

Report to	Governance Committee
Date	23 September 2015
By	Director of Operations
Title of Report	South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area 2012-2015
Purpose of Report	To update the Committee on the achievements of the South Downs Way Ahead NIA

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to note the achievements of the South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area 2012-2015 project

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Committee on the achievements of the three year Nature Improvement Area (NIA) project and SDNPA's work as the Lead Partner and Accountable Body for the NIA Partnership.

2. Background

- 2.1 The NIAs' overarching aim to create bigger, better, more and joined spaces for nature was based on the [Making Space for Nature](#) review chaired by Professor Sir John Lawton and submitted to the Secretary of State on 16 September 2010. Responding to this, Defra launched a competition for partnerships to apply for funding for NIA projects in England, in a very short timescale, during 2011. 76 applications were submitted and 15 shortlisted applicants were interviewed. The South Downs Way Ahead NIA was one of 12 successful partnerships which won funding from Defra to undertake an NIA project, over three financial years, from 2012-13 to 2014-15 (**Appendix 1**). The total grant was £7.5m of which the South Downs Way Ahead NIA received £608,000. SDNPA was the Lead Partner and Accountable Body for the NIA partnership comprising 29 organisations including community groups, wildlife trusts, local government and businesses.
- 2.2 There were 5 objectives of the South Downs Way Ahead NIA:
- 1) 'Walk the Chalk' to broaden the South Downs Way National Trail as a semi-natural corridor and improve the natural qualities of the route;
 - 2) 'Linking the Fragments' to achieve real improvements to the conservation and management of chalk grassland at the heart of the matrix of downland habitats;
 - 3) 'Surface to Groundwater' to demonstrate the viability and benefits of an input based approach to the improvement of groundwater quality;
 - 4) 'Town to Down' to assess and demonstrate the benefits of ecosystem services to urban populations; and
 - 5) 'Valuing the Chalk' to attribute an environmental, economic and social value to the benefits and services provided by chalk downland.

3. Project management and administration

- 3.1 The NIA partnership comprised 29 Partners including 8 funded Partners (**Appendix 2**).
- 3.2 A part-time (0.8fte) Project Officer was employed until 31 March 2015. This was the only dedicated SDNPA resource funded by the NIA, the resources being targeted at delivery.

3.3 The SDNPA was the Lead Partner and strategic project manager, monitoring progress throughout the project to ensure Partners had achieved their objectives. As accountable body, SDNPA monitored project budgets and ensured Partners' financial claims were accurate and worked with each to help it achieve its in-kind and match-funding commitments.

3.4 All claims and progress reports were submitted to Natural England in a timely fashion.

3.5 Monitoring and evaluation commitments were overseen, coordinated and submitted to Natural England by SDNPA.

4. Project delivery

4.1 Examples of project delivery for each of the 5 objectives:

- 1) 'Walk the Chalk'. 79 sites across the five focal areas of Winchester, Harting, Worthing, Brighton & Hove and Lewes and Eastbourne and the South Downs Way corridor (**Appendix 3**) were identified where chalk grassland would be created or restored during the 3 years of the project. The work was undertaken by SDNPA staff, contractors and the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (SDVRS), and included scrub management, development of chalk grassland management plans and installation of fencing and water to facilitate management through grazing.
- 2) 'Linking the Fragments'. A programme of surveying Local Wildlife Sites (formerly SNCIs/SINCs) was managed by the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre to establish a baseline on chalk grassland condition and inform future management plans. The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew at Wakehurst collected and propagated seeds from chalk grassland plants which were not available commercially, established demonstration plots and ran best practice workshops. The SDNPA, in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation, undertook targeted habitat management, successfully increasing the distribution of the nationally endangered Duke of Burgundy butterfly. In the 'Chantry to Chanctonbury' area, part of the Worthing focal area of the NIA, annual counts rose from 82 to 408 (2012 to 2014), an increase of 398%. On the Heyshott escarpment near Midhurst, part of the Harting focal area, peak daily counts rose from 31 in 2012 to 104 in 2014, an increase of 235%.
- 3) 'Surface to Groundwater'. Led by SDNPA, this project developed a model to determine the levels of nitrate pollution affecting groundwater across the National Park and identified measures of how to reduce it.
- 4) 'Town to Down'. Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) led on a suite of projects as part of its Biosphere initiative, creating B-banks (butterfly, bee and biodiversity banks) and wildlife corridors in the Brighton and Hove area and developing a conservation grazing scheme. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, in partnership with the RSPB, undertook farmland bird surveys and ran a series of farm conservation advisory workshops. Lewes District Council held a number of events to raise awareness of the value of chalk downland to the local community and drafted a Biodiversity Action Plan for the Lewes district. Lewes & Ouse Valley Economics Group identified and promoted the links between the Lewes local economy and ecosystems from which they benefit so they were understood and valued by members of the Lewes community.
- 5) 'Valuing the Chalk'. BHCC conducted a research project to quantify the potential ecosystem services benefits of introducing chalk grassland green roofs in Brighton and Hove. The Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust undertook chalk grassland and habitat restoration projects in the Winchester area through implementation of a conservation grazing scheme and community engagement, including training and supporting sheep and cattle lookers. The SDNPA established a bespoke Visitor Payback Scheme for organisers to donate funds generated by its events to the National Park for maintenance/enhancement of the South Downs Way.

5. Partnership

5.1 Excellent working relationships have been formed with Partners which will be beneficial in developing future projects / synergies.

- 5.2 Focal area groups were formed in Winchester and Lewes to facilitate partnership working at a local level.
- 5.3 Regular Partnership meetings were held to give Partners the opportunity to update on their projects, share best practice, network and discuss future projects and funding opportunities.
- 5.4 During the Evaluation workshop held on 11 March 2015, Partners commented that the SDNPA's strong and strategic leadership was key to maintaining the Partnership and ensuring the Project achieved its objectives.
- 5.5 The SDNPA was instrumental in forming a national NIA group comprising all 12 English NIAs. Two meetings have been held to date and a joint NIA brochure published to celebrate the work of all the NIAs which is available on the [SDNPA website](#).

6. Finance

- 6.1 The timescale was very tight for preparing and submitting a bid to Natural England for its NIA competition. The NIA Business Plan requested a grant of £664,792 and committed to leveraging in £1,161,123 of cash match and £1,244,580 of in-kind match-funding. The NIA was awarded a grant of £608,285 (£56,507 or 8.5% less than requested) but there was no reduction in its match-funding commitments.

South Downs Way Ahead NIA funding 2012-2015				
2012-2015	Defra Grant £	Additional Cash Funding £	In-Kind Funding £	Total Project Amount £
NIA Funding Agreement	608,285	1,161,123	1,244,580	3,013,988
Match-funding from SDNPA:				
Major partnerships budget		150,000		
Area budgets		119,530		
Strategy & Partnership budget		22,770		
Visitor Payback Scheme		1,600		
Ranger, staff and Volunteer time			365,318	
Match-funding levered in by SDNPA:				
Biffa funding		49,832		
SITA funding		85,800		
Veolia funding		39,425		
HLF Steyning Dukes		28,000		
Rampion Offshore Wind Farm monitoring & mitigation fund		358,500		
Environment Agency		25,000		
Portsmouth Water		5,000		
Landowner contributions		44,090		
HLS contributions		74,090		
BHCC finance staff contribution			2,764	
Total match-funding from SDNPA		1,003,637	368,082	
Match-funding from other NIA Partners		592,027	711,358	
Total funding	608,285	1,595,664	1,079,440	3,283,389
Over/under Funding Agreement	0	+434,541	-165,140	+269,401

- 6.2 The NIA Partnership achieved its objectives on budget and on time.
- 6.3 The Partnership succeeded in contributing £1,595,664 of cash match-funding (£434,541 or 38% more than its commitment) and £1,079,440 of in-kind match-funding (£165,140 or 13% less than its commitment). The additional cash match-funding contributed over and above its commitment more than offsets the lower realisation of in-kind funding. In total the NIA contributed 110% of its match-funding commitment despite being awarded a smaller grant.

7. Governance and Evaluation

- 7.1 Members approved and endorsed the NIA project at a full NPA meeting on 24 May 2012. Subsequently, Members were kept up to date on progress on two Members' Tours on 6 November 2012 and 16 June 2015. At the latter, Professor Sir John Lawton, praised the logic of landscape scale conservation and linking areas of chalk grassland within the South Downs National Park. Partnership meetings by focal area or theme ensured the various project elements were delivered to time and budget, with an overarching steering group meeting on an 'as needs' basis.
- 7.2 An external consultancy, &Co, was engaged to conduct an evaluation of the impact of the NIA project on landscape scale restoration, SDNPA's management and partnership working. The consultants carried out desk-top research and facilitated an evaluation workshop with NIA Partners and SDNPA staff. A copy of the report is available to Members on request.
- 7.3 The evaluation report highlighted the following areas of achievement/best practice:
- The new NIA partnership collaborated to produce a winning application which attracted match-funding commitments in excess of £2.6 million.
 - The NIA project introduced and brokered new relationships between organisations and individuals through adopting an inclusive approach.
 - The partners felt SDNPA played an enabling role and was a strong leader providing drive, consistency and stability throughout the life of the project.
 - As a result of the project SDNPA and partners have a much stronger sense of how one another contributes to the different priorities that affect the National Park.
 - There were opportunities for professional and personal development for SDNPA staff, volunteers and partners.
 - The wide range of activity meant that significant new knowledge has been generated.
- 7.4 The evaluation report noted the following challenges / improvement areas:
- Ensure appropriate delivery mechanisms are in place from the outset, such as a third party procurement framework.
 - Build baseline data to ensure future activity is easier to measure and understand.
 - Have the resources and procedures in place to develop suitable and robust mechanisms to ensure all new and innovative learning is identified, recorded, integrated and embedded.
 - Develop and resource a robust engagement strategy at the outset of the project which incorporates PR, community and education.
 - Complete the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the funding body which may be subject to change during the life of the project.
 - Consider how to continue the range of partnerships that had been developed during the previous three years.

8. Continuation of NIA philosophy

- 8.1 The NIA project has finished but the philosophy of landscape scale conservation will be continued through future initiatives including:
- a. Farmer clusters. The Arun to Adur Farmers' Cluster comprising 24 farmers/landowners covering an area of 14,100 hectares has been awarded £110,000 over 5

years under the new Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund scheme (**Appendix 4**). It is hoped this is the first of many future farmer clusters across the South Downs National Park.

- b. £358,500 funding from E.ON's Rampion Offshore Wind Farm project to monitor the project and carry out mitigation measures within the NIA Brighton & Hove and Lewes, Worthing and Eastbourne (Heritage Coast) focal areas.
- c. Brighton Integrated Catchment Management Partnership (CHAMP) to deliver advice and practical land management improvements to the Brighton Chalk block which has been identified as currently having the highest nitrate loadings.
- d. Potential Heritage Lottery funding.
- e. European Funding, for example Life+ 'Big Chalk'. This is intended to deliver effective conservation and enhancement of ecosystem services provided by chalk landscapes, in particular: achieving sustainable growth within environmental limits; and, protecting biodiversity assets such as chalk streams, grasslands and species that are indicators of environmental thresholds. If successful, this would be a great opportunity to bring together all the rare and vulnerable chalk grasslands, which are all confined to NW Europe, a real flagship for the EU and augmenting the conservation and enhancement of the South Downs National Park.

9. Resources

- 9.1 The NIA project has finished so no further resources are required.

10. Risk management

- 10.1 A Risk Register was established and maintained during the project. As a result of effective project management and regular liaison with partners the potential risks identified did not materialise.

11. Human Rights, Equalities, Health and Safety

- 11.1 There are no implications arising from this report.

12. Sustainability

- 12.1 The work undertaken under the NIA project has enabled a more sustainable future for key chalk grassland sites and associated species. The legacy of the NIA will be the continuation of the philosophy of landscape scale conservation through future projects.

13. External Consultees

- 13.1 An external consultancy, &Co, was engaged to produce an evaluation of the NIA project, its impact and project management.

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Appendices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Map of all NIAs & South Downs Way Ahead NIA 2. NIA Partnership 3. South Downs Way Ahead NIA Focal Areas' Sites map 4. Farmer cluster map, Adur to Arun
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Operations, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Director of Planning, Chief Finance Officer & Monitoring Officer
Background Documents	SMT Year 1 Report SMT Year 2 Report