

Agenda Item 11
Report 13/16

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	23 June 2016
By	Chief Executive Officer
Title of Report	Chief Executive's Progress Report
Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report	

1. Summary and Background

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my last report to the 24 March 2016 NPA. As usual, I will focus on topics not covered elsewhere in the papers for the 23 June Member meetings.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 On 18 May the Queen's Speech set the legislative programme for this Parliament. A total of 21 Bills were mentioned but none of these were allocated to Defra. Several support the current devolution process and two are of particular relevance to SDNPA:

2.1.1 **The Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill** will include proposals to streamline pre-commencement planning conditions to speed up housing developments. LPAs will be prevented from imposing conditions unless "considered absolutely necessary". It will be necessary for us to keep a close eye on the development of this provision to ensure that it does not conflict with our statutory purposes and emerging Local Plan. The Bill also promises communities more say over neighbourhood planning. This is likely to involve making the duty on local government to support neighbourhood groups more transparent and improving the process for reviewing and updating neighbourhood plans. The National Infrastructure Commission will be put on a statutory footing and there will be a new statutory framework for paying compensation, based on the market value of land.

2.1.2 The **Digital Economy Bill** is part of a five year Digital Strategy being promoted by DCMS Minister Ed Vaizey MP who addressed our digital summit last November. The Bill will seek to enable every UK household to have a legal right to a fast broadband connection with a minimum speed of 10Mbps to be guaranteed through a Broadband Universal Service Obligation. This ought to support for our own work to extend broadband connectivity but it is concerning that properties in the 'remotest areas' may have to contribute towards the cost of installation. The Bill will simplify planning rules to assist with the construction of mobile and superfast broadband infrastructure and there will be rights to automatic compensation when a broadband service goes down.

- 2.2 Both of these Bills could have effects on the SDNPA – both positive and negative – and we will be scrutinising the details in association with National Parks England when each Bill is published.

- 2.3 There had been speculation that there might be a Wildlife Bill following a report by the Law Commission on the topic and it is still possible that this might appear in draft during the Parliament. Also notable by its absence was any Forestry Bill to take forward the reforms to the Forestry Commission that were promised in the Government's response to the

Independent Panel on Forestry.

- 2.4 We have hosted two important Defra visits since the last NPA. On 23 March the Secretary of State for the Environment, **Liz Truss MP**, launched the **National Parks 8 Point Plan** with a visit to the South Downs National Park at Butser Ancient Farm. The visit focused on our education, outreach and food and drink work and generated very positive coverage on TV, radio and in print media. I have met senior officials in Defra to agree a joint action plan to implement the 8 Point Plan.
- 2.5 On 30 April we welcomed the Minister responsible for National Parks, **Rory Stewart MP** to the National Park and took the opportunity to showcase a number of key aspects of our work including farm clusters, whole estate plans and devolved planning, all while taking him on an invigorating 10 mile walk. The Minister was impressed with the landscape of the National Park and the fact that you can catch a train from London to a station like Amberley and be out walking on the Downs in minutes. Both visits were praised by Defra for their content and careful planning.
- 2.6 The Minister is interested in learning lessons from the high profile of US National Parks and in the possibility of twinning arrangements with them. He is very ambitious for National Park income generation and wanted to learn more about our plans in this area. He supported our proposals, including the creation of a charitable trust which is on today's agenda. He commented that applications to trusts and foundations should be a particular target – mentioning some possibilities he had encountered – and I assured him that our independent advice had reached the same conclusion. He was enthusiastic about the plans for a rural affordable housing vehicle that were considered at a P&P “think tank” session on 26 May, commenting that this was an urgent need in his own constituency. A member working group has been formed to take forward this proposal.

3. Planning

- 3.1 A revised timetable for the **South Downs Local Plan** has been produced in consultation with LPMWG and Committee Chairs/SMT. This follows on from a change to the timetable necessitated by the large number of representations on the Preferred Options (2,600), a number of staff changes and the need for neighbourhood development plans (NDP) to ‘catch up’ with the Local Plan, with a number of NDPs reaching pre-submission and submission such as Liss and Lavant. This progress will help to ensure that there are no policy ‘gaps’ in the development plan for the South Downs.
- 3.2 The timetable for the South Downs Local Plan has been altered by ten months. The next formal stage of the Local Plan will be the Pre-Submission consultation in September 2017. This will focus on matters of soundness rather than general issues. There will also be an informal round of consultation with the parishes on new allocations in November 2016. This is primarily for the settlements that were set a housing requirement in the Preferred Options Local Plan, but sites had not yet been identified to meet these requirements. All the revised policies will be presented to LPMWG and Planning Committee, and the composite Plan will be presented to NPA twice. At the second NPA in July 2017 it is hoped that the Local Plan will be approved for Pre-Submission consultation and submission for independent examination. The plan would finally be adopted by the NPA after being found sound by the inspector in 2018.
- 3.3 It has been a particularly busy period for the South Downs National Park and many communities in terms of **Neighbourhood Planning** with many reaching pre-submission stage and indeed submission and examination. Of particular note is the recent making of Clapham, meaning it now forms part of the development plan for that parish and will be used in the determination of planning applications. Not only do Officers work with communities entirely within the National Park but there is also now a need to input into many that straddle the National Park boundary. This includes large plans such as Steyning, Wiston, Ashurst and Bramber and smaller plans such as Hamsey and Plumpton. In the coming months we expect a large public consultation in Petworth and Liss will be considering the representations they have received on their pre-submission plan.

3.4 On 14 April, the SDNPA and WSCC published the **Draft West Sussex Joint Minerals Local Plan** (Regulation 18). The consultation will run from 14 April to 17 June. The draft Plan sets out four key areas: a vision and strategic objectives for future mineral development in West Sussex; 10 policies to achieve the strategic objectives for different mineral activities; 15 policies to ensure no unacceptable harm to the environment and communities of West Sussex; and two mineral site allocations (Ham Farm, Steyning and an extension to West Hoathly Brickworks) that will make an important contribution to meeting the need for minerals. A well attended public exhibition was held in Steyning on 23 May.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

4.1 The South Downs National Park was successfully designated as an **International Dark-Skies Reserve** in May 2016. It is the second in England and only the 11th in the world to be awarded this status. The International Dark Sky Association awarded the landscape as a 'Bronze Level' tier, with approximately 66% of the National Park having Bronze level skies, and 25% of the park within the main IDSR core. Over 25,000 sky quality measurements were taken to map the National Park and the South Coast and identify the boundary of the required and buffer zones. Approximately 2,700 street lights within the National Park were changed as part of wider county upgrades, all of which are now 'dark sky friendly' and compliant with the IDA requirements. With 13 societies, two observatories and three science centres in the area and with a prediction of around 200,000+ annual astro-tourists the dark skies of the South Downs serve as a valuable resource to the millions of inhabitants in the area that live in far more polluted skies.

4.2 The consortium of protected landscapes, government agencies, delivery partners and research bodies, led by the South Downs NPA, have continued to develop the **Big Chalk project**. The intention is for this to proceed as a bid for LIFE+ funding under the 'Integrated Project' strand, though other sources of potential funding are being actively considered. The primary focus is on groundwater and chalk river catchments as they are the key to these special landscapes.

4.3 Two major planning events and a training session were run during the period from January to April to further develop a strategy for the chalk landscapes of Southern England. This work has considered the wide land management issues affecting, or influenced by, groundwater and surface waters; such as sustainable arable farming practices and livestock management, the role of trees and woodlands, ecological connectivity, water resources, flood management and spatial planning. Discussions are underway about the potential to submit a bid for technical support during 2016/2017. The aim is to secure additional funding and resources to proceed towards submitting a full bid early in 2018. By activating the power of the protected landscape network, we can meet the challenge of working across a larger area with more people and a greater diversity of issues than has been attempted before. The aim is that the lessons learned from this new approach will be disseminated and widely adopted throughout all similar chalk landscapes in England and neighbouring European countries.

4.4 On 14 May we opened a new section of the **Egret's Way Shared Use Path** in East Sussex. This latest section of the riverside route runs between Southease and Deans Farm, just north of Piddinghoe. Improvements to the path at Ham Lane, Lewes were carried out as part of the same contract and all work was funded through the Department for Transport's Cycle Ambition fund. The Egret's Way is a community led scheme driven by the Egret's Way Project and this most recent phase is the third section to be completed. With planning permission for whole route already in place, it remains our ambition to see the path completed, connecting Lewes and Newhaven, improving access for local communities and visitors and increasing economic opportunities in the area. This is, of course, subject to the availability of funding and landowner support: something we will be exploring with potential partners in the coming months.

4.5 Following the completion in December of an extension to **Centurion Way Shared Use Path** to West Dean tunnel entrance, we are now preparing to go out to tender for the design and planning permission of further phases of the path. This work was approved by

P&P Committee and will be funded from the Authority's strategic fund. Making the scheme 'construction ready' in this way will enable us to bid for external resources to fund the build. A location for the connection of the existing route with West Dean village has now been agreed with the Estate and designs are being drawn up.

- 4.6 At the end of March, the Department for Transport released its first **Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS)** for consultation. The strategy sets out the Government's long term ambitions for walking and cycling in England to 2040. These include a desire to double the number of cycle journeys by 2025 and to reverse the decline in walking. Local Authorities are encouraged to produce their own plans to help achieve the Government's objectives and the Strategy sets out the various sources of revenue and capital funds that could be used for this work. Many have been disappointed in the detail of the strategy: there is strong focus on towns and cities, presumably because of the potential for interventions in these locations to benefit large numbers of people and very little new money is identified with much of the funding already committed to existing initiatives. We are concerned that the focus on cycling and walking in towns and cities and the proposal for infrastructure improvements to be funded through the LEPs and the Local Growth Fund, will result in a shortfall for funding schemes in National Parks. We have responded to the consultation in two ways: an SDNPA response and a joint National Parks England response. Copies of both are available from Member Services.
- 4.7 Our involvement in the **DfT's LSTF programme** has come to an end with the completion of the Two National Parks LSTF 15/16 extension year. The programme of 17 schemes was delivered within a final budget of £683,000 and a detailed project evaluation will be reported to Members at Governance Committee in July. The highlights of the programme included extensive public engagement which saw more than 1600 people take part in 63 events across the National Park ranging from Vintage Bus walks and Discovery Bike Rides to Rail Station engagement events and Cycle Ambassador Training. The LSTF fund was replaced in 2016 with a Sustainable Travel Transition Year fund running to March 2017, but the Two National Parks Partnership bid to this fund was unfortunately unsuccessful. This was due largely to the Government's requirement for programmes to make an impact on access to employment opportunities. A new Access Fund is to be announced in the summer. This will be the successor fund of LSTF and subject to bid criteria we hope to be able to participate in this fund.
- 4.8 Our **Share the Path campaign**, funded through LSTF, launched positively over Easter with 14 pieces of local/regional coverage with highlights including Andy Gattiker's interviews on ITV Meridian News, Express FM, The News (Portsmouth) and Petersfield Post. Following an FOI sent to the Daily Mail, the story took off and received widespread national coverage which ranged from criticism of the cost of a campaign designed to encourage users of the countryside to respect and welcome each other to a debate about whether there has been a decline in traditional standards of politeness. We engaged in all of these issues, always emphasising that the chief aim of the campaign was to encourage those who would not normally venture out into the countryside to explore the National Park on their doorstep. With careful management we were able to get across the message that the National Park is a wonderful resource, here for everyone and our goal is to enable people to understand and enjoy it responsibly. We estimate the campaign reached over 15 million people.
- 4.9 Our **Have an Adventure in the South Downs Campaign** proved very popular and we estimate to have reached nearly 4 million people through advertising at rail stations, social media and print coverage (including the high-visibility wrapping of the Brighton & Hove Independent).

5. Volunteers and Delivery

- 5.1 Since my last report members of the **Volunteer Ranger Service** have carried out 250 practical, promotional and training tasks with 1433 days of volunteer support overall. With scrub clearance stopping on most sites because of bird nesting etc., the range of tasks carried out by the practical groups changes significantly from March/ April onwards, with access and site management becoming much more important, along with surveying of

wildlife. Work supporting the water vole re-introductions on the River Meon has continued.

- 5.2 A range of access work has included the construction of several bridges and installation of steps on a number of sites. The mild winter meant that clearance of footpaths started earlier than normal and volunteers have been working on paths, including parts of the South Downs Way, since mid-March.
- 5.3 In May, SDNPA attended the SPARK Awards in Eastbourne as co-sponsors, with High Weald AONB, of the Awards for Environmental Achievement. SPARK is an organisation set up to support, connect and celebrate groups and organisations that work directly with children and young people, many as volunteers.
- 5.4 The first Volunteer Rangers to go through the John Muir award spent two days on this in the Western Downs and an Introductory Training Day for Volunteer Rangers at the South Downs Centre was attended by 21 new volunteers. Two volunteers from a group in Lavant joined one of three First Aid courses we held. So that their group can help to look after the Centurion Way.

6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 Our **new structure** came into effect on 1 June. We have created a fully integrated policy and delivery Directorate. We have strengthened our delivery capabilities, created lead rangers and increased the number of apprentices and assistant rangers. We have introduced a new income generation team and – more important than this – the whole organisation is adopting a more commercial approach. We have rationalised management and introduced an Operational Management Team that will take on much more delegated authority. We have undertaken an independent pay and grading review and rationalised key procedures that were too burdensome. This has all laid the basis for greater cross team working and renewed our focus on the needs of the landscape and its communities.
- 6.2 These achievements have delivered against the general principles that were presented to Members at the 1 December workshop. There is much still to do but the objectives we set ourselves then have been met. In addition we have a much stronger remit from Government than we could have hoped for back in December and more scope to invest in new projects and programmes.
- 6.3 On 17 May a workshop, hosted by SDNPA and The Management Centre, was held for English NPAs to discuss **income generation and shared services**. English NPA Directors of Corporate Services (or similar) and those responsible or with an interest in fundraising were invited to this session to **explore** opportunities for sharing learning and working together in the future. NPUK, NPE and NPP were also represented. The day was well attended with each English NPA represented.
- 6.4 Following the session, excellent feedback has been received from delegates and a summary of the discussion and proposed next steps is to be presented by Helene to the NPUK AGM on the 9 June.
- 6.5 On 13 April we hosted the fourth annual **Our South Downs Teachers Conference** at Ditcham Park School, Hampshire. This was the most well attended conference to date with over 140 delegates, 50 market place stand holders showcasing their outdoor learning provision and 21 practical workshops delivered by outdoor learning providers for delegates to choose from. Feedback was extremely positive with 97% of delegates saying the conference was very or extremely useful and 100% saying it was very or extremely enjoyable. This was the first year that we charged for the conference which has provided useful experience for future years.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 Since the last report, the events season has swung into top gear and we have attended a total of 16 events to date.
- 7.2 We have achieved wide media coverage for the organisation and the National Park over the past three months. Proactive **media highlights** include working with Defra to launch the

National Parks Plan with BBC Breakfast (national) and BBC South today covering the story from the SDNP and widespread national print coverage including a quote from Margaret Paren. We also announced that the South Downs National Park had received International Dark Sky Reserve status and achieved coverage on ITV Meridian, BBC South Today, BBC Sussex, The Telegraph online and Guardian online. Our tweet to Brian Cox regarding dark night skies gained 94 retweets and 286 likes – making it one of our most popular ever.

- 7.3 Our reactive media work includes turning around the story of recorded swift song annoying local residents to a positive piece about our wider work on BBC Radio 4's PM programme. We also responded to questions by Mail on Sunday, Guardian, the Telegraph and the Times regarding our Share the Path campaign – briefing journalists about the wider aims of the campaign. We have worked closely with colleagues in Planning, Environment Agency and Forestry Commission to respond to questions about the unlicensed felling and importation of waste at Pondtail Wood in West Sussex, achieving balanced coverage.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 24 March 2016 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or which they would like to debate further at the Meeting.

TREVOR BEATTIE **Chief Executive Officer**

South Downs National Park Authority

Contact Officer:	Trevor Beattie
Tel:	01730 819313
email:	trevor.beattie@southdowns.gov.uk
Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Director of Countryside Policy & Management, Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer, Legal Services & Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None