members have had the following workshops. Thank you to all the officers for producing these informative and incredibly useful sessions:

- Planning committee away day
- Local Plan workshop
- Budget workshop
- Corporate Plan workshop
- Treasury Management training
- Cultural Heritage workshop
- Seven Sisters Country Park strategic Day

2.3 Thank you to members, Mark Potter, Robson Peisley and Tom Nevill for attending Campaign for National Parks celebration in Westminster of their New Perspectives project just before Christmas.

2.4 Thank you to Vicky Wells for being part of the 10th birthday celebrations of our Dark Night Skies designation on Friday 13 February and for cutting the cake so beautifully!

2.5 The Dark Night Skies festival that ran across half-term week in February. Thank you to those members who volunteered to help at ones of these events. I was at the Seven Sisters one which was wonderful & dry with a packed programme including a star walk, telescopes and two talks. Huge well done to the comms team for putting these events on.

Chair's Activity

- 2.6 I was pleased to attend Hampshire Wildlife Trust's event in Westminster at the beginning of the year.
- 2.7 There are several reports that have been commissioned this year looking at the Governance in Protected Landscapes. Campaign for National Parks (CNP) are working on their own report, which they will submit to the Defra team. I am part of the steering committee for this work, and we will be meeting towards the end of March to agree the final report. This will be very much focused from CNP's ambitions for these places to be more inclusive following the 2019 Glover Landscape review.
- 2.8 Defra have commissioned the Countryside & Community Research Institute (CCRI) based at the University of Gloucester to carry out a study into soft governance in Protected Landscapes. Members and officers from across the sector were invited to take part in online interviews and where possible, to attend in person workshops held in London and Penrith. Richard Sandiford and I attended the London workshop in February. The study is due to be submitted to Defra in April.
- 2.9 The Office for Environmental Protection is also carrying out a study into our governance as well as Protected Landscapes' ability to deliver the ambition laid out in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) of delivering half the target of delivering 30% of land managed for nature by 2030 on 25% of the land in England. This is due to be submitted in the autumn.
- 2.10 I attended the annual full in person Campaign for National Parks council meeting in January, along with board member Robson Peisley. The meeting started with keynote speeches from Beccy Speight CEO of Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), who spoke on the recent polling RSPB had carried out showing the nation's love of nature and their approach to talking about their work this year. Prof Robbie McDonald, Chief Insights Officer & Chief Scientist from the Office for Environmental Protection gave a presentation on the study that the organisation is carrying out this year on Protected Landscapes. He will also be presenting to the National Parks England (NPE) board in March.
- 2.11 Community Energy Pathways, based out of the climate hub in Lewes hosted a visit by Warren Buckley the Ofgem board member focused on communities which I attended. We discussed how community energy schemes are being delivered locally, where the blocks were, the good work of energy champions and the issues that the people they're helping are facing.

National Parks England

- 2.12 As Chair of National Parks England, I was involved with the recruitment of the new Independent Chair of the Protected Landscapes Partnership last year. Defra announced the new Chair, Mary Ann Ochota in January. Mary Ann Ochota is a broadcaster, archologist, President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and a passionate advocate for access to the countryside. I have met with Mary Ann several times since then and all of us across the Protected Landscapes are excited to be working with her.
- 2.13 National Parks England have recruited a new Executive Director, Debbie Stockwell, who started at the end of February. Debbie has focused her career on climate and environment policy, mainly in government at Defra, Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC) (now DESNZ) and the Department for Transport. She has worked with national parks on Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) rural development schemes and led the delivery of the 25 Year Environment Plan and Green Recovery from COVID. She is a fantastic appointment to lead the NPE team and I look forward to her visiting the South Downs later in the year.
- 2.14 I attended the Joint All Party Parliamentary Group meeting to launch the Reconomics 3.0 report hosted by the Outdoor Recreation & Access to Nature APPG, the Sport & Physical Activity APPG and the Swimming APPG on 26 January.
- 2.15 CPRE held their 100th birthday celebrations in Parliament on 3 February, which I attended alongside my fellow Protected Landscapes Partnership board colleagues.

- 2.16 I travelled with Ruth Larbey, Head of Policy at National Landscapes Association and Tim Slaney to Rugby in February to visit Urban & Civic's Houlton development at the invitation of James Scott the developer and Natural England board member, to understand their approach to on-site delivery of nature at large scale (6,000 homes) and what we could learn from this. We look forward to hosting James in the South Downs to discuss approaches to nature recovery alongside development in Protected landscapes.
- 2.17 The Protected Landscapes Partnership hosted a workshop on Environmental Social Justice in London at the beginning March with attendees from across protected landscapes. The aim of the event was to highlight best practice when delivering work with underserved communities and to find possible ways of collaboration across the Protected landscapes.
- 3. Conclusion**
- 3.1 I am happy to respond to any questions that may arise from this update and will provide any further updates as needed at the meeting.

## **VANESSA ROWLANDS**

### **Authority Chair**

#### **South Downs National Park Authority**

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Appendices:	None
SDNPA Consultees:	Chief Executive; Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer.
External Consultees:	None
Background Documents:	None

