



**South Downs**  
National Park Authority

**Agenda Item 11**  
**Report NPA19/20-02**

Report to	<b>South Downs National Park Authority</b>
Date	<b>2 July 2019</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. Introduction**

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 16 May 2019 NPA.
- 1.2 The local elections have brought a significant change in the Membership of the Authority which has given us the opportunity to organise a major induction programme for new Members alongside our usual Member workshops and other events. The Member induction is a two day programme: Day 1, which is being held on 27 June, will provide new Members with an overview of some of the Authority's key projects and achievements and will also provide them with relevant training to enable them to sit on one of our committees; Day 2, which is being held on 23 July, will take Members out into the National Park to give them a fuller understanding of the work done by SDNPA in a wide variety of areas from habitat conservation and enhancement, to our management of the South Downs Way, to our work with land owners and farmers.
- 1.3 The induction programme will be followed by three all Member events which will look at the landscape of the National Park (4 September), it's economy (17 October) and biodiversity and rewilding (21 November). Together these five days provide a comprehensive introduction to the SDNPA. Whilst the two initial induction days are primarily aimed at new Members all Members are of course welcome to attend.

## **2. Planning**

- 2.1 A new **awards scheme** was launched this year to promote outstanding and innovative design in the National Park. The South Downs National Park Design Awards will celebrate projects that have made a standout contribution to the landscape, heritage, built environment and our local communities. Embedding our purposes and duties in landscape-led design and efficient construction sets a high standard for future development. It is also an opportunity to promote design led solutions to delivering sustainable development to a wider audience, beyond the National Park.

2.2 Nominations are open in the following categories

- Residential
- Non-Residential
- Conservation
- People's Choice Award

A special awards ceremony will be held on 12 November to tie in with the tenth anniversary of Hilary Benn signing the National Park's official designation.

- 2.3 Consultation on the initial proposals for the **Aquid Interconnector** (a scheme to link electricity grids in England and France) closed in April. This is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Proposal (NSIP) and the applicants propose to locate the required Converter Station in Lovedean, just outside the National Park. This will contain a range of buildings including two converter halls, each measuring approximately 90m in length and 22m to 26m in height. Following a comprehensive report to Planning Committee in April 2019 SDNPA raised a number of significant concerns, including the fact that there has been no evidence tabled that the setting of the National Park (both its visual and landscape character) has been used to directly influence the siting of this proposal, which could be located on other sites in southern England.
- 2.4 Representations, including those from SDNPA, East Hampshire, Winchester and other relevant local authorities, are being reviewed by the applicant and meetings held to discuss the issues raised. These will continue over the coming months as further evidence is prepared and the proposals are refined. Officers remain fully engaged in trying to influence this proposal and it is anticipated that the application for the Development Consent Order will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate towards the end of this year.
- 2.5 At **New Monks Farm** (adjacent to but outside the National Park) Adur District Council resolved to grant permission in October 2018 for the development of 600 homes and a large retail store (IKEA), for the provision of 25,000sqm of commercial floorspace. SDNPA, through our Planning Committee, had objected to this application and following receipt of our comments changes were made to the proposal. These improved it from a National Park perspective, although there will still be an impact on landscape character and views in and out of the National Park. It has recently been confirmed that this planning application will not be called-in by the Secretary of State and it is therefore expected that planning permission will be granted once the Section 106 legal agreement has been completed between the applicant and Adur District Council.
- 2.6 Members will recall our legal action against Highways England last year in relation to the **A27 at Arundel**. Highways England will now be undertaking a consultation starting in late August or September for a number of route options, including routes outside of the National Park. Highways England have undertaken to table information on all route options to the same level of detail. The Authority and others will also be able to comment on any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities and the extent to which they could be moderated. The SDNPA response to the consultation will be brought before Members. Once the consultation has concluded Highways England will be obliged to consider and review all consultation responses before deciding which option to proceed with.
- 2.7 Enforcement action was carried out in June to remove two residential caravans that were unlawfully sited on a field off **Long Road** in the National Park at Soberton, Hampshire. In a joint exercise between SDNPA and Winchester City Council, a specialist contractor was appointed to carry out the removal of the caravans and other domestic paraphernalia. The plot contained one static and one touring caravan, contrary to the land's lawful use for agricultural purposes. Fencing had also been erected in breach of a restriction agreed by the Secretary of State in 2004.
- 2.8 This action came after an enforcement notice was served in November 2018 by SDNPA.

This set out the planning harm, including its prominent and conspicuous location in the National Park, breach of the Secretary of State-endorsed restriction, breach of the Winchester District Local Plan Joint Core Strategy and the emerging SDNPA Local Plan. The development also contravened the statutory purposes of the National Park to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area. After none of the steps set out in the enforcement notice were taken, notice was given to the occupiers that direct action was being considered and inviting the occupiers to comply. Enforcement action subsequently took place over 4-5 June.

### **3. 25 Year Environment Plan**

3.1 In May the government published the first annual progress report on the 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP) since its publication in January 2018. As the Chair explains in her update there has been a lot of activity through National Parks England (NPE) on the key priorities for National Parks, for example:

- NPE submitted a collective response, led by SDNPA, to Defra's consultation on achieving environmental net gain through planning - with specific recommendations on exemptions, tariffs, the mitigation hierarchy and compensatory land. A legal opinion has been commissioned from Landmark Chambers.
- A collective response was submitted to the Defra consultation on the indicator framework for evaluating the 25YEP. The recently published revised indicator framework does a better job of linking indicators for landscape enhancement and natural beauty.
- NPE has continued to engage with the development of the Draft Environment Bill and our concerns over independence of the new Office for Environmental Protection were echoed in the recommendations made by Parliamentary committees.
- Defra, Natural England, Public Health England and NHS have developed a partnership to take forward work on mental health, though successful implementation will be dependent upon a Spending Review bid.
- NPE and Forestry England have recommended that woodland planting and management be better integrated with ELMS development but with limited success to date. Similar concerns are shared with Historic England that the new scheme may not embrace the historic environment.
- Discussions are ongoing to ensure that NP Management Plans will be integrated with the new Natural Capital Plans being developed by Defra's Agencies. To date most thinking on natural capital in Government has been directed at the Oxford-Cambridge corridor

3.2 In the progress report, the Environment Bill and the Agriculture Bill are identified as central achievements. However, both are significantly delayed pending action on the Withdrawal Agreement. Their passage is essential to enable implementation of key policies underpinning the success of the 25YEP, including the concept of public money for public goods, the Office of Environmental Protection, and the environmental net gain planning policy. Without these two pieces of legislation it will be much more difficult to make tangible progress on the 25YEP.

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

4.1 Following the decision of the May NPA to seek to acquire **Seven Sisters Country Park** from East Sussex County Council (ESCC), the Council have now approved an officer recommendation to transfer the Country Park to SDNPA. The decision follows a detailed and competitive process through which the ESCC have sought to identify the best custodians for this iconic asset.

4.2 There will now be a period of negotiation to finalise the details, followed by extensive legal work to complete the transfer of the site, with all its associated leases and licences which will probably take place in March 2020. During this time, we will be putting together an SDNPA project team and beginning preparatory work to make ourselves

ready for ownership and the task we have set ourselves in delivering our business plan and vision for the Country Park.

- 4.3 As part of DEFRA's Environmental Land Management system (ELMs) Tests & Trials process, the SDNPA will be running a series of seven **farmer workshops**. These have been designed to gather thoughts, opinions and ideas from the farming community on the 'building blocks' of the new scheme. This includes elements such as what a land management plan should look like and how it will be used, the prioritisation of national objectives to the farm level, and the role of advice and farm clusters in scheme processes.
- 4.4 The first three workshops, run in mid-May, were attended by 50 farmers, landowners and advisors and generated some good discussion with plenty of new ideas. In many cases there was a consensus from those involved around key issues, including that any new scheme should be simple and flexible, and also interesting points raised relating to specific areas of the sector such as smaller farms and livestock enterprises. The remaining four workshops are planned for the beginning of October.
- 4.5 Once all of the workshops have been completed, the findings and recommendations will be compiled into a report that will be submitted to DEFRA by the end of the year. The information it contains can then be used to inform their on-going ELMs development.

## 5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 With the increasing emphasis on **health and well-being** across society and within the health and environmental sectors, SDNPA has prioritised this area of work in the new Partnership Management Plan, with the introduction of a new outcome. With this new emphasis, comes the requirement to increase capacity in the organisation, in order to deliver this large area of work.
- 5.2 SDNPA has lead the way in creating the first expert role of its type in an English National Park by recruiting a Health and Well-Being Officer. The purpose of this role is to promote understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the South Downs National Park and to increase its use to support health and well-being for residents and visitors.
- 5.3 The post holder starts with the Authority on 15 July and will focus on developing and improving and creating networks with a range of public health organisations and providers to raise awareness of the National Park as a resource for supporting improved health and well-being. They will also identify opportunities to create new partnerships where any gaps are identified and assess whether any National Park wide partnerships would add value to achieving SDNPA Health and Well-being outcomes.
- 5.4 Emma Allen started as our **Statutory Funding Officer** in May. This is a new role focused on assisting our Strategic Leads in securing significant grants (from government or lottery linked sources) for strategic projects. It is important to separate this from the Trust, with funds raised coming directly to the Authority. Emma has made a good start with a number of £100k plus applications due to be submitted over the Summer. I look forward to updating you as this work progresses.

## 6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 The work of the Authority continues to attract widespread coverage across print, online, broadcast and social media platforms. A key highlight of the last quarter has been the launch of the Bee Lines campaign, which will work with landowners and farmers to create new wildflower corridors across the National Park. This has been covered extensively in the regional media, including the Brighton Argus, Chichester Observer and Portsmouth News, as well as on BBC Sussex and ITV Meridian. Nationally the story was picked up by The Sun and a clutch of titles in the north such as the Yorkshire Post, as well as key outlets in the environment sector such as Forestry Journal and Envirotec. There will be more media updates to come as the campaign gathers momentum.
- 6.2 Water management continues to be a priority in our media agenda in line with the Public Affairs Strategy and a story about the return of otters to the River Meon – due to improving water quality – gained a huge amount of coverage, including being featured in

BBC Countryfile Magazine and the NFU Countryside publication.

- 6.3 The announcement that the Authority is the preferred bidder for Seven Sisters Country Park has been another highlight – gaining positive coverage in the Brighton Argus and Eastbourne Herald, as well as broadcast slots on ITV Meridian evening news and BBC Sussex Drivetime and extensive positive social media comment.
- 6.4 A content-led approach to social media, focusing on key dates such as Mental Health Awareness Week and Loneliness Week, continues to reap rewards and engage new audiences. Our Instagram following has risen by more than 2,000 in just four months using engaging, highly-visual content.
- 6.5 Our Dark Skies VR headsets continue to be very popular across all age ranges at **events** and are helping us to bring our Dark Night Skies to new audiences. In the last few weeks we have attended a number of key events engaging with nearly 2,000 people – including the Lord Mayors Show in Portsmouth, the largest Christian festival in the UK (Big Church Day Out) and we again ran the Family Bike Ride at the Winchester Criterium. We are also engaging with many weekly dog patrols and school STEM events, making this a very busy period for events.
- 7. Conclusion**
- 7.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 16 May 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 Countryside Policy & Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	<b>N/A</b>

