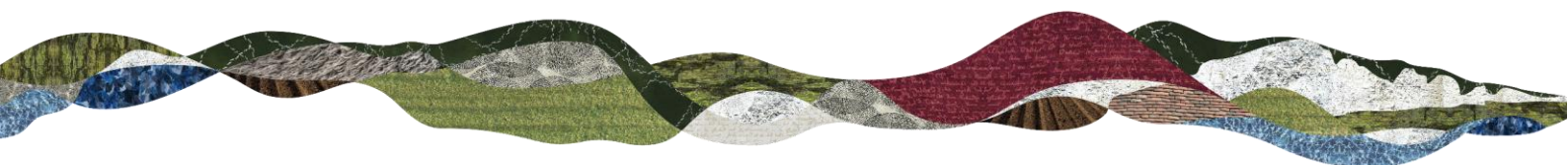


Biodiversity Duty Statement

South Downs National Park Authority

Reporting period: December 2023 - 1 January 2026

Published: March 2026



Executive Summary

This Biodiversity Duty Statement explains how the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) has complied with – and demonstrated leadership in delivering – the strengthened biodiversity duty introduced by the Environment Act 2021.

As England's newest National Park Authority, SDNPA has embedded biodiversity recovery at the heart of its statutory purposes, decision-making and delivery. The Authority has moved beyond minimum compliance by using its statutory powers, convening role and partnerships to secure measurable, long-term outcomes for nature at landscape scale.

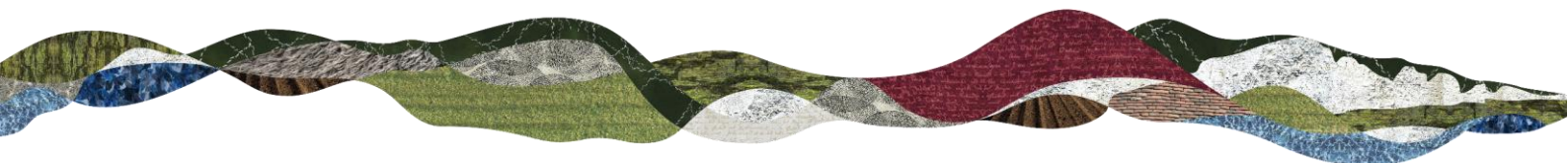
During the reporting period (December 2023 – 1 January 2026), SDNPA has:

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- Secured or managed **7,459 hectares of land for nature** since 2022 (57% of the ReNature target of 13,000 hectares by 2030), including **1,418 hectares** delivered during this reporting period.
 - Delivered and supported major landscape-scale initiatives such as chalk grassland recovery, a Park-wide hedgerow initiative, targeted species recovery, wetland and river restoration, and secured Approved Body status in advance of **Seven Sisters** becoming a **National Nature Reserve**.
 - Implemented mandatory **Biodiversity Net Gain** as Local Planning Authority, securing a net gain of **120.28 biodiversity units**, with average gains exceeding the statutory minimum.
 - Leveraged approximately **£9 million of private finance**, securing **over 1000 hectares** of land for long-term nature recovery through habitat banking, nutrient mitigation and voluntary biodiversity credits.
 - **Over 70,000 trees have been planted** across the South Downs through the [Trees for the Downs](#) programme and other projects during the reporting period.
 - **31 ponds have been created or restored** in partnership with pond specialist and wildlife charity Froglife since 2023.
 - Secured a five-year **Countryside Stewardship Agreement of £168k pa**, with an additional uplift for 10 years for Chalk Grassland restoration at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP).
 - [Downs to the Sea Project](#) has secured funding and gone live, it's focused on water, both in the landscape and in people's lives and aims to restore and **create a network of vital "blue spaces"**.
 - [The Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project](#) in the East Hampshire heathlands is ongoing and 2025 monitoring results **saw record increases in Nightjars, Woodlark and Dartford Warblers recorded on site**.



- Delivered by working with others, through strong partnerships with farmers, land managers, conservation organisations, local authorities, private investors and statutory bodies including Natural England, and through active leadership in shaping and contributing to **Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)**.
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Over the next reporting period, SDNPA will prioritise action using the **Partnership Management Plan (2026–2031)** and LNRS priorities to focus effort, funding and nature markets where they will have the greatest impact, ensuring continued delivery of sustained nature recovery across the National Park.



1. Introduction

This Biodiversity Duty Statement sets out how the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) has complied with the strengthened biodiversity duty under section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, as amended by the Environment Act 2021.

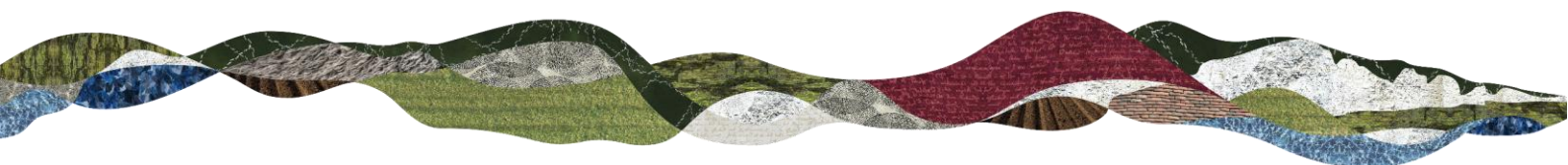
As England's newest National Park Authority, SDNPA has taken a proactive approach to the duty, embedding biodiversity recovery at the heart of strategic planning, investment, partnership working and delivery. The Authority has used its statutory powers, convening role and innovation in nature finance to demonstrate how public authorities can move beyond compliance to deliver measurable, long-term outcomes for nature.

The strengthened duty requires public authorities to **consider what actions they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity**, and to **take action** where appropriate. This statement explains how the Authority has met this requirement by integrating biodiversity considerations across its decision-making and by delivering action at scale through partnerships and private finance.

Biodiversity recovery is fundamental to the Authority's first statutory purpose: *to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area*. Action for biodiversity is therefore not confined to a single programme or team, but is integral to how the Authority plans, invests, partners and delivers across the National Park.

Compliance at a glance - strengthened biodiversity duty

Duty requirement	How SDNPA complies
Consider what action can be taken	Biodiversity considerations are embedded across the Corporate Plan, Partnership Management Plan, Climate Change Action Plan and Local Plan policies, informed by evidence, partnership input and statutory strategies including Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).
Set policies and objectives	Clear objectives for nature recovery are set through the Corporate Plan and Partnership Management Plan, including the ReNature target to secure or manage 13,000 hectares of land for nature by 2030, alongside specific objectives for Biodiversity Net Gain and nature-based solutions. Our core nature objectives seek to maintain, enhance and/or restore 30% of existing Core Nature sites and support key species recovery within the SDNP by 2030. Core nature sites include designated sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest



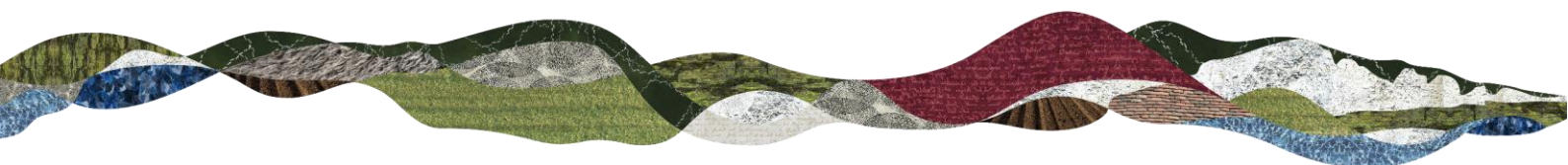
	(SSSIs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs), Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and ancient semi natural woodland. A 288ha SSSI is directly under NPA management at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)
Take action to deliver outcomes	Action is delivered through ranger-led land management, multi-partner projects, planning decisions, Biodiversity Net Gain, habitat banking, on our own land at SSCP and through nature markets and private finance, supported by long-term legal agreements and funded monitoring.
Review and plan future action	Delivery is monitored through regular performance reporting and external review where appropriate. Future action will be prioritised using the Partnership Management Plan (2026–2031) and LNRS priorities to focus effort where it will have the greatest impact.

2. Our approach to biodiversity

Strategic context

Biodiversity recovery is embedded within the Authority's strategic framework and delivery model, ensuring that action for nature is coordinated, evidence-led and delivered at scale. Key components include:

- Corporate Plan -setting measurable targets for nature recovery, climate action and Biodiversity Net Gain, including the commitment to secure or manage 13,000 hectares of land for nature by 2030.
- **Partnership Management Plan (PMP)** -providing the overarching framework for partnership-led delivery across the National Park, aligning national priorities with local action through the following outcomes:
 - Outcome 1: Landscape & natural Beauty
 - Protect landscape character
 - Create green infrastructure
 - Target new payments
 - Outcome 2: Increasing Resilience
 - Improve soil and water
 - Improve trees and woodland
 - Target new payments
 - Outcome 3: Habitats & Species
 - Join up habitats
 - Manage priority and invasive species
- **Climate Change Action Plan** -aligning biodiversity action with climate mitigation and adaptation, recognising the role of healthy ecosystems in climate resilience.



- **Development Plan policies** -securing biodiversity outcomes through the planning system, alongside mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain.

In December 2025 the Authority approved a new **Partnership Management Plan 2026–2031**, following extensive public and stakeholder consultation. The Plan formalises shared aims, objectives, indicators and targets, and reflects the central role of partnerships in delivering nature recovery at landscape scale.

We also work at national level, collaborating with other National Parks and Protected Landscapes, to share and develop best practice, and to ensure our work is coherent and impactful. We are involved in initiatives such as the Nature Recovery Leaders Group, the [Landscape Observatory project](#) and are a partner in [Big Chalk](#).

3. Policies, objectives and actions

Nature recovery and land management

The Authority is delivering a long-term programme of nature recovery through its ReNature initiative, which brings together ranger teams, farmers, land managers, communities, conservation partners and private investors.

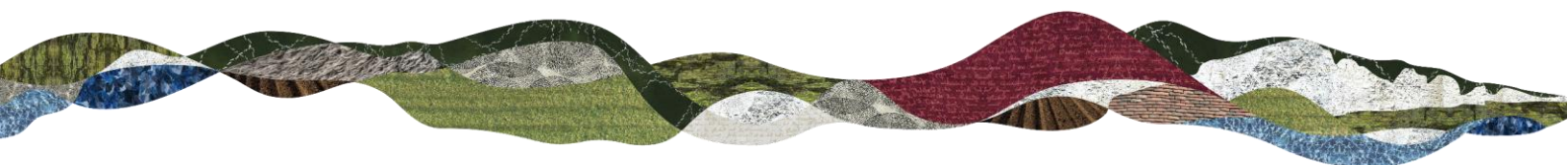
The ReNature target is to secure or manage **13,000 hectares of land for nature by 2030**, equivalent to around one third of the National Park. This includes habitat creation, habitat improvement and land legally secured for long-term nature recovery to deliver on our core nature target.

By the end of 2025:

- **7,459 hectares** had been secured or managed for nature since data collection began in 2022 (57% of the 2030 target)
- **1,418 hectares** were delivered during this reporting period alone

Delivery has been achieved through a combination of:

- Ranger-led land management and advisory work
- Multi-partner landscape-scale projects, using external funding sources
- Government funding programmes such as Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)
- Nature-based solutions and habitat banking
- Private finance secured through Biodiversity Net Gain, nutrient mitigation and voluntary biodiversity credits
- Delivery against the local plan, including associated Biodiversity Net Gain
- Exemplar land management on our own estate at SSCP.



Key delivery programmes and projects

Changing Chalk

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk is a landscape-scale partnership connecting nature, people and heritage across a 458 km² area of the eastern South Downs. The SDNPA has supported this scheme through **the targeted restoration of dew ponds** in areas where we could achieve better connectivity, close to public access (South Downs Way Corridor), with opportunities for education and interpretation.

Additionally, SDNPA have led a 5-year project to employ a conservation grazer to cover the Changing Chalk project area. Working with a number of partners and stakeholders, targeted grazing has **brought priority sites under appropriate management** whilst testing and establishing innovative, yet viable business models, that will support conservation grazing in the future.

Big Chalk

Growing from an initial partnership of Protected Landscapes, the Big Chalk Partnership now comprises more than 150 organisations with a common vision of **creating thriving chalk and limestone landscapes across southern England**. SDNPA has supported the project through several development phases, firstly by Natural England and then, since 2023, by the Protected Landscapes Partnership, supported by Defra.

The project aims to collectively secure the future of nature in southern England's iconic chalk and limestone landscapes, by:

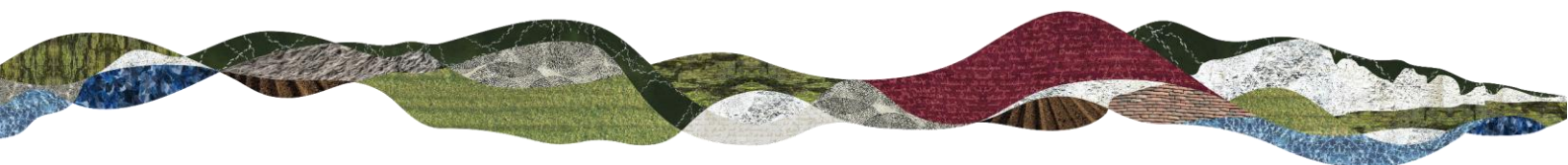
- championing the global importance of their unique nature,
- uniting nature recovery expertise to restore habitats and species, and
- working with speed, scale and focus.

Chalk grassland recovery

Over the last two years the Authority has undertaken **Rapid Condition Assessments** of undesignated chalk grassland, led by ranger teams and supported by the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre and Natural England expertise. To date, **83 sites** have been surveyed. Each participating land manager receives a tailored survey report, including species lists and management recommendations, and several sites are already showing improvements through changes in grazing and management.

Park-wide hedgerow initiative

A major focus during the reporting period has been the **development of a coordinated, Park-wide hedgerow initiative**. This work combines historic landscape evidence, farm-level planning and landscape-scale delivery. Historic



hedgerow maps (1850–1900) have been purchased, and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) South East commissioned to develop holding-level hedgerow plans. Farmer clusters are being supported to develop joined-up delivery projects, with practical implementation resourced through a combination of grants, fundraising and partnership projects.

Species recovery - the '4 Bs'

Targeted work for **bats, bees, birds and butterflies** underpins many projects. This includes the long-running Farmland Bird Initiative, butterfly monitoring used to guide habitat management, targeted action for species such as the Potter Flower Bee, and the deployment of static bat detectors across ranger areas to improve evidence-led action.

Downs to the Sea

Led by SDNPA, Downs to the Sea is a £2.5m multi-partnered project that aims to **restore and create a network of vital "blue spaces" in the landscape**. Focused on water in the landscape and water in people's lives, this project has been made possible by a £1.7m grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, as well as significant funding from Southern Water and DPD.

The project has enabled urgent work to internationally designated wetlands that also have huge local value - reducing flood risk, supporting biodiversity and offering space for recreation. The restoration of ponds and rivers across the South Downs will provide vital water resources for wildlife in an increasingly dry landscape as climate change takes effect. Targeted engagement is also raising awareness of the vital role that water plays in all our lives, whilst helping people to connect meaningfully with nature.

Rother Action Plan

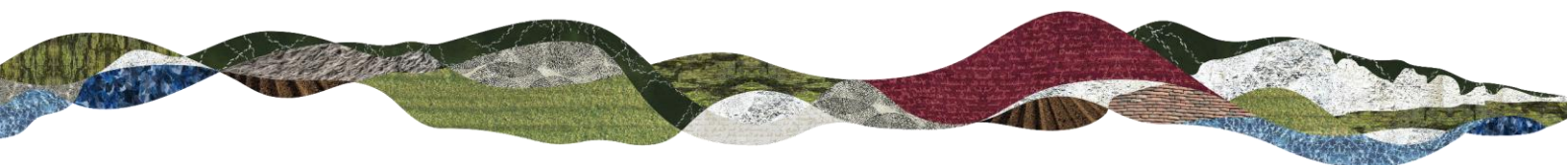
SDNPA are supporting the Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT) to develop and begin to implement a shared stakeholder action plan for the Western Rother sub-catchment.

SDNPA support includes the facilitation of a stakeholder group for the sub-catchment. The group will create a shared evidence base, develop an Action Plan (including Vision, Route Map and a costed pipeline of projects), and oversee the first stage of delivery of the plan to include the submission of funding bids.

The Rother Action Plan will run to at least 2030 and will be integrated into the Hampshire and West Sussex LNRs and the new South Downs PMP.

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)

In 2021, the FiPL programme was announced by Defra to help support farmers in England's 44 protected landscapes.



Farmers and land managers in the South Downs National Park have been able to apply for funding as part of the initiative to support nature-friendly farming and sustainability. During the reporting period, 55 FiPL projects were delivered, contributing to **increases in wildlife-rich habitat, improved habitat management, and enhanced connectivity**, all supporting improvements in biodiversity. A wide range of nature-recovery actions were delivered, including hedgerow planting and restoration, meadow creation, improved food and habitat for wildlife, soil enhancement, dew-pond restoration, chalk grassland and woodland management, regenerative grazing, and the reduction of invasive non-native species.

Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)

Demonstrated direct delivery on our own estate at SSCP by securing a **five-year Countryside Stewardship Agreement supporting land management**, conservation grazing on chalk grassland, wetland enhancement works and infrastructure investment to open up new areas for grazing. Ongoing conditions, habitat and species surveying are undertaken to record the positive impacts of change.

Access and biodiversity delivery

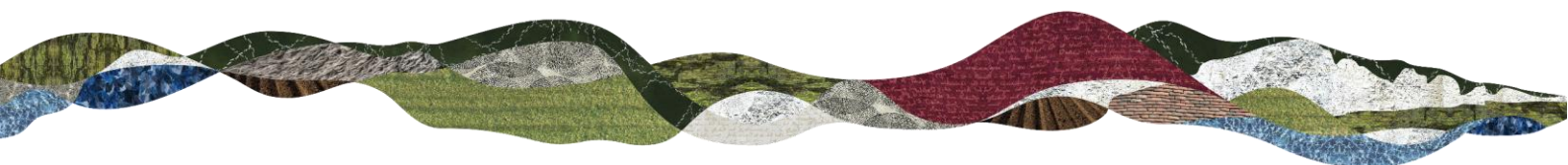
Along **National Trails**, biodiversity benefits are delivered through measures such as cut-and-collect verge management to increase floristic diversity (approximately 2 kilometres managed during this reporting period), traditional hedge laying and new hedge planting, dew pond restoration (two ponds restored or improved), and the creation and management of wildflower meadows, including Itford Meadow at YHA South Downs.

New access infrastructure projects, including **Egrets Way** and **Centurion Way**, deliver biodiversity enhancements through mandatory **Biodiversity Net Gain**, supported by route-specific Landscape and Environment Plans that include habitat creation and long-term habitat-sensitive maintenance.

4. Working with wider strategies and partners

The Authority has actively contributed to all three **Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)** covering the National Park as a Supporting Authority, recognising their importance in guiding coordinated investment and delivery.

- Formal partner representation on the **Hampshire LNRS**, published in December 2025
- Active participation in the **West Sussex** and **East Sussex & Brighton and Hove LNRS**, including working and supporting authority groups



A pan-Sussex approach has been welcomed, reflecting the National Park's role in delivering nature recovery at a larger-than-county scale. LNRS priorities are now being used alongside the Partnership Management Plan to guide investment, project development and planning decisions.

The Authority is also an active partner in a wide range of regional and national initiatives, including **The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere** and the **Weald to Waves** nature corridor, supporting farmer- and landowner-led approaches to landscape connectivity.

5. Biodiversity Net Gain and private finance delivery

Biodiversity Net Gain (Local Planning Authority role)

As the Local Planning Authority, SDNPA has implemented mandatory **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**, alongside strong local planning policies that require biodiversity to be conserved and enhanced.

During the reporting period:

- **115 planning permissions** required BNG
- **15 biodiversity gain plans** were approved
- An overall **net gain of 120.28 biodiversity units** was secured

The average gain across all biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period was **11.6%**, exceeding the statutory minimum. No biodiversity gain plans were approved where on-site impacts affected irreplaceable habitats. Long-term delivery is secured through legally binding agreements, funded monitoring and clear monitoring schedules over a 30-year period.

During the reporting period the SDNPA has been preparing a new Local Plan. The first statutory consultation (Regulation 18) took place from January to March 2025. This consultation set out proposed strategic policies which seek to support nature's recovery and explored potential options for requiring development to achieve a percentage of biodiversity net gain beyond the statutory minimum. The SDNPA is reviewing the responses to the consultation, and this will inform the policy requirements set out in the Proposed Submission Local Plan which is anticipated for publication in May 2026.

Nature-based solutions and habitat banking

The Authority has adopted a **habitat banking approach** to nature-based solutions, working with landowners and farmers to secure high-integrity, long-term nature



recovery on privately owned land. This approach is applied across Biodiversity Net Gain, nutrient mitigation, woodland carbon and voluntary biodiversity credits, and is underpinned by legally binding agreements and the Authority's statutory powers.

By the end of the reporting period:

- **Over 1000 hectares** of land had been legally secured for nature through habitat banking
- Approximately **£9 million** of private finance had been leveraged
- A pipeline of more than **4,000 hectares** of potential future habitat banks had been identified by landowners

Key schemes include:

- **Halnaker Hill Farm** -England's largest BNG scheme, transitioning 131 hectares of intensive farmland to nature
- **Iford Estate** -phased delivery combining BNG and voluntary biodiversity credits through a pioneering legal agreement
- **Wiston Estate** -phased BNG delivery building on earlier habitat creation
- **Chilgrove Farm** -a 40-hectare nutrient mitigation scheme, contributing to over 300 hectares of nutrient mitigation habitat secured across the National Park

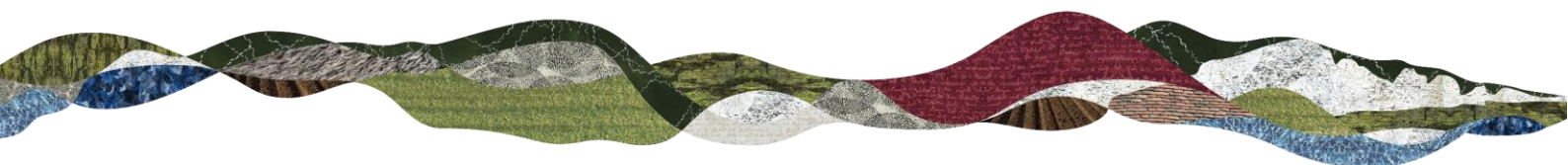
During this period the Authority also established voluntary biodiversity credits as a new nature market, supported by NEIRF funding, with multiple habitat banks now offering credits to both developers and corporate buyers.

6. Governance, partnerships and organisational arrangements

The South Downs National Park Authority is governed by a Board of 27 Members and operates through established committees and delegated decision-making arrangements.

The Authority:

- Employs approximately **156.2 full-time equivalent staff** across four directorates
- Owns and manages **Seven Sisters Country Park**, including 288 hectares of SSSI land
- Operates under Standing Orders, financial regulations and a Local Code of Corporate Governance



In July 2025 the Authority became a **Responsible Body for Conservation Covenants** under the Environment Act 2021, providing an additional mechanism to secure long-term outcomes for nature.

7. Education, engagement and awareness

The Authority has continued to raise awareness of biodiversity and support community engagement through:

- The **ReNature campaign**, promoting action for nature across the National Park
 - **Grant programmes** supporting hedgerows, pollinators and tree planting
 - The **Outdoor Learning Grant**, enabling nature-based learning for schools
 - **South Downs Youth Action**, supporting young people aged 16–25 to take action for nature
 - Over **250 engagement events** delivered through the Wealden Heaths SAMM project
 - The annual **Dark Skies Festival**, celebrating nocturnal wildlife and night skies
 - Multiple **citizen science opportunities**, events, walks, learning visits, and corporate volunteering opportunities at SSCP
 - During the reporting period, **343 volunteers have given 17,000 hours** to support biodiversity through a range of initiatives including, but not limited to, wildlife surveys, general land management, species specific management and invasive species management.
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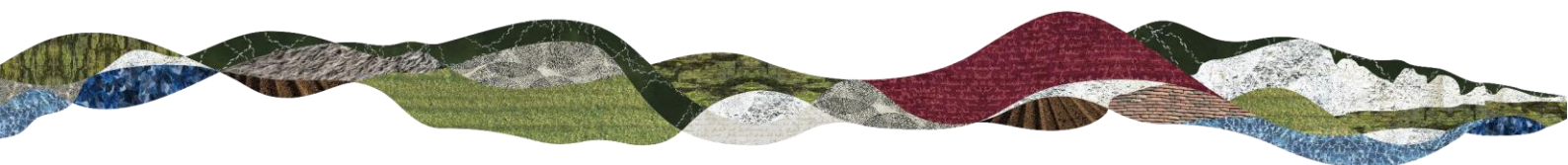
8. Monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management

Progress against biodiversity targets is monitored through:

- Bi-annual Corporate Plan reporting to Members
- Annual public performance report
- Quarterly and annual DEFRA reporting
- Monitoring of BNG and habitat banking delivery through legal agreements
- Publication of habitat condition assessments and monitoring reports
- The State of the Park report

This evidence-led approach, guided by the **Biodiversity Monitoring Framework**, allows the Authority to adapt delivery, strengthen partnerships and continuously improve outcomes for nature.

Other evidence developed during reporting period includes: the Water in the Park **report**, the Bats in the Park report, a Landscape Connectivity Study,



species-prioritisation work for the South Downs, historic and current hedgerow mapping, and the creation of a pond data layer.

9. Highlights, challenges and looking ahead

Highlights

- Large-scale chalk grassland restoration supported by innovative grazing solutions
- Restoration of historic dew ponds across the eastern Downs
- Securing Approved Body Status for SDNPA land to be part of the future **Seven Sisters National Nature Reserve**
- Beaver reintroduction on the River Meon
- Major wetland and river restoration projects delivering biodiversity and climate resilience
- Becoming an Approved Body for Conservation Covenant Agreements (Env Act 2021) in July 2025.

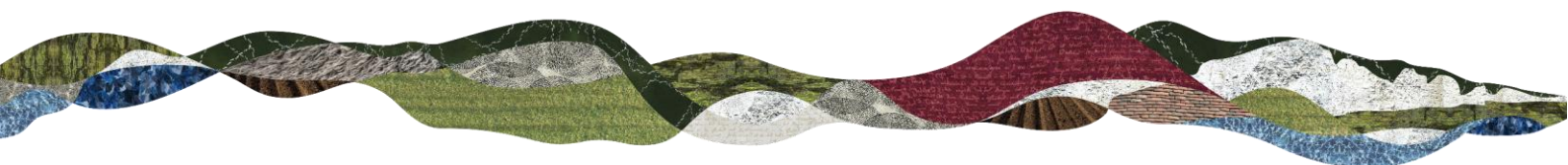
Challenges

- Securing sustainable grazing across the landscape
- Water availability and water quality pressures
- Deer impacts on habitats
- Climate change impacts on species and ecosystems

Looking ahead (how we will comply in the next reporting period)

Over the next reporting period the Authority will continue to fulfil the strengthened duty by:

- **Reconsidering and prioritising action for biodiversity** at regular intervals, so that delivery remains responsive to evidence, emerging pressures and opportunities.
- **Using the Partnership Management Plan (2026–2031) as the primary framework for coordinated delivery**, ensuring that our projects and investment are aligned to agreed outcomes, targets and indicators.
- **Applying Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) to focus effort where it will have the greatest impact**, using LNRS priorities and opportunity maps (as they are published) alongside the Partnership Management Plan to:
 - target habitat creation, restoration and management to the most strategic locations
 - guide development of new projects and partnership bids



- help direct nature markets and private finance toward locally agreed priorities
- **Scaling delivery through partnerships and private finance**, building on habitat banking and nature market mechanisms to secure long-term land-use change for nature through legally binding agreements, funded monitoring and high-integrity ecological standards.
- **Embedding biodiversity across decision-making**, including through the planning system (BNG and local policies), land management, procurement and organisational governance.
- **Developing and adopting a new Local Plan**. Through the new Local Plan, we are developing robust policies that support nature's recovery as part of implementing the Biodiversity Duty, our first purpose, and S245 duty. The new Local Plan explores a potential development requirement for a percentage of BNG that goes beyond the statutory minimum.
- **Strengthening monitoring and evaluation**, so that learning from habitat condition assessments, project outcomes and BNG monitoring continually improves delivery and demonstrates measurable progress.
- **Continued direct delivery on our own estate** with a scheduled review of the SSCP Landscape Management Plan and securing an extension of the Countryside Stewardship Agreement post 2029.

This forward programme will ensure that SDNPA continues to move beyond compliance, using its convening role, statutory powers and partnership approach to deliver sustained nature recovery on a landscape scale.

