

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	28 March 2019
By	Chief Executive Officer
Title of Report Note	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 report to the 18 December 2018 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The three months since the last NPA have been dominated by the final stages of the Local Plan process, the review of the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) and our dark skies festival. All three are covered later in this report. I had a long telephone conversation with Julian Glover on 16 January and the Chair will cover the progress of the Review in her report.

3. Planning

- 3.1 The Inspector for the **Local Plan** examination wrote to us at the beginning of January to say that he intended to make relatively modest modifications to the Local Plan following the hearings. The consultation on these modifications runs for eight weeks and closes on 28 March. We will forward the responses to the Inspector and his final report is expected shortly afterwards. We are hoping that the South Downs Local Plan will be adopted at either the full Authority meeting on 17 May or 2 July and are now working on a programme of Local Plan training for both SDNPA and the host authorities which will cover Members and officers. There will be training for the town and parish councils in the autumn.
- 3.2 SDNPA led on the joint National Parks England (NPE) response to the **Net Biodiversity Gain consultation**, which proposed to mandate biodiversity net gain as part of the planning system. The response recognises that the net gain approach has the potential to benefit biodiversity in a way that is compatible with the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy and that could support the delivery of National Park purposes. Net gain is, however, only one part of a much wider holistic approach to the landscape.
- 3.3 Our response, therefore, set out some important caveats;
- Net gain should not compromise the mitigation hierarchy of 'avoid, mitigate, compensate'.
 - There must be a strict sequential approach to ensure that net gain is prioritised on site,

and then if that is not possible as close as possible to the development site.

- Only after those two options are exhausted should tariffs be considered.
- The high level of protection of national parks is such that the collection of tariffs within them is not appropriate, although they could benefit from payments arising from sites beyond their boundaries.
- Biodiversity net gain must never enable inappropriate development and should also be of a 'like for like' nature, assured for the long term and monitored to ensure effectiveness.

3.4 Members may recall that, under the auspices of the Rural Housing Network, SDNPA staff led last year on assembling a pilot proposal for a **Revolving Rural Land Bank**. This follows the commitment in the Government's 25 Year Plan for the Environment to pilot such a concept, which has had some success in Scotland. I am pleased to say that the Minister for Housing recently wrote to tell me that he had asked his officials to work with DEFRA, Homes England and the Rural Housing Network to explore how this could be delivered in practice.

3.5 I have meetings scheduled to refine the details with officials but the early signs are that the Government are interested in rolling out this initiative under the management of Homes England using monies from its centrally administered – and generously funded - Land Assembly Fund. The programme will be focussed on acquiring difficult sites in rural areas and bringing them forward for development much more quickly than is currently the case. This would represent a significant success since it is to my knowledge the first time that a Homes England programme (or Homes and Communities Agency as was) has been focussed on delivering small numbers of rural affordable housing rather than the large urban developments. I updated the Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group on 18 March and this welcomed the news and supported the proposed approach.

4. **Progress of Existing Projects**

4.1 Earlier this month the first 2 of 19 **entry signs** from the pilot were installed. Installation is underway at the 17 remaining sites. The signs already installed in Lavant and Hares Lane, Funtington are two of the smaller designs, but we have already been receiving positive feedback about them. We are currently finalising dates for the installation of the remaining 17 signs and I will update Members on our progress at the meeting. Many signs will require traffic management for the final installation, which is currently being obtained. We are planning a media launch for the next tranche of signs, choosing some of the more prominent locations and sign sizes.

4.2 East Sussex County Council (ESCC) are currently considering SDNPA's proposal, along with others, for the future ownership and management of **Seven Sisters Country Park**. They are expected to make a decision in late May, following which a public notice will be issued. Final sign off by the County Council is expected on 16 July.

4.3 Planning Solutions Consulting Ltd, a company commissioned by SDNPA, are working with us to provide the fully validated business case behind our proposal to ESCC. This will be considered in detail by the Enterprise and Investment Task and Finish Group before being presented to the NPA.

4.4 We are currently involved in detailed discussions on three national strategic infrastructure projects affecting the National Park and its setting:

- **ESSO** - A Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) between ESSO and SDNPA has been completed. ESSO have commenced further technical meetings with SDNPA officers to review the detailed development of the Environmental Impact Assessment for the scheme prior to submitting their application to the Secretary of State for a Development Consent Order during Summer 2019.
- **A27 Arundel** - further meetings between Highways England (HE) and SDNPA representatives at officer and member level are under way. The second consultation is expected to run during July and August 2019. A second meeting between SDNPA, the

Defra family (Natural England, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission) and the Sussex Wildlife Trust is planned for early April 2019. These meetings seek to share information between the various bodies about the impacts of the scheme and to coordinate a collective approach to mitigation and compensation on a landscape led basis.

- **M3 Junction 9** SDNPA have responded to the Scoping request issued by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) during February 2019. This consultation will inform the content of the Environmental Impact Assessment which will be submitted with the Development Consent Order (DCO) application. Highways England are planning to undertake a further statutory consultation during July-August this year which will be brought to P&R committee and the NPA. The DCO application for this scheme is expected in the early spring of next year.

5. Volunteers and Delivery

- 5.1 In Q3 2018-19, 248 volunteers delivered 7120 hours towards the National Park's purposes. The most common tasks were scrub clearance (441 days), coppicing (263 days) and hedgelaying (165 days). 46 days were in support of the South Downs Way. 17 South Downs Way Wardens contributed 124 hours to surveying the condition of the Trail.
- 5.2 In the autumn a new volunteer role of Youth Ambassador was created and two young volunteers have signed up as a 12 month pilot. Our Youth Ambassadors recently attended the South Downs Volunteering Network meeting to present their views on the barriers for young people to accessing the National Park and its activities. We are considering how we might involve them in the work of the NPA and I would welcome Members thoughts on this.
- 5.3 In December the new Volunteer Ranger Service fund was launched in partnership with the South Downs National Park Trust. Grants of up to £5000 will be available over the next 5 years in support of conservation and community projects which involve our volunteers.

6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 An intensive programme of work has been underway on the **Partnership Management Plan (PMP)**. Strategy Leads are completing the remaining few meetings with stakeholders. To date we have met over 200 organisations and individuals, who have, between them, committed to over 120 projects to the next 5 year delivery phase.
- 6.2 The Partnership Management Plan Member Task and Finish Group hosted a successful workshop at which Members not on the group had a chance to learn about the work they have been doing to refine and streamline the outcomes and priorities. Members endorsed the work of the Task and Finish Group which paves the way for the presentation of a draft set of outcomes, priorities and projects to the P&R Committee in April. Members also endorsed the approach to communicating the plan.
- 6.3 On 21 March Members will be hosting a workshop for partners. The aim is to seek wide endorsement for the changes to the outcomes and priorities, to agree the approach to communicating the plan, and to agree ways of monitoring and reporting on the plan. The workshop will also be used to test the scope for obtaining written commitments from partners for what they will deliver over the next 5 years.
- 6.4 We are therefore confident that the content of the PMP will be ready for agreement by the NPA in July.
- 6.5 As part of the review of the PMP, a new outcome was added. This ensures that the next 5 years of the Plan has a focus on making the South Downs National Park a well-used and recognised asset for sustaining mental and physical **health and wellbeing**. We are currently working with partners to define the priorities for this outcome over the next 5 years.
- 6.6 An important element has been providing feedback to the three County Council level Health and Well-Being Boards on their strategic priorities for the next 5 years. The emphasis has been to make sure that the Boards understand that SDNPA wants to be an engaged and

integrated partner in the delivery of their plans. The response to the Hampshire Board consultation was submitted jointly with the New Forest National Park.

- 6.7 The SDNPA is also an active partner with the Dartmoor, Exmoor and New Forest National Parks in a collaboration of the southern national parks and the Public Health England Regional Leads for the South East and South West. We are currently exploring options for a joint bid across all 4 national parks and with Public Health England to support young people with mental health issues.
- 6.8 In order to support this work, given the priority that has been accorded to it, we will begin soon on the recruitment of a post to work with public health organisations across the National Park, to deliver projects and activities supporting the new outcome.
- 6.9 Post Brexit, an entirely new system of support will be put in place for **farming and forestry**; as outlined by Michael Gove last year in the *Health & Harmony* paper and the new Agriculture Bill. Members will recall that our own South Downs pilot proposal, endorsed by a wide range of stakeholders, was submitted to Defra at the end of February 2018. Over 90 expressions of interest were received, and just after Christmas we heard that the 49 chosen to go forward include all 9 submitted by National Park Authorities. In a recent meeting with our allocated case officer it became clear that the Department would like us to run a series of workshops over 2019 which can test potential elements of a new scheme. At the time of writing we are the only National Park to have been asked to proceed. The findings from this and other tests and trials will inform a national pilot of the New England Land Management Scheme (NELMS) to be rolled out in 2021.
- 6.10 In my last report I mentioned the work that we are undertaking through NPE on **Rural Development**. In all National Parks, viable rural businesses are needed to ensure a high quality landscape and thriving communities. A broad approach to this was recently approved by the NPE Board, the central objective of which is to help Defra to gain traction over the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and to join forces with other rural interests (including the CLA, LEPs and ACRE) to ensure that some of the funding is ring fenced for the rural economy. This support would partly replace EU funds such as LEADER and EAFRD, which will be important to farms and estates in the South Downs, some of which derive over half their income from sources other than agriculture or forestry. A meeting of National Park Officers on 8 March endorsed this approach as a basis for advocacy with Defra and the joint BEIS/MCLG cities and growth unit, as well as the national body for LEPS. We are pressing hard with government whilst we await Julian Glover's response to the proposals on this topic that we submitted to his Review.
- 6.11 In February we ran our annual **Farmer Breakfast meetings** across the South Downs National Park. All three meetings were well attended, with nearly 100 at the Midhurst meeting, and over 50 at both Plumpton and Alton. Presentations were given on the ELMS tests and trials, planning guidance for farm businesses, woodland creation opportunities and roll out of rural fibre broadband. The meetings also provided an opportunity for local farmers and landowners to raise issues and to network with SDNPA staff and partners.
- 6.12 We continue to work with Natural England on their Countryside Stewardship pipeline process. This year area teams will be able to provide local input and advice into the development of new Countryside Stewardship schemes and to support HLS extensions where applicable.
- 6.13 The **Culture group** which is comprised of both Members and officers, has recently completed a range of activities on SDNPA values and are currently working through a number of themes and suggestions received by staff. Due to a number of these being raised more recently through the staff survey, the group's work is currently on hold until the Staff Survey Action plan is complete. This will ensure all messages from staff are fed into the group. These include a review of the PDR process, work shadowing opportunities and further guidance on e-learning. There have also been some quick wins regarding communicating messages about culture to staff which we have already implemented, including notice boards in shared spaces to promote internal messages.

7. Lessons from other National Parks

- 7.1 The Northumberland National Park has developed a strong track record of commercial income generation and I recently spent a couple of days there to learn more about how they had achieved this. I will include a report and some photographs in my weekly blog for 22 March and will present the key findings to the Enterprise and Investment Task and Finish Group. I was particularly impressed by the Hexham Enterprise Hub which is run by the NPA and accommodates 11 small businesses employing 21 people, generating a net income for the National Park. I also learnt more about the development of the SILL and Northumberland's approach to generating significant income from the 8 car parks that they own and operate.
- 7.2 Whilst I was in Northumberland I took the opportunity to visit the Kielder Observatory to discuss how we can establish better linkages with the nation's other Dark Skies Reserve. Despite its remote location the Observatory runs booked events for some 40 people on every night of the year, regardless of whether there are clear skies. These operate at about 90% of capacity. They recently opened a Lottery funded astro-photography centre and are about to begin work on a free standing planetarium. The outreach programme undertaken by the Observatory is impressive but its tickets are expensive and our own public engagement on dark skies is already much more extensive and diverse. Kielder does, however, demonstrate the benefits of the creation of a physical hub for dark skies work, not least in terms of income generation. There are therefore lessons to be learned on both sides and we are planning a more formal liaison visit as part of a stronger partnership between the two reserves.

8. Media and Communications

- 8.1 It has been a busy start to the year in the media, with a flurry of activity locally, regionally and nationally. Highlights have included extensive coverage of the two-week Dark Skies Festival, with pieces in print and online across the press in Hampshire and Sussex, including a three-page magazine cover story in the Portsmouth News. The success of the National Park Collection of visitor experiences and the national award described in the Chairs report has also gained wide coverage in support of this strand of Public Affairs Strategy.
- 8.2 The Government's Year of Green Action and #iwillfornature campaign provided an ideal opportunity to tell South Downs stories and promote the messages in our Public Affairs Strategy. We received coverage on a number of local papers across the National Park with our Learning Team generating stories on five ways that young people in and around the South Downs can help protect nature. We also achieved coverage of the National Park's woodland management work, tied to a major national story about the predictions that 2019 will see record highs of CO₂.
- 8.3 The social media presence for the National Park continues to grow and diversify. We now have more than 10.5k followers on Facebook, 11.5k on Twitter and almost 5,000 followers on Instagram. The National Park is now regularly using Instagram "stories" to bring a fun element of storytelling to our events, with more than 400 people tuning in to follow a recent Dark Skies event in Petersfield.
- 8.4 This year's **Dark Night Skies Festival** has been hugely successful. The festival featured over 30 events and over 20 partner organisations. For the first time we have run additional events ourselves, replicating the successful indoor event at Midhurst Rother College with events in Petersfield and Lewes. It is always hard to estimate how well first time events will do, but both exceeded our expectations – with 350 people coming to Petersfield and 712 people attending at Lewes. We also hosted a moon gazing workshop on Brighton seafront at the i360, again for the first time, and had 150 people attend, including a woman with visual impairment who had not been able to see the moon or stars in over 20 years. This story has been promoted in the latest e-newsletter.
- 8.5 The Festival has been a big undertaking but has enabled us to positively engage with around 2000 people through our own events – many of whom are families and others who have never directly engaged with the National Park and have come from the surrounding urban

areas. Feedback from those attending has been extremely positive. Members will have an opportunity over lunch before the NPA to try the virtual reality headsets that have been so popular during the festivals.

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 18 December 2018 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

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