

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	19 December 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. Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 1 October 2019 NPA.
- 1.2 At the time of writing we are still deep in the election campaign and it has been good to see how prominently climate change, National Parks and the Glover Review have featured in the party manifestos and campaigning. Work on responding to the Glover Review has necessarily taken a back seat during the campaign but Defra has taken the opportunity to appoint a dedicated team to shape their response. I have met the head of this team on a couple of occasions recently and know that they have been using the time to map the Glover recommendations on to their 25 year plan priorities.
- 1.3 On 24 October Andrew Lee, Robin Parr and I were in London for the first of a new series of annual review meetings with Defra. We talked the Department through our new Partnership Management Plan and pressed them for early confirmation of our budget for 2019/20. It was a helpful and supportive meeting which did not generate any proposals for change from the Department but did much to raise our profile with them and register our analysis as they work towards the creation of a set of indicators for the 25 year Plan for the Environment.

2. Planning

- 2.1 I am very pleased to report that South Downs National Park Authority received an **Award** from the South East branch of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) for Excellence in Planning for the Natural Environment. The event was held on the top floor of the Spinnaker Tower in Portsmouth and the prize was awarded by Ian Tant who is the President of the RTPI. Ian then visited the National Park the following day to see some of the winning schemes for himself. We are now in the process of putting our Local Plan forward for a National RTPI Award.
- 2.2 Planning performance continues to be strong with all government targets being met. Our appeal performance in the financial year to date also remains good, which is notable given that in the first quarter of the financial year the Local Plan was not adopted and, consequently, Planning Inspectors were applying varying weight to its policies.

- 2.3 November's Planning Committee approved the allocation of £925,000 of **Community Infrastructure Levy** funding. £370,000 of this funding will be given to the Counties for defined infrastructure projects whilst the remaining money will be used to fund 20 individual projects across the National Park. As Members may be aware we are the only National Park to operate the Community Infrastructure Levy and I am pleased to note that in the current financial year we have already exceeded the total raised in 2018/19.
- 2.4 Members will recall **Esso's plans for an underground aviation oil pipeline** between Fawley refinery in Southampton and Heathrow Airport. It will replace an existing pipeline and will run across 25km of the National Park in Hampshire, entering the Park west of Bishops Waltham and leaving it adjacent to Chawton. Esso made their application to the Planning Inspectorate in May and the application is now nearing month three of the set six month examination period (which runs from early October to early April). The deadlines set by the Planning Inspectorate during the examination phase are demanding for all parties and officers from both Planning and CPM have been engaging fully with the examination process, including thorough written representations and appearing at the examination hearings on 27 November and the 3 and 4 of December. Further hearing dates are a possibility in February 2020.
- 2.5 The cost of SDNPA officer time on this project is covered by a Planning Performance Agreement. I am pleased to say that officers, both from an Authority only perspective and also in conjunction with other Local Planning Authorities, have managed to secure a number of meaningful concessions from Esso. I will report further after the end of the examination period in early April. The Inspector's decision as to whether to grant a 'Development Consent Order' will then follow.

3. **Progress of Existing Projects**

- 3.1 At the beginning of October we ran the four remaining workshops for our new environmental land management scheme (**NELMs**) **Test & Trial for Defra**. 125 people attended the seven workshops, 73% of which were farmers and landowners, with the remaining 27% comprising agents and advisors. A range of farming types were represented including arable, pastoral, mixed and dairy. Similarly, there were a range of holding types from larger estates to smaller farms, and owner occupiers to tenants. The outputs from the workshops have now been consolidated into a final report that we aim to finalise by the end of the year.
- 3.2 At the end of October we signed the contract to deliver our Farm Clusters/Land App ELM test and trial (T&T). Four Clusters will be involved looking at key priorities in the South Downs including:
- Winchester Downs Cluster – access
 - Selborne Landscape Partnership – pollinators
 - Rother Valley Farmers Group – soil and water
 - Eastern South Downs Farmers Group – chalk grassland
- As part of the first stage of the test, the clusters are now using the Land App to map the individual holdings taking part and are collating the data relating to their selected priority. Once completed, it will enable them to analyse and plan their landscape scale delivery.
- 3.3 As the Test & Trial process continues, we are working towards a National Pilot that is planned to start in October 2021. The latest thoughts are that Defra will take a modular approach with this, piloting various elements rather than an entire scheme. We remain engaged and ready to assist wherever possible.
- 3.4 We have also been feeding back to Defra as a National Parks collective through the England Agriculture and Rural Development Group (EARDG). Recent areas of consultation have included the scale, governance and prioritisation of the new scheme. Feedback from the South Downs has been largely based on the outputs from this year's farmer workshops.

- 3.5 Outside of ELMs development, at a recent National Farm Liaison Officers (FLO) meeting, there was considerable interest in the 'Meet the Farmer' initiative underway on the South Downs. Project information has now been shared through this network and we are seeking funding opportunities to roll it out to all National Parks.
- 3.6 Since June when the SDNPA were identified as preferred bidders by ESCC work has been progressing internally on the transfer of the **Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)** to the SDNPA, under the leadership of a Member/officer Project Board. We are currently in the process of completing and agreeing Heads of Terms with ESCC. This will be put by ESCC to their Lead Member on 20 January 2020 for their final decision. Following this the Secretary of State then needs to approve the transfer before it can be considered final.
- 3.7 Work completed to date by the project team includes commissioning a series of surveys and documents to support a planning application in early 2020. An architect has been appointed, and early interpretation work and signage is in the process of being commissioned to support delivery of the SDNPA vision for the site. Meetings have been held with the Environment Agency, Natural England and one of the tenant farmers and further discussions will be held once we have the ESCC Lead Member decision.
- 3.8 The Project Board proposes to complete the work in three phases. Phase 1 will start when the SDNPA takes ownership. Currently this date is outlined as May 2020, but the ESCC processes may cause this to slip. Initial works are proposed to include signage, refurbishment and interpretation works until we have completed the necessary planning and ecology surveys in August 2020. More significant refurbishment and construction work will then take place over the winter.
- 3.9 Phase 2 will complete the initial construction work specified in the Business Plan, and is likely to run for 2-3 years. Its details will be finalised at the end of Phase 1. A business case was presented to the NPA in May 2019, which is currently unchanged. This proposes a capital loan of £1.4 million to be invested into the SSCP.
- 3.10 Phase 3 has been identified as the longer term aspirations of the project, but these elements are currently outside the business case and would require additional funding to deliver and a further approval from the NPA. We have currently registered an expression of interest for Phase 3 with the Heritage Lottery Fund which would provide a substantial funding contribution, and we wait to hear if we have been shortlisted.
- 3.11 Our campaign to reach higher numbers of urban, young and black and minority ethnic audiences through **Engagement Events** with our two customised display vehicles has paid off, with the final figure for the numbers of the public directly engaged over the year approaching 18,000. This is an increase of 5,000 over the 13,000 in 2019. The rise is in large part down to our increased push to "bring the National Park to people" by running our own events, in particular our very popular 'Stargazing South Downs' roadshow during the February Dark Skies Festival, the town centre engagement during Discover National Parks Fortnight, and our attendance at the festivals such as Boomtown, Southampton Mela and the Big Church Day Out.

4. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 4.1 In Q2 2019-20, 5670 hours were contributed with the involvement of 227 volunteers. 406 of these hours were in support of access management while 4578 were put towards practical conservation of the landscape. Working with area teams and external partners, volunteers delivered 341 days in support of Access Land and over 300 days in support of partners. The most common task was scrub clearance with 229 days. Drystone walling was a popular task again with 77 days, there were also 61 days of bracken clearance and 64 days in support of the South Downs Way.
- 4.2 Members will recall that in September 2018 at the launch of the EUROPARC Youth Manifesto, we created a new volunteer role for people aged 16-25 – **Youth Ambassador**. Our plans for these ambassadors and the potential to expand their role were covered in our submission to the Glover Review. Our first two Youth Ambassadors, Kirsty Ferris and Cameron Macdonald, have been extremely active in the past few months with

takeovers on the South Downs National Park Instagram and Twitter accounts to promote micro-volunteering, articles for our website and local newspapers and a presentation to a Brighton University symposium on young people and nature. I was particularly pleased that Cameron was present throughout the recent Member workshop on climate change, making an active and important contribution to the debate. I hope that we can involve the ambassadors in all future policy workshops of this kind.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 Following the successful **Member Workshop on Climate Change** on 21 November, work has started on commissioning an up-to-date baseline for the SDNPA's greenhouse gas footprint and also, on a production basis, the greenhouse gas emissions for the National Park as a whole. An action plan for the former will be driven by the new sustainable solutions officer group. The scope for the Park-wide action plan will be drawn up in the next few weeks and brought back to the March NPA. This will be based on the concept suggested at the workshop of a coalition of partners who can themselves make measurable contributions towards a National Park reduction target and can also encourage grassroots commitments from local communities, businesses etc. Step one, drawing on the new evidence base, will be to identify which key sectors (for example transport, agriculture, housing providers) are accountable for the majority of emissions or have the potential to absorb greenhouse gases, and who can influence these sectors. At the same time we will look across all aspects of the SDNPA's external facing work on Planning and PMP, along with our Communications & Engagement work, research and evidence, to see what contribution each can make.
- 5.2 A number of Members and external speakers at the workshop mentioned the need to see the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis as interdependent. So it is appropriate that on 30 January there will be a **Member Workshop on Biodiversity, Rewilding and Land Management**. This will follow a similar format, with external speakers led by Prof Sir John Lawton, author of Making Space for Nature, the report to government which has shaped much recent thinking on working at a landscape scale on nature recovery. Other speakers will cover farming with nature and gardening for wildlife. Many of the habitat creation and restoration measures needed will have the dual benefit of absorbing greenhouse gases or increasing resilience in the face of climate change, for example by slowing the flow in river catchments.
- 5.3 On Friday 29 November the SDNPA hosted an event at the South Downs Centre to discuss the development of a **Nature Recovery Network** for the area. The event was well attended with representatives from around 40 different organisations from both the public and private sector. In the morning there were some excellent presentations from Natural England, the SDNPA and Local Nature Partnership to set the context for some joint-working in the afternoon. The group worked together to develop their ideas on how an effective Nature Recovery Network could be planned, targeted and delivered. They also considered how the organisations could achieve the necessary join-up across their various organisational remits and operational boundaries. There was a great deal of enthusiasm on the day and it generated a lot of ideas. Defra are interested in the transcripts for the meeting. The group were keen to follow up this initial work and another session will be planned in the New Year.
- 5.4 Under a private sponsorship deal negotiated by National Parks Partnerships **Forest Holidays** agreed to donate £20 per booking between 8 November and 2 December to support bee, butterfly and red squirrel projects in the South Downs, Pembrokeshire Coast, North York Moors, Dartmoor and Lake District National Parks. I am pleased to be able to report that this generated a total of £9,413 for our beelines project, bringing the total raised for beelines since its launch in May to £30,000.
- 5.5 As you know, 2020 is the **10th Anniversary of the National Park**. A year long programme of activities has been developed and will include:

- Increased engagement events in 10 town centres on the urban fringe during Discover National Parks week, an expanded Dark Skies Festival, attendance at events where the audiences we want to reach are, including Boomtown and the Southampton Mela.
 - A celebratory event on 31 March – with an informal daytime event for staff, Members (past and present), partners, volunteers and the local community and a smaller, more formal evening event with a meal celebrating the local produce of the South Downs, to which all current Members will be invited.
 - The latest Way in a Day will see us inviting 10 outreach groups from our priority audiences to walk sections of the South Downs Way with us on 19 June.
 - We will be launching a new website, and the new Partnership Management Plan – all focusing on our 10 ambitions for the future (outcomes).
- 5.6 To support the above activity, we will be creating a “partner pack” with information on how our partners can also celebrate the 10th Anniversary.
- 5.7 The Authority held its inaugural **Design Awards** on 12 November, with the event being timed to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the South Downs National Park Confirmation Order. The Design Awards recognised outstanding design projects from our first decade and the Awards were, as Members may have seen from local press coverage, very well received. Over 60 entrants from across the National Park were received for the Awards and our People’s Choice Award received 1,200 votes from the public. I have talked elsewhere about the winners so suffice it to say here that the quality of the entrants was very high and it is clear that we have much good design to be proud of. We intend to hold another Design Award in 5 years’ time.
- 6. Media and Communications**
- 6.1 There have been some important milestones in the growth of our social media channels, with our Instagram following breaking through the 10k mark. This growth has been tied to high-quality, engaging content for our growing audiences.
- 6.2 One of the media highlights of the autumn has seen wide coverage of our **Youth Action Days** to help engage the next generation of National Park custodians, with broadcast coverage on BBC Sussex. Raising awareness of the cultural heritage of the National Park has also led our media push during the autumn, with an article on folklore in the South Downs featured in every major news publication in Sussex. The launch of a bid to plant 5,000 new trees across the National Park has also gained considerable traction.
- 6.3 In summary, our media coverage continues to raise the profile of the work of the National Park Authority in our local communities as well as large urban communities outside the National Park boundary and further afield across the UK.
- 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 1 October 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	N/A