

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	31 January 2017
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 29 November 2016 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Since my last report the **Environmental Audit Committee** has published the results of its inquiry into the implications of Brexit. Its principal recommendations are twofold. The first is for a UK Environment Protection Act to ensure that UK regulation after we leave the EU is as at least as strong, or stronger, than that afforded by the Habitats Directive and other key European legislation. The second highlights the need for clarity about the sort of land management payments scheme which could replace the CAP. This important report will inform our work on Brexit (to be covered later on today's agenda) and I hope it will also be given serious consideration as government refines its own plans.
- 2.2 Defra is expected to produce two Green Papers shortly – one a 25 year strategy on the environment and the other on the future of food & farming. So that the Authority is ready to respond quickly, the **NPE Future of Farming Group** is developing a narrative on the importance of National Park landscapes and the opportunity for NPAs to play more of a role in local co-ordination and, potentially, delivery. A dossier of case studies of NPAs working strategically with farmers is being prepared to which we have contributed four examples which are, Brighton CHAMP, South Downs National Park Forestry and Woodland Partnership, South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area and our programme of farm clusters.
- 2.3 Meantime, the European Exit Working Group has met twice and will be covered later on today's agenda. This later agenda item is the right place for issues relating to Brexit to be discussed, not my own report, but I refer to them here to provide some context to the NPA's subsequent deliberations. In addition to the Working Group, discussions have also taken place with both Natural England and the NFU/CLA about possible future scenarios for farm support and advice, building on the six farm clusters which now cover about two-thirds of the National Park. There will be a session on the implications of Brexit at the three Farmers' Breakfasts we are running in late January/early February, and we are planning a couple of low key events with farmers in late Spring/early summer which can explore these issues in more depth. These will be supported by Natural England.
- 2.4 Our successful farm clusters provide a readymade framework for working with farmers to identify how the recommendations of the Environmental Audit Committee and the opportunities described in the Prime Ministers Brexit speech of 17 January can be exploited to ensure a better return for farmers, for nature and for the public good. The National Park Authority is in a good position to help pilot innovative new land management funding and

techniques. We have registered our ability to do this with Defra and other key partners in government and await developments with interest.

3. **Planning**

- 3.1 Currently there is considerable local political pressure to bring the northern routes for the A27 around Chichester back onto the agenda through a new consultation, although it is difficult to see how Highways England can do this as their remit was purely to look at on-line options. We continue to keep a watchful eye on what happens next and have all of our evidence ready should the schemes be brought forward in a new consultation. The decision on the East of Lewes options which members discussed with HE on site on 17 November is likely to be taken in the spring. Regarding Arundel and Worthing there will be a meeting of key stakeholders in February, when we should be given further information on likely timelines for public consultation.
- 3.2 **TAG Farnborough** received our consultation response and have made their resulting comments available in an on-line report. Following publication of this report, Farnborough Airport submitted the proposed revision to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and requested that they restart the Airspace Change Proposal (ACP) decision process paused on 30 October 2015 with immediate effect. There are winners and losers within the National Park for these proposals with some communities expected to experience increased overflying and others finding it will reduce. We are not certain when any decision is expected as the original dates have been paused whilst this additional round of consultation has taken place.
- 3.3 With the support of a grant from the Department for Communities and Local Government, officers have been preparing a Business Plan to underpin the establishment of a trading element for the **neighbourhood planning work** of the SDNPA. This uses the existing team to provide a planning consultancy service which supports local communities (outside of the National Park) and Local Planning Authorities to deliver Neighbourhood Plans. We are pleased to say we have been awarded our first two pieces of work, one from a Parish Council and one from a District Council. These small steps into the commercial world will be used as a test bed to better understand what might be involved and to establish our name in the market. Officers will now be using soft marketing techniques to attract potential custom over 2017 with a particular focus on rural planning and protected landscapes.
- 3.4 **Local Plan workshops** for all the town and parish councils took place in mid-November in each of the three counties. City/district/borough councillors who represent wards located in the National Park were also invited to the workshops and record numbers of councillors attended. The purpose of the workshops was to share emerging Local Plan allocations and designations outside designated neighbourhood planning areas. The draft allocations and designations are still work in progress and do not constitute a definitive list of sites that will be allocated in the Pre-Submission plan. The consultation materials for the parish workshops were presented to Members at the Local Plan Member Working Group (LPMWG) meeting in October and Member site visits took place in November and December.
- 3.5 The draft allocations are supported by a raft of evidence based studies. A number of these documents were published on our website in December including a study on ecosystem services and our revised **Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA)**. The SHLAA assessed all the potential housing sites that have been submitted to the NPA for consideration and made recommendations with regard to their availability, suitability and deliverability for housing. It is important to note that the SHLAA is simply evidence and does not make decisions about what will be allocated for housing in the Local Plan. The identification of a site as having potential for housing in a SHLAA is very different to allocating a site for housing in the Local Plan.
- 3.6 Work is underway on the remaining policies of the Local Plan. These are predominantly linked to the socio-economic duty of the National Park, for example, housing, employment and town centres. These will be presented to the LPMWG and the Planning Committee between January and March 2017. Work will continue on the draft allocations. Comments from the town and parish councils will be analysed and statutory bodies consulted to ensure

that there are no insurmountable barriers to development. The draft composite plan is scheduled to be presented to the LPMWG and the Planning Committee in April and June respectively. It will be considered by an Authority workshop in June and Members will be asked to approve the draft plan at the Authority AGM in July for Regulation 19 consultation in September 2017. Further details can be found in December's Local Plan newsletter. This has been an important source of regular information for parishes and other partners and will in future form part of our wider monthly e-newsletter.

- 3.7 In terms of **Planning Performance**, the third quarter's figures (October to December) show that of the 601 cases across the Authority 90% were dealt with within statutory timescales (1% lower than in the first quarter and 4% lower than in the second quarter). All 'major', 'minor' and 'other' category targets were met. Of the 601 applications 71 were dealt with by the SDNPA Team (23 less than in the second quarter).
- 3.8 The number of major applications being dealt with by the SDNPA Team has risen 29% from 21 applications in the first three quarters for 2015/16 to 27 applications in the first three quarters of 2016/17.
- 3.9 There has been mixed success with regard to two areas of work which were highlighted in my previous report. Firstly the noticeable improvement in swift validation of applications has been maintained with 71% having been validated in within 5 days in the third quarter. The Park Support Team has shown the most significant improvement at 82% for the main statutory case work.
- 3.10 Performance in relation to appeal outcomes continues to require close attention, remaining static at 43% of appeals having been allowed (43% in the second quarter).

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The **Heathlands Reunited Project** is now six months in and so far 26 hectares of mixed scrub and 6 hectares of rhododendron have been cleared to create more heathland. There has been half a kilometre of rhododendron clearance in the Severalls to help connect Midhurst Common to Stedham Common.
- 4.2 The Project has more physical works to be carried out this winter and is about to start a wide range of workshops and training activities for managers and volunteers including: 'Preparing fire plans for heathland sites'; 'Fixed Point photography' and 'Woodland management on heaths'. We are also preparing a range of public events and activities. On 17 July we will be walking the 'Serpent Trail' over 6 consecutive days. Those taking part can walk the whole route or come for just one day. The walkers will meet the heathland managers of the sites we go through, as well as some of the historic characters who have influenced the development of the heathland. Any Members who might be interested would be very welcome to join all or part of the walk.
- 4.3 Members will be aware from previous meetings of a number of proposals for the disposal of local authority countryside sites. These pose serious challenges for the SDNPA. Whilst local authorities must be free to dispose of their assets as they see fit, these countryside sites in the National Park are not just local assets, they are national legacies. We will therefore continue to make our concerns clear and to press for a re-think. Where there really is no alternative we will urge councils to put in place covenants and conditions to protect the land from damaging uses which might not be caught by the planning system.
- 4.4 **Eastbourne Borough Council – proposed sale of 5 let farms.** The Council are still in the process of checking water responsibilities, which have proved very complex. They have not yet served pre-emption notices to the Davies-Gilbert and Duke of Edinburgh Estates. There has now been considerable press coverage of the proposed sale at a local and national level and a campaign to 'Keep our Downs Public'.
- 4.5 **Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC)– sale of downland plots.** In July 2014 BHCC approved three sites for disposal at Poynings, Plumpton Hill and part of Devil's Dyke Farm. In July 2016 two further sites at Poynings and part of Park Wall Farm were also identified for disposal. Two of the plots of land have now been sold and other disposals of buildings are to be managed by BHCC. The SDNPA asked that the sensitive downland sites

of the scarp site opposite Plumpton College and the first of the Poynings sites be reviewed by BHCC and following a well organised public campaign the Council put the sales on hold and agreed to review them, arguing that half of the proceeds (some £180k) were necessary to complete their package of match funding for the £5.8m Stanmer Park HLF project. A BHCC committee meeting on 19 January extended the period of review, calling for more information on the land sales and asking officers to explore alternative revenue raising options. The sales will now be discussed by an urgent policy panel before coming back for a final decision. This will give us more time to explore the options with BHCC.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 Since my last report members of the **Volunteer Ranger Service** have carried out 170 practical, promotional and training tasks involving 929 days of volunteer support overall.
- 5.2 Chalk grassland and heathland scrub clearance as always forms the biggest area of work for the outdoor practical groups at this time of the year, occupying 72 task days. While most of these were primarily habitat improvement, several days were spent clearing scrub to protect archaeological features, including a section of Roman road crossing Iping Common.
- 5.3 Coppicing was undertaken on twelve different sites for five different organisations across the National Park during November and December. Two sites are managed by local groups affiliated to the VRS.
- 5.4 The water vole reintroduction work continues, with monitoring of mink rafts and surveying for water voles by a small group of Volunteer Rangers.
- 5.5 In the run up to Christmas, most of the outdoor groups got together for a more social day, often with a task in the morning followed by lunch provided by Area teams in thanks for the invaluable help they have provided over the year. I'd like to use this report to second that thanks on behalf of the whole Authority.

6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 On 3 January our first **enewsletter** was sent out. This monthly enewsletter will go out at the start of each month to all staff, Members, volunteers and to a much wider audience including parishes, the South Downs Partnership, the Land Managers Group, and councillors of the 15 local authorities. The enewsletter replaces the key highlights document and is now one of our primary means of communicating with our key audiences. We will continue to work to increase the audience and encourage people to sign up.
- 6.2 News of the change to an enewsletter was shared with staff and Members through Update on 9 and 16 December. I would like to remind Members that a great deal of information about our work is communicated through the weekly Update which is sent to your National Park email address on a Friday afternoon. If you would like it also to be sent to your personal email address please email update@southdowns.gov.uk and let the Comms team know, but please do read the weekly Update as it ensures all of the key information Members and staff need to be aware of is sent out in one communication rather than in many separate emails.

7. **Media and Communications**

- 7.1 Our first **Dark Night Skies festival** will run from 10–26 February. We are planning events at 20 locations across the National Park including the Winchester Science Centre, Harting Down, Clanfield Observatory, Slindon College and Estate, Stanmer Park and Eastbourne. Our own key event, Stargazing South Downs, will take place on Saturday 18 February at Midhurst Rother College. This will be an evening of family astronomy activities indoors and outdoors including stargazing, an indoor planetarium show, elements from the Tim Peake exhibition at the Novium, and much more. We are also running school sessions, with six schools signing up on the first day. As part of the festival we are creating a pocket guide to stargazing in the South Downs. There has been a great deal of media interest. Dan Oakley has already taken a journalist from the Telegraph out stargazing and the piece will appear in the next few weeks. Countryfile are also covering the festival.
- 7.2 We are launching our new **Take the Lead campaign** on 1 March. The campaign will

include an edit of the original animated film to include heathland issues a new viral campaign featuring real dogs and the creation of ambassadors. The campaign will be rolled out by the 10 other partners involved in the Heathlands Reunited project including the National Trust, RSPB and Sussex Wildlife Trust. While the campaign will feature heathland issues such as grazing cattle and ground nesting birds, we will ensure that it can be used across the National Park.

- 7.3 There has been strong media coverage of the National Park over the last two months. The Argus has, for instance, featured a series of positive stories over recent weeks, including the award of HLF grant for Stanmer Park and a double page spread on the results of our photographic competition. It also published my call for local authorities to rethink plans to sell-off parts of their downland estates. They covered the planning committee's decision on Stanmer Park in a well-balanced piece proving that the journalist had made good use of our webcasting facilities.
- 7.4 Andrew Lee was interviewed by BBC South Today ahead of a meeting with the local community about the South Pond in Midhurst. The result was a balanced piece acknowledging that, despite best intentions, mistakes had been made with planting and the Authority will work with the community to fix this to create a pond that works for both people and wildlife.
- 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 29 November 2016 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or which they would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Strategy & Partnerships; Director of Planning; Director of Corporate Services; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None

