

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	16 May 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 28 March 2019 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Members will be aware that my recent blogs have drawn attention to the increased profile that environmental issues have received in the mainstream media over recent weeks. Greater public awareness will support SDNPA initiatives that centre on behaviour change and will strengthen our case for greater powers and resources through the Glover Review but we need to act swiftly to harness this awareness to concerted action from ourselves and our partners if it is to generate real change. This is the thinking behind our new Partnership Management Plan and our plans for Seven Sisters, both of which feature on today's agenda. This will be a theme for discussion at the combined staff and Member away day on 8 May which had not taken place at the time of writing.

3. Progress of Existing Projects

- 3.1 Following our expression of interest; '**Farming the Future – South Downs National Park Pilot Scheme**', early in 2018, we received confirmation from DEFRA in December that our proposal had been selected for phase one of the tests and trials for the new Environmental Land Management system (ELMs). Ours was one of 49 proposals chosen from a total of 128.
- 3.2 We met with our assigned DEFRA Officer in February to discuss our proposal. During these discussions it became clear that at this stage DEFRA want to concentrate on refining the 'building blocks' of the scheme. To help them achieve this, we decided to run two separate trials based on our initial expression of interest: a series of farmer workshops across the National Park to explore how the new scheme could operate, and a project with Farm Cluster Groups using the "Land App" to plan and coordinate delivery of priority objectives at a landscape scale.

- 3.3 Since meeting in February, the farmer workshops proposal has been agreed by the DEFRA Panel. We have now arranged seven workshops, three in May and four in October, facilitated by Cumulus Consultants. These will focus on four key questions; the role of the land management plan, prioritising objectives, the provision of specialist advice and the role of farm cluster groups. A final report will capture the key findings and suggest next steps. This work will be complete by the end of the calendar year. The Farm Cluster Land App test is still under development, and we plan to submit proposals to the DEFRA panel in May.
- 3.4 In addition to the above, we continue to work closely with the **Farm Cluster Groups**. Following the success of the Arun to Adur Farmers Group 'Meet the Farmer' video project last year, we are repeating the process with the Eastern South Downs Farmers Group this summer. To support the social media channels we are developing a website; South Downs Farming, that will promote and showcase the interesting and innovative work farmers, land managers and Farmer Clusters/Groups are undertaking across the Downs. The Southern (Farm Clusters) Facilitators' Group continues to provide a forum to share knowledge and ideas, which is proving especially useful during this significant time of change for the farming industry.
- 3.5 The Pilot stage for the **new entry signs** is now nearing completion, with 14 of the 19 signs installed. The remaining five signs will be installed over the summer, as we await traffic control permission from the relevant highways authorities to install these larger signs. The response from the public has been overwhelmingly positive. We will be bringing a lessons learned paper to P&R Committee in June, after which proposals for Phase 2 will be going to the NPA on 2 July for Members to consider, which will include some ideas for improving village signage.
- 3.6 With three of the Area Teams now housed in more suitable **office accommodation** with typically five year leases, our attention has turned to the Wealden Heath area team and the refurbishment of Heath Barn Farm, outside of Midhurst. This building will be leased from the National Trust on a 25 year lease and a firm of architects are currently completing initial designs.
- 3.7 On 10 April 2019 I met James Blake, CEO and Jake Chalmers, Property Director, for the **Youth Hostel Association (YHA)**. The purpose of the meeting was to strengthen the existing relationship between our two organisations and to catch up on the YHA plans at Truleigh Hill. The YHA have three sites within the Eastern Downs located at Itford/Southease, Truleigh Hill and on the Eastbourne Downland. They also have a newly refurbished hostel in Brighton. We have a history of collaboration with the Association having undertaken interpretation work at the South Downs Hostel at Southease. Much of our current focus is at Truleigh Hill, which brings together opportunities at the Hostel with our own Truleigh Hill Landscape Project. The hostel is due for its planned renovation to modernise the accommodation and facilities and make it more suitable for school groups to use the facilities, as well as addressing accessibility. As part of this we will be supporting the development and production of interpretation which will tell the National Park story.
- 3.8 During our time together it was clear that there is a strong alignment of priorities between our organisations. For example, the YHA is keen to grow its outdoor learning offer which is an opportunity to work with our SDNPA Learning team. We are also looking at opportunities for camping pods and bell tents, which could have a dark skies link. As a follow up to the meeting Claire Kerr will be meeting with Andy Reynolds, the new YHA Operations Manager for the SE, to explore how we build on existing local Ranger – Hostel relationships and taking more of a strategic approach in the Eastern end of the National Park.
4. **Volunteers and Delivery**
- 4.1 In Q4 2018-19, 253 people volunteered 7366 hours towards the National Park's purposes. This is a minimum added value of £36,830. A total of 231 volunteers worked

on practical conservation tasks (6573 hours). Working with ranger teams and external partners, volunteers undertook over 380 days on Access Land sites and more than 550 days in support of partner organisations. The most common tasks were scrub clearance (425 days), coppicing (238 days) and hedgelaying (183 days). 87 days were volunteered in support of the South Downs Way.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 The state of **biodiversity in British National Parks** has received public attention following articles in the Sunday Times, and the Ecologist and local media coverage (about the New Forest in particular) by the Hampshire and IoW Wildlife Trust. The claim being made is that wildlife in Britain's National Parks is faring no better (and in some cases worse) than in the wider countryside outside them. This claim is being linked to calls for National Parks to take a much more proactive stance on rewilding in the context of the Glover Review, and is even being used by some to suggest that they should lose their IUCN classification.
- 5.2 The challenge in terms of biodiversity is a legitimate one. But many people assume that National Parks are publicly owned, and that NPAs have the powers and resources in relationship to wildlife within their boundaries when these actually lie in the hands of statutory agencies such as Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Rural Payments Agency. There is a danger that complex issues are being presented as a failure of NPAs themselves. I therefore invited the regional heads of these statutory agencies to a round table discussion to formulate a shared approach. I have received a very positive response and we are currently seeking a date.
- 5.3 Given the quality of the data, the difficulty of cutting it to Park boundaries, and the markedly different issues in upland and lowland National Parks it is very hard to arrive at a definitive answer as to whether National Parks do better or worse than elsewhere. What is clear is that the South Downs – as a mixed farming landscape designated in the last ten years – has very different challenges. We have some strong case studies – for example involving water voles, the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, or farmland birds – which buck the national and regional downward trend. Along with many other NPAs, our Glover response contains a series of clear asks in terms of powers and resources to manage biodiversity and support farmers. For all these reasons we will be convening a **Member workshop on biodiversity rewilding, and land management** on 19 September. This will be used to explore the issues and challenges in the light of the new Partnership Management Plan and the Glover Review, and we are seeking to involve some informed and outspoken external speakers.
- 5.4 For this year's **70th anniversary celebration** we are coming together with the AONBs in the south east (Surrey Hills, Kent Downs, Chichester Harbour and High Weald) to encourage new audiences from our urban fringes and London and travel to their protected landscapes by train or bus. Rather than a static, passive campaign about beautiful places to visit, we are creating an inspiring call for action that incorporates individual benefit with a 'give back to the world' element, ie helping yourself while helping the natural environment. The design work is being done largely pro bono by Chaos design agency in Guildford. We have agreed free advertising space with South Western, Southern, Gatwick, Gatwick Express, Great Western Trains, Stagecoach and Metrobus. Our aim is to launch the campaign for mid/late July in time for the school summer holidays, ideally by a Minister. The campaign ties into the Government's Year of Green Action through its focus on connecting people with the natural world and green space in a way that protects and conserves it (by public transport).
- 5.5 National Parks Partnership (NPP) the commercial vehicle that represents all 15 National Parks, has entered into a partnership with **Clif Bar**, an American company that produces organic food and drink, including energy bars used widely by climbers, hikers, bikers and those enjoying the outdoors.
- 5.6 The partnership with Clif Bar will fund a programme called National Park Protectors. Five

specific National Parks Conservation projects have been chosen to receive £10,000 funding each in 2019. The South Downs will be one of the other 10 UK National Parks that share an additional £25,000 of conservation funding.

- 5.7 Alongside this, Clif Bar will provide to NPP at least £10,000 worth of products to be distributed to volunteers and staff and for use at events in UK National Parks. We have identified a number of events in the South Downs National Park which would be suitable to distribute free bars at including Winchester Criterium, Wild Chalk Event, Brighton and Secrets of the Heath, Petersfield.

6. Lessons from other National Parks

- 6.1 The **Working Together project team** brought its final report to the Steering Group at a telephone conference in April. The project was aimed at exploring areas where National Park Authorities across the UK could usefully collaborate and share resources, and to identify the genuine barriers that exist to cross-working. Most NPAs have contributed and a number of initiatives have been taken forward resulting in a new National Park Induction scheme for new staff, a new national approach to video conferencing and market assessment of lone worker tracking devices. The project has also established on-going communities of practice on Fundraising and Charitable Governance and Apprenticeships. A joint recruitment advertising framework agreement across the UK is also out to tender and we are now entering the third year of a joint insurance contract, which was let at the outset of Working Together and has delivered considerable savings to SDNPA.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 Positive **media coverage** of the National Park has further strengthened over the past two months, with a flurry of activity regionally, nationally and in the specialist press. Highlights include the launch of the National Park Collection of visitor experiences, aligned with the sustainable tourism strand of the Public Affairs Strategy, being featured in the Sunday Times, as well as target sector media such as Travel Daily and Travel and Tour World.
- 7.2 Broadcast presence for the National Park has been particularly strong, featuring in a 70th anniversary of National Parks special on BBC Countryfile. The success of the Mend Our Way campaign also featured prominently on regional radio broadcasts, including BBC Sussex. The upcoming Bee Lines campaign to protect pollinators across the South Downs is being featured on Escape to the Country and, as well as the BBC, will be syndicated to more than 50 countries globally, including the US and Australia, and will be shown on Netflix.
- 7.3 Media coverage from a planning perspective has been a highlight, including a feature in South East Farmer on two innovative farm diversification projects in the National Park. The launch of our Design Awards to recognise outstanding design in the built environment has been widely in the local media as well as in sector titles such as Building Construction Design.
- 7.4 Our social media following continues to grow, particularly on Instagram where a new, younger audience is being reached with a series of engaging and highly-visual posts. We now have 6,247 followers – a significant leap of more than 1,200 new followers – in just two months. Our aim is to break through the 10k mark before the end of the year.
- 7.5 This year **National Parks week** moved from being held in the first week of the school summer holiday to a two week period in the Easter holidays and has been renamed 'Discover National Parks Fortnight'. In line with our new engagement strategy of targeting underrepresented groups in urban locations we organised a Ranger Roadshow to travel to 8 different town centres bordering the National Park over the course of the fortnight; Newhaven, Horsham, Brighton, Southsea, Bordon, Worthing, Crawley and Guildford.
- 7.6 We used both our events vans and had a great offer for families, with a new colouring wall, a bushcraft activity, a VR experience and a giant floor jigsaw. The latest edition of

South Downs View let families know what other events and activities they could attend in the National Park itself.

- 7.7 With the exception of Newhaven and Bordon, which had poor weather, the roadshow attracted great interest and direct engagement with a total over around 1,500 people and several hundred more following the Instagram stories that were issued during the Horsham and Guildford events.

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 28 March 2019 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 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

