

Agenda Item 10
Report 22/17

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	19 Dec 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 19 October 2017 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The period since my last report has been one of intense activity for the Authority. We have successfully delivered the National Parks UK Conference, carried out the final consultation on the Local Plan, hosted a Ministerial tour and several other important visitors, launched our first public fundraising appeal, responded to the Worthing A27 consultation and relocated an area office – all without any slackening in the pace of our more routine workload. There have also been a number of welcome developments from central government that will help to shape our policy work, particularly the ongoing exercise to review our Partnership Management Plan.
- 2.2 In early November we heard that Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for the Environment, has decided that the UK will back a total European ban on neonicotinoids (the highly toxic insect-harming pesticides). The European Commission has been seeking a total ban on their use outside greenhouses for some time but the UK has hitherto been reluctant to support this. A vote is expected this month and the reversal of the government's previous position means it is very likely to pass. The change of heart is fully justified by recent studies, including those on the edge of Brighton led by Prof Dave Goulson, showing neonicotinoids contaminate the whole landscape and cause widespread and lasting damage to bees. Neonicotinoids are, of course, only one part of the problem and the Sussex study showed that 22 different chemicals were used on a single field in the course of one year, but they are a very good place to start.
- 2.3 This announcement from the Secretary of State was swiftly followed by his pledge to launch a consultation on establishing "a new, world-leading body to give the environment a voice and hold the powerful to account, independent of government and able to speak its mind freely". The new body will be on a "statutory footing" and its ambition will be to "champion and uphold environmental standards always rooted in rigorous scientific guidance." We will watch out for this consultation, which may or may not form part of the wider consultation on the 25 year plan.
- 2.4 At the end of November, the Government published its Industrial Strategy. Its theme is the need to tackle the UK's productivity problem and it proposes directing economic activity towards the four "grand challenges" of an ageing society, the transition to a low carbon economy, mobility, and AI and the data economy. It was encouraging to note the prominence given to the move to low carbon and the inclusion of agriculture as a key

sector. The White Paper focuses on technology in food and farming as a means of making it more efficient and productive, talking about transforming the sector 'from farm to fork'.

3. Planning

- 3.1 The new **Section 101 agreements** with our 5 host authorities (based on the pay per application model) came into force on 1 October and are generally working well. The host authorities are responsible for approximately 85% of all planning decisions made across the National Park.
- 3.2 In terms of planning performance, speed of decision making remains good with 89% of applications in quarter 2 being dealt with within statutory timescales. All government targets in this respect have been met. As discussed at the last meeting of the P&R Committee, there is concern at the speed at which planning applications are being validated by three of our host authorities and actions to improve this performance are well underway.
- 3.3 On Thursday 23rd November Tim Slaney and Michael Scammell attended the **RTPI South East Awards** at Brighton Pavilion following our submission in June of the proactive planning work on the Depot cinema in Lewes. It was gratifying that SDNPA and BFF Architects ended the evening as double winners collecting the 1st prize for the category of Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Overall Regional winners. This is a fantastic award for the project and the Authority that acknowledges the hard work to improve the original proposal and justifies the decision to focus on high design values.
- 3.4 The Depot is a new community cinema on the site of part of the old Harvey's Brewery depot which opened on 25 May 2017. It was previously a vacant site located in a prominent location within the Lewes Conservation Area surrounded by numerous listed buildings. Sue Percy, Chair of the judges panel, stated; "Through good planning practice and early community engagement the development was not only shaped by, but helped build, public support for the project resulting in an amazing community facility that locals and visitors will use, experience and be proud of for many years to come".
- 3.5 At the end of last month I attended a celebration of the first six months of the cinema which brought together the CEOs of the main cultural heritage organisations in Sussex and I was asked to join the East Sussex Cultural Heritage Board. The project is now being entered into the RTPI National Awards.
- 3.6 The **Planning Committee** had its third **Away Day Workshop** at the end of November. This event is always well attended and is a chance for officers and members to discuss matters arising from the Planning Committee in informal and frank open session. Feedback has been positive from all those involved and it was pleasing that a number of officers who may not always go to a Planning Committee were able to engage with the Committee and present some of the good work they do.
- 3.7 The **Design Review Panel** also attended which was well received and helped to build mutual understanding. It was noted how much time and effort the Panel put into advising on significant planning applications and how lucky we are to have such skilled people working with us in a voluntary capacity.
- 3.8 Amongst matters discussed by members at the workshop were the need to take a proportional approach to development management having regard to national park status; the importance of Whole Estate Plans, not just as documents in themselves but as a representation of the contacts that are made with landowners within the National Park; Committee procedures and continuing to improve them so the public understand at all times what is going on; how officers can ensure clarity in the committee's recommendations; and the need for an annual members planning tour to examine how decisions actually impact upon the landscape. Together with our customer survey, which is live as I write, I am confident that we are devoting close and proper scrutiny to how our service is perceived and to the areas where we can improve.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The **Heathlands Reunited Project** entered its second year on 1 June 2017. The

project continues to work towards its vision of bigger, better, joined-up heathland that people care about and use responsibly and sustainably.

4.2 During the first winter habitat management programme, in partnership with its 11 partner organisations, the Heathlands Reunited Project achieved the following:

- 30 football pitches worth of scrub cleared
- 5 football pitches worth of secondary woodland cleared
- 10 football pitches worth of rhododendron cleared
- 5 football pitches worth of bare ground created
- 3 km of heathland corridor created.

4.3 In 2017 the project carried out 8 public events and 9 training events for partners and volunteers. It has attracted 40 new volunteers to date and has just launched the Dog Ambassadors and Cultural Heritage volunteering streams. 3 Dog Ambassadors have signed up so far, each hoping to spread the word about responsible dog walking in their local patch. The scheme has been welcomed by site managers and has also gained recognition further afield, e.g. sharing ideas and best practice with the Thames Basin Heaths project and at a recent Dog Conference in the New Forest.

4.4 The Take the Lead on the Heath campaign has also been well received by partners and other organisations which are grappling with the same dog related issues. Over half a million people have been reached through the social media campaign and two other National Parks have begun to use it. The campaign was used as an example of good practice by the Parliamentary Working Group.

4.5 Following Bruce Middleton's decision to step down from the post of Heathlands Reunited Project Manager, Colin Carré has accepted the role. Colin was originally interviewed for the post, and has already been working closely with the project team.

4.6 Bruce will be sadly missed, particularly in respect of his expertise and enthusiasm for all habitats and ecology, but Colin brings skills to the role which will ensure the continuing success of this key project. Bruce will be supporting Colin over the next few weeks to ensure a smooth transition.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

5.1 During October and November, members of the **Volunteer Ranger Service** carried out 186 practical, promotional and training tasks. October sees the full winter programme of habitat management tasks begin in earnest. 48 days of hazel coppicing were carried out by Volunteer Rangers over the two months and at least 58 days of scrub clearance work. There were twelve days spent hedgelaying and cutting hedgelaying materials at four sites. This makes a total of 1040 days of volunteer support.

5.2 The Satisfaction survey of Volunteer Rangers was completed during November. Over 40% of volunteers contacted responded to the Survey Monkey on-line questionnaire or a paper equivalent. Results are being reviewed by a member of the VRS Committee with a small group of staff and will be compared with the results from the last survey in 2012.

6. **Corporate Update**

6.1 The member level **European Exit Working Group** gave their full support to the development of a South Downs agri-environment pilot working with the six farm clusters. The appointment of a Farming Officer early in the new year will enable this development work to pick up speed. It is our intention that farm clusters within the National Park should become innovative test-beds for potential agri-environment schemes in lowland landscapes, to include cultural heritage, access and education. The three key drivers of this work (as indicated by Defra) will be:

- Creating resilient landscapes.
- Placing people at the heart of the environment.
- Promoting natural capital.

6.2 Key to this work is stakeholder engagement with National Parks England (Future of

- Farming Group), NGOs and farmers / land managers. Our engagement with the latter will be predominately through the farm cluster groups, and to those outside clusters via the South Downs Land Managers Group, NFU and CLA.
- 6.3 Within the National Park there are four Natural England (NE) funded farm cluster groups (Winchester Downs, Selborne, Arun to Adur and Eastern Downs) and two locally funded groups (Upper Rother and South Downs / Ems to Meon). All six groups are ‘farmer led’, the SDNPA’s role is largely influencing / guiding, but we have recently begun to take a leadership role for Southern England through the development and chairing of an overarching Facilitators’ Group. This comprises facilitators of 12 farm clusters stretching from Wiltshire to Kent and up to Surrey. Currently it is focusing on communications and habitat / species monitoring, with joint training on these areas organised by SDNPA. It is through this group that any pilots developed within the National Park for new agri-environment schemes could be discussed and market tested to assess their applicability for other areas in southern England.
- 6.4 After a period of homelessness following the condemning of the Stanmer office, I am pleased to say that the **Eastern Area Team** now has a temporary base at the Business Innovation Centre at Sussex University. Whilst not suitable for the longer term, this does keep the ranger team within reasonable distance of the workshop, toolstore and vehicle base in Stanmer Park, and there is some space for hot-desking. In the medium term we will move back into a converted building at Stanmer, awaiting the hopefully permanent location in the Long Barn. My thanks to Alan Brough, Kate Miles and the Eastern Team for keeping our operations going during this difficult time.
- 6.5 Having been served notice by the Weald & Downland Museum we are conducting a search for suitable alternatives for the Central Team, based on an agreed set of business needs. A number of locations are being investigated primarily in the Arun Valley corridor which include the old Amberley Station building. Looking slightly further ahead, the redevelopment of the Midhurst Depot site means we will have to go through the same exercise for the Wealden Office. Although we have a provision for capital expenditure in the budget, we will need to look at the phasing of any investment in new offices and the revenue costs in the longer term as part of a wider accommodation strategy that will go to the next P&R Committee.
- 6.6 We have received great feedback from the delegates who attended the **NPUK Conference** we hosted at Goodwood at the end of October. 97% of respondents rated the conference overall as excellent (83%) or very good (14%), and this rose to 100% rating either very satisfied (96%) or satisfied (4%) when delegates were asked specifically about the two evening events we laid on at the Weald and Download Museum and Goodwood House.
- 6.7 Our delegates appreciated the challenges laid down in the Friday morning debate, where our five invited speakers, Julia Bradbury, Professor Ian Bateman, Dr Sarah Mukherjee, William Wolmer and Adam Philip-Phillips all provoked the audience into an excellent debate, brilliantly chaired by Julia Bradbury.
- 6.8 When the feedback forms were analysed, SDNPA staff came in for particular praise for their enthusiasm, friendliness and knowledge. I will quote just two representative responses but the whole feedback is available to any members who are interested. ‘The enthusiasm of the SDNPA staff was infectious (throughout the whole event).’ ‘ Absolutely superb conference. Perfect balance of outdoors experiences and conference sessions. The whole event was seamlessly organised with great attention to detail. Well done South Downs team - outstanding event.’
- 6.9 The public consultation on the **Pre-Submission South Downs Local Plan** ran from 26 September to 21 November 2017. We ran three NPA workshops this autumn to which all parish, district and county councillors in the National Park were invited. Approximately 587 organisations and individuals have commented on the Local Plan and we have started to log the representations on our systems. Many of these comments relate to several Local Plan policies so we do not yet know the total number of representations. As a comparison we received 2,640 representations from 400

representors for our Preferred Options consultations. The intention is to complete the input by Christmas and submit the Local Plan for examination along with its core document library before the end of March.

7. Lessons from other NPAs

- 7.1 The NPUK Education/Outreach group officers meeting took place in Northumberland National Park from 21 to 23 November. I have recently taken over as the lead NPO for this lively group. It was a packed agenda with a wide range of topics including:
- a workshop with the Director of Public Health England (North East) about engaging people with health and wellbeing opportunities within National Parks
 - discussions with National Parks Partnership about the scope to attract sponsorship focused on connecting young people with National Parks
 - a workshop on the creation of video content for a joint learning resource in support of the 8-point plan requirements for educational resources with DfE
 - A look at how we can incorporate new technologies into learning resources. This takes forward one of the key action points from our recent NPUK Conference.
 - Sharing of best practice in educational resources around Dark Night Skies
 - Discussions about youth governance and youth ranger proposals.
- 7.2 The group produced a detailed Action Plan including several working groups to take forward key areas of work this year and will be meeting in February to review progress.

8. Media and Communications

- 8.1 In November we have worked hard to raise the profile of the new South Downs National Park Trust across local and regional media. This started with a photo story of Hugh Bonneville monitoring chalk stream quality with trustee Toni Shaw and followed with the launch of the Mend our Way campaign to generate funds to fix broken sections of the South Downs Way. In the first week of December we then announced the Trust's first corporate partnership with Langham Brewery with 5p from every bottle of renamed South Downs Best Bitter coming to support the Trust. Coverage has included Sussex Life magazine, a story on ITV Meridian news, two interviews with BBC Sussex, Breeze FM as well as coverage across almost every local newspaper in the National Park.
- 8.2 There is a new twitter account for the Trust which currently has 54 followers – follow them at @SouthDownsTrust. The main National Park account @sdnpa has 9,750 followers (up from 8,366 this time last year). Our rangers are doing well with @Ranger_SDNPA now having 4,135 followers (up from 3,477 this time last year) and the ever popular @SouthDownsWayNT has 4,830 followers (up from 3978). My own account is @trevorbeattie. Please follow, like and retweet to keep our accounts growing.
- 8.3 Other highlights include BBC South Today covering the Brighton ChaMP project with interviews with Amy Felus project manager and local farmer David Taylor.
- 8.4 The Midhurst & Petworth Observer covered Lord Gardiner's visit to the National Park to mark national tree week.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 19 October 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.

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Appendices None

SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy & Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	N/A