

Report to	Policy & Resources Committee
Date	29 March 2018
By	Head of Business Services
Title of Report Decision	Property and Accommodation Review

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- 1. Note the current operational shortcomings of the individual Area Offices**
- 2. Agree the necessity of finding premises that meet all of SDNPA's needs and provide stability through ownership or long term secured tenancy**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 SDNPA currently employs staff members based in four locations across the National Park. Of those, only the South Downs Centre is currently in SDNPA ownership, with the Area Offices being occupied through short term leases. The South Downs Centre is fit for purpose, having been designed with the SDNPA purposes in mind, but in each of the Area Offices, there are compromises that cannot be put right on a short term lease.
- 1.2 This report examines the need to secure accommodation that meets our basic needs for the operation in the short term and also the various routes to securing sites that are fully fit for purpose in the medium to long term.

2. Issues for consideration

- 2.1 Work has been carried out over the past few months involving Area Teams and Rangers to establish and agree a range of necessary and desirable criteria for an Area Office. The criteria were used to form and options appraisal when different locations were being considered for the Stanmer Office during the summer. The criteria are listed in the following table;

Essential	Desirable
Volunteers – physical requirements (workshop, tool store and accessibility (for current volunteers and to encourage diversification of volunteer base in the future)	Accessibility to public for interpretation
Ranger operational requirements (vehicle parking & movement; workshop space; storage)	Public Transport and accessibility
Accessibility to Ranger operational Area (i.e. ability to get vehicles in and out of site, traffic etc.)	Sense of location speaks to the National Park
Wider Operational Requirements – Hot Desk Provision / ease of meetings as appropriate	
Affordable rental costs or capital equating to similar	
IT connectivity (s/f broadband or fibre)	

Satisfies the authority's obligations under the Equality Act	
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2.2 The current situation in the Area Offices is as follows;

Area	Office	Essential Criteria Missing	Lease Arrangements
Western	Empshott and Queen Elizabeth Country Park	No s/f Broadband No volunteer accom.	No lease in place. The yard at QECP is separate from the office and the lease expires in 2020 with the temp planning permission for the site expiring in 2019.
Wealden	Midhurst Depot Potentially Heath Farm Barn, Midhurst	Okay	Currently on a tenancy at will awaiting proposed three year lease with a 6 month rolling break Potential for long term lease from National Trust, after structural repairs are carried out.
Central	Weald and Downland Museum Potentially Amberley Railway Station	Okay	Less than a year left of a three year lease but in the early stages of arranging a new medium term lease in a larger building on the museum grounds. Potential for long term lease being investigated
Eastern	Sussex Innovation Centre Stanmer Workshop	No Volunteer accom. / workshop or storage Okay	Until October 2018 From October 2018 until Long Barn is ready for occupancy (c2023)

2.3 SDNPA was forced to seek short term accommodation in both Western and Eastern Areas at short notice and in those cases, not all of the essential criteria can always be met. It is a feature of short term tenancies, especially where the occupation has been agreed on a casual basis and SDNPA is not paying an economic rent, that there is little control over the fabric of the building being tenanted.

2.4 No Area Office, with the exception of our temporary occupation of Sussex Innovation Centre, provides the working environment and facilities SDNPA should be aiming for to enable staff members to operate in a professional and efficient manner.

3. Options & cost implications

3.1 The original strategy for area accommodation in particular was founded on partnership working, and with the SDNPA having a light footprint in the Park. Those are both sensible aims and go to the core of how the Authority operates but in terms of accommodation they have not achieved their goals. With the best will in the world the landlord / tenant relationship is never one of equals and this is particularly the case where low cost, short lease, grace and favour accommodation is concerned. The concept of partnership only goes some way to mitigate this.

3.2 Aiming to provide accommodation in the Area Offices that properly meets the organisation's operational needs and that has secure tenure for SDNPA, will have cost implications. This will mean either higher rental costs, capital expenditure or a combination of both of those things. There is no point trying to put an exact figure on any of those

factors at this stage as in most cases, the destiny of the permanent Area Office is not known. Sourcing permanent accommodation in all Areas will therefore have to be a longer term programme, taking place over the next ten years.

- 3.3 The programme would consist of four separate projects, each involving the sourcing of a new Area Office site, either to purchase the freehold or obtain a long term lease of at least 25 years. It is anticipated that whether the property is purchased or leased there will be an element of capital expenditure to adapt and / or refurbish this to meet SDNPA needs. There may also be increases in revenue expenditure due to increased rental or running costs. These costs would be reflected within the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

4. Next steps

- 4.1 In the Eastern Area there is a strong prospect of SDNPA occupying a site at Stanmer Park in the Long Barn. This has the potential to meet SDNPA needs in all aspects although this will be subject to negotiation with Brighton and Hove City Council. A five year timescale for this is not unrealistic and accommodation is being arranged within Stanmer Park to fill the five year gap for the Area Team.
- 4.2 In other areas, the Estates team will work with other staff to identify suitable sites that will allow costed options to be brought to the Committee in due course. It is not intended to address these in any order or priority but to follow opportunities as they arise.
- 4.3 In order to achieve a degree of consistency in the appraisal of options, the criteria listed above will form the qualitative measurement. Cost standardisation and value for money will be measured with reference to a defined 'normal' rent for the sort of premises and facilities SDNPA require. This will be expressed as a Net Present Value over twenty five years and all capital and revenue costs will be estimated in a similar manner.
- 4.4 Due to the inevitably long lead in time to occupying permanent offices, the Estates Team will work to identify alternative temporary offices if this becomes necessary in the interim.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 All four Area Offices are currently occupied on a temporary or uncertain basis, under various types of short lease or subject to future development uncertainties. None of them meet all of the criteria identified for a long term office location and few of them are centrally located to the Area they serve. This arrangement means that the costs are artificially depressed because a full market rent is not being charged, and it does have advantages in terms of flexibility and partnership working.
- 5.2 Over time the organisation plans to move to more stable long term accommodation that does meet all of the criteria. There are already some indications of how we might do this, in the Eastern Area, where there are plans with Brighton and Hove City Council, to renovate and occupy the Long Barn at Stanmer. In the Central Area, there is another such potential long term lease to locate at Amberley Railway Station, which is being investigated. In the Wealden Area, a long term lease will potentially be available for Heath Farm Barn, on the A272 outside Midhurst. Our Medium Term Financial Strategy will make provision for the increased costs of such a programme but the precise timing depends on many factors outside our control, including the attitude of freeholders, market conditions and the number of potential developments that meet our criteria. We will keep Members fully informed of developments.

6. Other Implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No, not at this stage. Any proposals relating the acquisition or long term lease of property will be brought to the relevant decision making body
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	Yes, at the moment SDNPA are not paying economic rents in many of the properties it occupies. Obtaining suitable accommodation is likely to have a significant resource impact on

	capital expenditure and a more limited impact on on-going expenditure.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	Occupying properties with longer term security of tenure or ownership, will allow the SDNPA to invest properly in developing those assets to meet the operational needs of the organisation. This will also be an investment in the staff who work there. As well as representing a better investment in the long term, there should be operational efficiencies from having 'fit for purpose' workplaces.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	Not at this stage, although some or all of the projects may involve procurement contracts which individually could have Social Value implications.
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Compliance with our equality obligations is an essential criteria when considering next steps. It will be important to consider this when considering particular properties or locations for the Area Offices.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	Security issues, for staff and property, will be considered within each individual project.
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	Health and Safety will be a major consideration on each individual project and the move into SDNPA controlled premises will assist this in general.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	None
Are there any Sustainability implications based on the 5 principles set out in the SDNPA Sustainability Strategy.	Full control of operational premises will enable SDNPA to run those in as sustainable a manner as possible.

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SDNPA Consultees: Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services
External Consultees: None