

Agenda Item 9
Report 06/17

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| Report to | South Downs National Park Authority |
| Date | 30 March 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 31 January 2017 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 At the time of writing there is still no sign of Defra producing the **25 Year Plan for the Environment** or the Food and Farming Plan. I am becoming increasingly doubtful that they will appear any time soon since the launch of Article 50 and then the purdah period for the May elections will occupy much of the Government timetable over the coming months. This is a shame since Government as a whole would benefit from a statement of environmental priorities as we enter the Article 50 process, as well as the opportunity to take a strategic view before the negotiations begin to dominate.
- 2.2 The **budget papers** are being finalised, with changes being made to reflect the improving financial position. SDNPA has requested an opt-in to be one of the Authorities participating in the increased planning fee charging and delivering extra resources to Development Management. This is expected to result in an increase in turnover of £140k in 2017/18.
- 2.3 Following a competitive process, two consultants were appointed to manage and develop the **Shared Services Programme** across all 15 UK National Park Authorities. The Shared Services Programme Board were keen that the selected consultants had genuine National Park knowledge and experience and therefore were pleased to appoint Helene Rossiter, previously of South Downs NPA and Joanna Swiers, previously of North York Moors NPA, to the joint role. They are currently communicating with five category groups, made up of NPA staff covering Finance, HR, ICT, Legal and Procurement.
- 2.4 Members will recall that the **Natural Capital Committee** is an independent body set up in 2012 to advise the Government on how to value nature and ensure England's 'natural wealth' is managed efficiently and sustainably. Its first three reports on the 'State of Natural Capital' have called on the Office for National Statistics to integrate the state of the country's natural assets into mainstream national accounting.
- 2.5 The **Committee's fourth report**, which was published at the end of January, has recognised the significance of National Parks. It contains the following recommendation: "England's National Parks contain very significant natural capital, and their powers and duties should be extended to support the objectives of the 25 Year Environment Plan.

Where practical, each National Park should quantify and value the main natural capital assets in its area, using the accounting framework recommended by the Committee in its first term. Valuation should play a key part in the assessment of natural capital investment options. Consideration should be given to the creation of new National Parks.”

- 2.6 The report contains a number of other recommendations that, if accepted, could have implications for National Parks such as the creation of a new National Infrastructure Commission, the inclusion of natural capital catchment approaches in OFWAT’s 2019 Periodic Review and a proposal that the 25 year Plan for the Environment should consider the creation of new wildlife areas and corridors, committing Government to the recommendations of the 2010 Lawton report.
- 2.7 In my opinion the most significant of these is the proposal that the Treasury Green Book should be revised to incorporate Natural Capital assessments. Members will be aware that this document governs all public investment proposals and acceptance of this recommendation by Treasury could have a major impact across Government.
- 2.8 National Parks are not, of course, new to these concepts. A number have already piloted Ecosystem Accounts and all have undertaken Ecosystem Mapping. Here in the South Downs the concept is written into our draft Local Plan and we are preparing to base the next Partnership Management Plan and Corporate Plan on a Natural Capital account.
- 2.9 At the launch of the fourth report Dieter Helm, its Chair, said “if you can’t do natural capital in National Parks then we might as well all go home”. It is clear that his Committee has been much influenced by his meeting with NPOs last May. His challenge now is to persuade Defra and the Treasury to support the recommendations.

3. **Planning**

- 3.1 Work on the production of several **Whole Estate Plans (WEPs)** has been gaining momentum, with at least one Estate likely to have a Plan ready for P&P Committee to consider for endorsement in July, with others ready for consideration later in the year. In order to prepare for this there will be a Member Workshop on 16 May to brief Members on WEPs, their background and application in the Park and how we will be determining whether a Plan will be suitable for endorsement.

4. **Progress of Existing Projects**

- 4.1 On 6 March we received the welcome news that Eastbourne Borough Council (EBC) had decided to **call off the sale of its downland farms** following a clear public vote against. It was extremely important that the sales were prevented. This is not because the SDNPA thinks that such land should always be in public ownership. Precious landscapes and fragile habitats are often well protected across the National Park regardless of who owns them but this is a special case because:
 - It respects the objectives of the original council purchase in 1929;
 - It protects fragile habitats in this particularly sensitive location from the impacts of inappropriate agricultural activities that would be classed as permitted development and be beyond the planning control of the National Park Authority;
 - It supports the existing tenant farmers; and
 - It sends a clear message that the SDNPA will be a staunch defender of our landscape.
- 4.2 There is another compelling National Park wide reason for welcoming this outcome. The decision not to sell has called into question the basis for the current sharp increases in the “hope value” of agricultural land. This represents the potential added value from a change of use or a shift to more intensive agriculture. Hope value is rising for agricultural land in all ownerships across the National Park - generating unrealistic expectations of the possibility of development which in practice would run counter to National Park Purposes.
- 4.3 I have written to Rob Cottrill, the Chief Executive of Eastbourne and Lewes, to offer that

the Authority could work with the Council and the existing tenant farmers to increase the economic potential of the farms through more proactive and sustainable management. I have also offered to join with EBC to call together a partnership of the main farming, environmental and business interests to create a shared plan for a sustainable future for the entire downland estate. I will report back to the meeting on any response I receive.

- 4.4 This is an exciting opportunity to create a world class gateway into the Eastern end of the National Park as part of a new vision for all of the downland to the east of Newhaven. This would support the objectives of our established Heritage Cost Partnership with an integrated visitor and access offer for Beachy Head, Birling Gap, Seven Sisters and the surrounding access land and rights of way.
- 4.5 Works are underway to construct the new stepped access from the **Centurion Way** path to Motor Road at West Dean. The steps, which incorporate a ramp enabling cycles to be wheeled to and from the path, should be completed and open to the public later this month providing connectivity to the village amenities, West Dean College and local attractions. Survey and feasibility work is also underway for the next stage of the Centurion Way – the 6 km section from West Dean to the South Downs Way.
- 4.6 We recently received confirmation that the **Coast to Capital LEP (C2C)** has awarded SDNPA £75k to support this work. This is in addition to the funding Members approved last year and will enable us to carry out all the necessary preparatory work prior to submission of a planning application. We have also indicated to C2C our intention to bid for capital funding towards the construction costs once planning permission has been granted.
- 4.7 Since becoming the world's newest **International Dark Sky Reserve** in May 2016 the SDNPA has continued to deliver the requirements set by the International Dark Sky Association and has attracted considerable media attention. In addition to developing a strategy and action plan for dark skies in general, technical planning guidance is being produced to aid partners, developers and planners in responding to lighting issues. In the meantime, the SDNPA continues to advise on lighting issues across the National Park and to raise the profile of dark skies with partners.
- 4.8 To celebrate the designation of the South Downs as an International Dark Skies Reserve we ran the first **South Downs Dark Skies Festival** from 10 to the 26 February. There was a great response and 18 partners were involved with 26 events being held at 21 different locations. The activities included indoor comet making sessions for children, talks and presentations, planetarium shows, night hikes and stargazing evenings. We ran the main 'Stargazing South Downs' in Midhurst involving several partners and a mix of indoor and outdoor activities. A total of around 1800 people were directly engaged throughout the festival and on the middle Saturday a wonderful clear night meant that the four events taking place that night attracted around 750 budding astronomers, with 250 of these attending our own 'Stargazing South Downs' event.
- 4.9 We also supported local communities with outreach activities, particularly with Buriton who in conjunction with the SDNPA are developing their own International Dark Sky Community application. The designation will be used to develop a toolkit to encourage other communities to take greater ownership in the protection of their local skies.
- 4.10 The **South Downs Alphabet project** is funded by the SDNPA and the Heritage Lottery Fund and uses Eleanor Farjeon's book, *A Sussex Alphabet*, as a lens through which to view the modern day National Park. The project has been extremely successful in engaging young people and members of the University of the Third Age and has received considerable media interest. It is now reaching its conclusion with two book launch events scheduled: Tuesday 21 March 2-4pm at the South Downs Centre and Thursday 30 March 2-4pm at Deans Place Hotel, Alfriston.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 Since my last report members of the **Volunteer Ranger Service** have carried out 166

practical, promotional and training tasks with 894 days of volunteer support overall.

- 5.2 In February, the Committee of Representatives for the VRS held what is likely to be its last meeting in its current form (subject to final ratification at the VRS AGM on March 25th). From April, a new, smaller, structure, developed by a working group of Volunteer Rangers in consultation with the VRS membership will seek to work more actively with SDNPA officers in developing and supporting projects involving volunteers.
- 5.3 VRS affiliated volunteer groups at Lodge Copse in Barlavington and Church Copse, Clapham continued their season of weekly coppicing days. SDNPA Rangers and partners led another eleven days of coppicing on six other sites across the National Park during January and February.
- 5.4 Stakes and binders cut from two coppice sites were used during a week of hedgelaying in the Eastern Downs during February. Across the National Park as a whole, Volunteer Rangers from four of the five VRS bases joined in on 17 task days in all laying hedges on three different sites.
- 5.5 Hedgelaying projects gave many volunteers a change from the major scrub clearance effort always needed at this time of year, although there were still 74 task days spent clearing scrub on chalk grassland and heathland over two months on 30 different sites, with eight different organisations including National Trust, Natural England, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Lewes District Council, Eastbourne Borough Council and Pyecombe Golf Course.
- 5.6 We are gradually expanding the range of opportunities for volunteers to help out in SDNPA offices. For instance, one of the outdoor Volunteer Rangers, has temporarily become office based, helping the South Downs Way team to update information on the National Trail following the regular survey work by voluntary South Downs Way Wardens.

6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 Plans are progressing for the **UK National Parks Conference**, which we will be hosting on 25–27 October. We are pulling together a wide programme which will include tours highlighting different aspects of our conference theme, 'National Parks for the Future'. The first night will see a relaxed evening at the new visitor buildings at the Weald & Downland Museum featuring stargazing, while the second will see a formal drinks reception and dinner at Goodwood House, which Lord Gardiner will address. This will feature a 'Great South Downs Menu' promoting South Downs food and drink. The event will conclude on the morning of the third day with presentations and a panel discussion. An international element will be provided by the inclusion of Frank Dean, CEO of the Yosemite Conservancy, who has not only led more than one US National Park, but who is now a leading figure in raising charitable income to secure their future. Members are aware that each National Park, including the host, has just four places at the conference and dinner but we are identifying opportunities for the wider body of Members and staff to be involved in individual elements of the programme.
- 6.2 Our **Landowner Conference on affordable housing** held on 3 February was a great success with 112 attendees covering a wide range of site owners, affordable housing providers, constructors and specialists. We undertook to hold another conference in just over a year to report progress and to look in particular at design issues. We are interested in the possibility of using local materials to create high quality standard designs that respect the vernacular, are sustainable and reduce construction costs.
- 6.3 I was able to tell the conference that we are working under the guidance of a Member Working Group to establish an affordable housing enabling service for landowners interested in contributing sites. This will put together specialist housing providers such as Hastoe and Hampshire Village Homes with our own planning and design expertise and, where possible, a little enabling support from Section 106.
- 6.4 In a packed South Downs Centre on Monday 20 February, the Lord Lieutenant presented

former Member **David Burden** with the British Empire Medal. In addition to playing a role in the establishment of the National Park Authority, David also has a record of more than 50 years of charitable work supporting local farmers and communities. Members will know that, despite stepping down as a Member, David retains an active and supportive interest in the National Park and I would like to offer him the congratulations of the whole Authority.

- 6.5 For the last four years the South Downs National Park Authority has hosted a **Teacher's Conference** aimed at connecting schools in and around the National Park with opportunities for learning outside the classroom. With over 840 schools and nearly 500,000 young people within 10km of the boundary and some 250 outdoor learning providers across the National Park, the South Downs presents a remarkable opportunity for quality learning outside the classroom. The conference has proved extremely popular with over 140 delegates attending each year and over 50 outdoor learning providers. This year's conference will take place on Thursday 29 March 2017 at Plumpton College and will focus on the Health and Wellbeing benefits of learning outside the classroom.
- 6.6 In February we heard that we had been successful in securing a grant for our Stargazing event, from the **Tesco "Bags of Help" Scheme**. The size of the grant depended upon a ballot which took place in January across 14 stores in West Sussex, with the public choosing one of three charities to support. We came a robust second, resulting in a grant of £2,000. This is an encouraging result for the planned charitable trust which features later on today's agenda.
- 6.7 **National Parks Partnerships Limited**, the limited liability partnership established by the 15 UK National Parks to create links with business at the UK level, have been finalising their first national partnership with Columbia Sportswear. Columbia are one of the USA's largest producers of outdoor wear who are gaining increasing recognition within the UK. The partnership will recognise Columbia as the "Official Apparel and Footwear partner for the UK's National Parks", providing each NPA with a supply of free, high quality clothing for Rangers, Members and Staff. There will also be a number of additional benefits including volunteer uniforms at a significantly reduced cost and favourable rates on future merchandise. The partnership is due to be launched in May and we anticipate that the new uniforms will arrive in the Autumn.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 We have been making a real impact in raising the profile of the National Park. **England's Mountains Green**, the South Downs Documentary, was aired on BBC 4 on 21 February. The first viewing attracted over 660,000 viewers, with many more tuning in to the repeats and catching up online. A DVD is now available with 10% of the proceeds going towards the South Downs Way. We will be working with Big Wave, the natural history filmmakers who created the documentary, to build on this interest to create some short films based on key species within our main habitats, which will be used as learning resources with the heathlands reunited project and our wider South Downs Curriculum.
- 7.2 On Sunday 5 March, after much persistence by the Comms Team, **BBC Countryfile** centred on the South Downs National Park and were not shy about saying so. Matt Baker opened with a description of our 'endless patchwork views' and a 'rhapsody of rich greens'. Our Dark Skies Reserve status was a real draw and they spoke to Dan Oakley to highlight the importance of conserving dark skies in the busiest part of the UK for both people and wildlife. The piece allowed us to highlight our work to change lighting within the National Park. They spoke to Andy Gattiker about the National Trail and also covered Charleston House, swifts in Lewes and the long history of sheep farming. The programme should be available on BBC iplayer until 4 April.

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 31 January 2017 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.

TREVOR BEATTIE
Chief Executive Officer

South Downs National Park Authority

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| Contact Officer: | Trevor Beattie |
| Tel: | 01730 819313 |
| email: | trevor.beattie@southdowns.gov.uk |
| 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 | N/A |