

**Agenda Item 9**  
**Report NPA01/18**

Report to	<b>South Downs National Park Authority</b>
Date	<b>22 March 2018</b>
By	<b>Chief Executive Officer</b>
Title of Report <b>Note</b>	<b>Chief Executive's Progress Report</b>

**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 and the announcements that have been made since my last report to the 19 December 2017 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

- 2.1 The period since my last report has been marked by a series of policy announcements and significant speeches. First was the 3<sup>rd</sup> January speech to the **Oxford Farming Conference** by Defra Secretary of State Michael Gove, as posted on our intranet, in which he painted an ambitious picture of a more sustainable food and farming industry post Brexit. An industry which has shaken off subsidy dependence, adapted to the challenges of the global market and is more productive whilst at the same time delivering more public goods like recovering soils and wildlife, cleaner water, access and health benefits.

- 2.2 This was swiftly followed on 11 January by the long awaited **25 Year Plan for the Environment**, launched by the Prime Minister. A full briefing was made available to Members at the time. This ambitious document marks a real change in the Government's direction and will set the context for our new Partnership Management Plan and Corporate Plan. It conveys a deep feeling for the importance of landscape and natural beauty with National Parks and AONBs described as "among the outstanding environmental achievements of the past 100 years". Natural capital analysis is a recurrent theme and there is a requirement that new development should result in a "net environmental gain", linking it to the restoration of neglected land and the creation of wildlife habitats – ideas which are now being reflected in our work with the Coast 2 Capital LEP on its new draft strategy.

- 2.3 The UK's first National Parks were created by an Act of Parliament in 1949 following the Government's 1947 Hobhouse Report, which remains the basis for most protected landscape designation in England today. The 25 Year Plan proposes a "21st century Hobhouse Review" which will consider how designated landscapes are financed and whether there is scope for new AONBs and National Parks. It will also examine opportunities to enhance the environment in existing designations. This will give us an opportunity to make the case for strengthening the section 62 duty on other public bodies to have regard to NP purposes and NP management plans. We are working with National Parks England (NPE) to maintain a close watch for announcements about the terms of reference, timing and membership of this review.

- 2.4 Also on 11 January the Homes and Communities Agency was re-branded as **Homes England**. The Government said in the budget that the relaunched agency – which will lose powers of social housing regulation – will begin to intervene more actively to buy land for housing. Nick Walkley, the CEO, has said that the aim is to move away from distributing grant funding towards deals with groups of housing associations and single providers. There

are useful echoes here of our own plans to stimulate rural affordable housing and we are liaising closely with the new Homes England.

- 2.5 On 20 February, at his speech to the **NFU national conference in Birmingham**, Michael Gove said: *"We want a healthy and beautiful countryside, producing food that makes us healthier as individuals, in a society which has a healthier attitude towards the natural world, an attitude that values permanence, where we wish to preserve and enhance natural capital and where we value the traditions and virtues of rural life"*. On 27 February Defra launched a ten week consultation on the future of food, farming and the environment, oddly titled **"Health and Harmony"**. It systematises many of the pledges made in Michael Gove's previous speeches, sets out rather more detail about how the transition away from the CAP will work, and includes a series of options about how area payments to farmers might be tapered off. NPE will be co-ordinating a response, to which we will be contributing. We will be seeking greater emphasis on lowland landscapes since there is currently scant reference to them in the text or the case studies.
- 2.6 Perhaps the most important element of the consultation from the SDNPA perspective is the proposals for a new agricultural policy underpinned by the principle of payment of public money for the provision of public goods. Providers will be paid for delivering environmentally beneficial outcomes based on natural capital principles, so that the benefits the natural environment provides for people and wildlife are properly valued and used to inform decisions on future land management. There is also a clear signal that the definition of public goods should include access, health, landscape and cultural heritage as well as biodiversity. This is the approach first signalled in our original Partnership Management Plan of December 2013 and most recently enshrined in the work on our future of farming pilot.
- 2.7 The latest in this flurry of key policy announcements was the publication on 5 March by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government of the revised text of the **National Planning Policy Framework**, with a closing date of 10 May. This is covered in the following section of this report.
- 2.8 The public reception for this chain of announcements has been largely positive, with the main criticism being that they lack detail and clear implementation plans. This misses their significance as ambitious statements of intent which commit the government to develop the gold standard in environmental protection and enhancement post EU membership. It is now for government departments, public bodies and the environmental sector to put flesh on the bones of these ambitions. This is where SDNPA is focusing, beginning with the submission at the end of February of an expression of interest in delivering a pilot of new agri-environment schemes based around our established farm clusters. If approved the pilot will give us an inside track on policy development in this crucial area. Members were sent a copy of the pilot after its consideration by P&R Committee and hard copies will be available at the Meeting. We have already received a useful response from the Defra policy team working on the new scheme, who will be invaluable contacts.

### 3. Planning

- 3.1 In terms of **planning performance**, speed of decision making remains good with 89% of applications in quarter 3 processed within statutory timescales. As usual, all government targets in this respect have been met. Appeal performance continues to be sound with 68% of appeals dismissed in the financial year to the end of February.
- 3.2 My last report recorded that SDNPA and BFF Architects collected first place for the category of Excellence in Planning for Heritage for the **Depot cinema in Lewes at the RTPI South East Awards**. We also emerged as the overall regional winners. I am pleased to say that we have now also been shortlisted for the National RTPI Awards for Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture. We are part of a small shortlist of projects from across the country, including the Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre in Northumberland National Park. The winner will be announced in May.
- 3.3 Our **Design Review Panel** (DRP) held their Annual General Meeting in January with a focus on evaluating the work they had undertaken in the year and discussing improvements in how they work with applicants, our planners and Planning Committee. We are well served by our multidisciplinary Design Review Panel who volunteer significant time to

increasing design quality in the National Park. The role of DRP, for example, was crucial in the design evolution of the Depot cinema in Lewes.

- 3.4 This month the Government have commenced consultation on a **revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**. The consultation runs until 10 May and the Government expect to publish the final document in the summer. The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied.
- 3.5 The revised NPPF builds on measures set out in the February 2017 Housing White Paper and is focussed on increasing housing supply across England. As Sajid Javid MP said at the launch of the consultation, the NPPF is about "building more homes, more quickly in the places people want to live". Some key points for SDNPA to note in this draft document are:
- The "great weight" that should be given in planning decisions to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks is retained and a footnote refers to the 2010 circular, ensuring that it remains current.
  - The major development test (paragraph 116 in the existing NPPF) is retained unchanged, stating that planning permission should be refused for major development in National Parks other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.
  - The National Parks exemption from meeting full objectively assessed housing need is maintained.
  - A standard methodology for calculating housing need will be set out which Local Planning Authorities should then accommodate in their Local Plans.
  - The new document states that planning policies and decisions should encourage multiple benefits from land, including taking opportunities to achieve net environmental gains and recognising the wider benefits we derive from natural capital. The achievement of net environmental gains implements the pledge in the 25 Year Environment Plan and fully accords with the ecosystems services approach set out in our Local Plan.
  - The Government states that affordable housing should not be sought for developments of below 10 homes, other than in areas such as National Parks where policies may set out a threshold of 5 units or fewer. This supports the evidence based approach we are taking in our Local Plan.
  - The Government maintains its strong support for neighbourhood plans and for providing affordable housing on rural exception sites.
  - The revised document states that planning conditions that are required to be discharged before development commences should be avoided, unless there is a clear justification.
- 3.6 The new NPPF will only be used for the purpose of examining Local Plans submitted 6 months after its expected summer publication. Given that our Local Plan is to be submitted very shortly it will therefore be examined for soundness in accordance with the current version of the NPPF. That being said there are important elements of the revised NPPF that already accord with the approach set out in our Local Plan.
- 3.7 Concurrently with the consultation on the NPPF the Government are also consulting on reforming developer contributions, producing updated viability guidance and making possible changes to both planning obligations and the Community Infrastructure Levy. To this end the Government are considering setting developer contributions nationally, rather than being determined by each Local Planning Authority as at present, and it is proposed that all viability assessments accompanying planning applications shall be made publicly available. This is something that the Authority has been working toward implementing and will have in place in the summer.
- 3.8 There is much here for officers and NPE to evaluate and a comprehensive consultation response will be provided once a full review has been completed.
- 3.9 The profile of our work on **Whole Estate Plans** has been raised recently with coverage in the CLA national magazine and several NPAs and AONBs considering the adoption of our WEP approach. To date we have approved two WEPs with two more going to P&R

Committee on 29 March (Highfield and Iford), six in progress for submission and ten in development.

#### **4. Progress of Existing Projects**

- 4.1 Members will be familiar with the **Rampion Scheme** of 116 offshore wind turbines located 14km off the coast at Brighton and its associated 30m wide cable construction route which passes through 14km of the National Park. The wind farm has started generating power, with the first electricity delivered to the grid in November 2017. All of the cable has now been laid through the Park and covered over. Reinstatement has been delayed by over a year and has so far only been completed at the Tottington Mount site. Work is about to recommence with a proposed completion date of September 2018.
- 4.2 Carillion was contracted for the onshore cable route works and EON has now taken the role of principal contractor. They are hoping to work with previous sub-contractors to deliver the remaining aspects of reinstatement without affecting the completion date. The route will then be monitored for a further ten years to ensure the landscape and habitat fully recover to their previous condition.
- 4.3 Due to the original programme being extended by a year, an additional £38,000 of funding has been requested from E.ON to cover the staff costs for the extended monitoring programme. The timetable for the potential planning implications of ensuring the requirements are met has also been extended with an additional £3000 of funding requested to cover this element.
- 4.4 As part of the Rampion project a S106 contribution of £242,000 was allocated to SDNPA to spend on S106 projects relating to Rampion. Four projects have so far been granted funding to a total value of £84,000, these are the Beggars Bush Walk for All community nature area (£25,000), the Heritage Coast identity and interpretation strategy (£19,000), Sustainable Coppicing for Longlands Wildlife (£11,000), and Truleigh Hill habitat and access improvements (£29,000). A remaining £158,000 is available for other projects over the next 10 years.
- 4.5 Contractors appointed by SDNPA have cleared the site of the old Singleton railway station in order to prevent further damage to the platforms by tree roots and to prepare the way for the first part of the 6 km extension of the **Centurion Way** from Singleton to the South Downs Way. The design and appraisal of the entire route is now nearly complete after which the proposal will go to Planning Committee in the summer. Discussions are underway to identify external funding for the main capital works.
- 4.6 The detailed work on the **pilot entry sign project** is ongoing. Safety, in all of its guises, is now a key consideration in the erection of any roadside signage, and this has taken longer to clarify than expected given the innovative design of the signs. Working closely with the signage company and the four Highways Authorities, we have decided to commission additional safety reports to ensure that we have taken all due care in the construction and installation of the signs. This has meant a short but necessary delay, but we hope to see the signs erected in the summer.

#### **5. Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 During January and February members of the **Volunteer Ranger Service** carried out 152 practical, promotional and training tasks providing an estimated 836 days of volunteer activity for the quarter.
- 5.2 The winter programme of habitat management tasks has continued with 26 days of coppicing work being carried out by Volunteer Rangers over two months and at least 30 days of scrub clearance work. There were 18 days spent hedge-laying and cutting hedge-laying materials on six sites, and 7 days of hedge-laying training sessions at Saddlescombe Farm which were attended by a total of 59 volunteers.
- 5.3 The VRS Satisfaction survey is an important way of tracking the 'health' of the VRS and ensuring the SDNPA and VRS Committee continue to provide the best possible support. The survey results were very positive with overall satisfaction rating of 1.59 on a 1-5 scale (with 1 being most satisfied). A small working group of SDNPA staff and VRS Committee have summarised the key findings and developed an action plan for taking forward the opportunities raised in the coming months. The VRS survey action plan has been

incorporated into the Volunteer Development Strategy which details our plans to support volunteering opportunities through the VRS and other Park-wide organisations.

- 5.4 The SDVRS AGM will be held on Saturday 17 March 2018 in Petersfield. There are over 45 volunteers signed up to attend and the agenda includes tours of the local area in the afternoon.

## 6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 We are very pleased to have been chosen as one of the National Parks that **Columbia** is focusing its media and promotional efforts around this spring. On 13/14 of this month, the Comms team and rangers were filming across the National Park with journalists and social media influencers in a campaign that will appear across print and online media. In addition to the publicity this will provide us with film and photography which we can use for our own promotional and media work.
- 6.2 Logistics for large scale distribution across 15 national parks takes time and while we have already received much of our new kit from Columbia, we will wait until we have it all before distributing to staff, volunteers and members to avoid mismatching the old and the new. The May staff/Member meeting will provide an ideal opportunity to distribute the new uniforms.
- 6.3 **National Parks Partnerships (NPP)** are continuing to develop new commercial partners, with a number of relationships in the final stages and a pipeline of opportunities. I will share the details with Members as soon as possible and there is a chance to discuss NPP later on today's agenda. Our own Income Generation team have also been busy making the final arrangements for our first local corporate partners, Gatwick and Southern Water, demonstrating that there is growing evidence of the National Park's propensity for developing commercial relationships.
- 6.4 The **Mend our Way campaign**, launched by the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) and South Downs National Park Trust in 2017, has raised around £62,000 of its £120,000 target. This is a fantastic start to the second part of the appeal which will see the BMC ramping up its promotion, building up to a crowd funding appeal at the end of the summer. During this period, as well as giving online, it will be possible to make donations in Cotswolds and Snow and Rock's stores.
- 6.5 The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual **SDNP Schools' Conference** will take place at Amberley Museum & Heritage Centre on Wednesday 21 March 2018. Over 120 people have signed up to attend this flagship event in our learning calendar which has become well-known and respected. This year delegates will include senior leaders, governors and trainee teachers as well as class teachers and support staff. Given our focus on attracting new audiences it is satisfying to report that 62% of delegates will be new to the conference this year. Outdoor learning providers who are part of the Our South Downs network will run 14 workshops for delegates on a range of curriculum linked topics. Professor Justin Dillon, President of the National Association for Environmental Education (NAEE) will be giving the keynote presentation and Mr Matthew Dampier, Headteacher of Droxford Junior School, will speak on a whole school approach to Learning Outside the Classroom in the SDNP.

## 7. Lessons from other NPAs

- 7.1 As we start to develop our approach to our **Corporate Plan for 2019-24** we have been seeking inspiration from what other National Parks have achieved with their own corporate plans. That research has prompted us to consider revising the length and structure of our own Plan.
- 7.2 Most National Parks refer to their corporate plans as business plans and they often run for three years. What is clear is that they are focused on fewer priority areas than ours have been and that they have fewer but more strategic performance measures. They also have more information about their organisational performance and aspirations, rather than reporting on issues that are already in their Management Plans.
- 7.3 Two in particular are influencing our thinking, the **Peak District** and the **Cairngorms**. Following their lead we will be focusing on clear organisational priorities for the next plan period and will be significantly slimming down what we have in our Plan. We are working on possible new formats and will use this to inform proposals for reporting our performance in a more consistent and transparent way on the website. The proposed new

format and priorities will be reported to P&R Committee in March prior to consideration at the NPA Meeting in April.

## **8. Media and Communications**

- 8.1 We announced the winning and highly commended photographers for our **annual photo competition** on 5 January through a media release and social media. They were then opened up to a public vote for the people's choice. The total reach from print & online coverage was 910,550; total impressions on Twitter was 67,298; our Facebook reach was 43,055 and total number of views of newsletter content about the competition was 4,574. This means that the total opportunities to view for the competition was at least 1,025,477.
- 8.2 We received wide coverage for our Dark Night Skies festival including a feature trailing all the festival events in the Chichester Observer, Bognor Regis Observer, Midhurst & Petworth Observer, and West Sussex County Times; a photo review of our Stargazing South Downs event in Midhurst in the Midhurst Observer; BBC South Today interviewed Dan Oakley talking about the International Dark Skies Reserve and our Dark Skies Festival on Monday 12 Feb; and on Monday 12 Feb Charles Winchester was interviewed on the same topic on BBC Sussex.
- 8.3 During February we gained 1,358 new subscribers to our main mailing list, in part due to people signing up at our dark night skies festival but largely due to promoting our telescope competition through social media. This took our main mailing list up to 2,950 by 28 February.
- 8.4 We felt it was time to carry out a fundamental review of our approach to **events** so that we attend fewer repeated events aimed at traditional supporters, and focus more on events aimed at new audiences, especially young people, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people living in our urban fringes. We will also focus on thematic events with clear objectives and messages such as our own Dark Skies Festival, heathland events, National Parks Week and our new chalk grassland event in July. These events take more resources and time to organise but give much greater return in terms of raising awareness of the National Park, our purposes and duty and special qualities.

## **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 December 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**

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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