

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	26 March 2020
By	Chief Executive Officer
Title of Report Note	Chief Executive's Progress Report

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to:

- 1. 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 19 December 2019 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Contingency planning and information provision on the Coronavirus has been a priority over the past month. At the time of writing our approach can best be summed up as "calm and watchful" but the position is changing almost daily and we will know much more by the date of the meeting. We are following the latest government guidance to the letter, with the intranet always containing the latest information. The whole organisation has effective and well tested systems for working at home, should the need arise, and we have a strong set of provisions to ensure the continued smooth operation of the Authority.
- 2.2 The Chair's report has already covered the formation of the new Government. It is welcome news that Lord Gardiner has continued as a Minister in Defra to provide continuity but there has been a great deal of change around him, amongst both Ministers and officials. We are building strong connections with the new team of officers at Defra and the new senior official responsible for National Parks and the Glover Review will be visiting SDNPA on 19 March.

3. Planning

- 3.1 We have recently consulted on two draft Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD), related to Affordable Housing and Sustainable Construction. These SPDs, to be presented to Planning Committee for approval in due course, add further detail and guidance on the policies in our Local Plan. The SPDs reflect the priority we give both to maximising the provision of affordable housing and, in the case of the draft Sustainable Construction SPD, helping to mitigate climate change through improvements in the environmental performance of new buildings.
- 3.2 I am pleased to report that planning performance continues to be strong with all government targets being met. Our appeal performance in the financial year to date also remains good (and above the national average), 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.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 In February we ran the **SDNPA 2020 Farmer Breakfast events**. This year there were both morning and evening events to provide further opportunities to attend. In total, 104 farmers and landowners were involved. Presentations were given on ELMs, Regenerative Agriculture, Climate Change and the Farm Carbon Cutting Toolkit, with time for questions at the end. The events were well received and we have received positive feedback.
- 4.2 In February, new details of the proposed new **Environmental Land Management System (ELM)** were unveiled in the Environment Secretary's vision for future farming. Speaking ahead of the NFU's national conference, George Eustice announced that farmers will be at the forefront of reversing environmental declines and tackling climate change as they reshape the future of farming in the 21st century. The speech also reiterated the 'public payments for public goods' approach and proposed three tiers of entry to the scheme, enabling anyone from any farm or land type to participate at the right level.
- 4.3 Within the National Park we have been continuing with our ELM Tests & Trials (T&T). The feedback and outputs from all seven Farmer Workshops have been collated into a final report, which provides strong support for a scheme that is simple, flexible and utilises the local knowledge of farmers and landowners. The report was submitted to Defra and circulated to all Farmer Workshop attendees in early January. As part of the ELM T&T process, the SDNPA has been asked to sit on Defra Thematic Working Groups which meet quarterly and allow us to further share the outputs of our work.
- 4.4 A meeting has been held with Craig Harrison regional director of the **Forestry Commission** and SDNPA key colleagues to discuss the national accord and the opportunity for creating a South Downs National Park joint accord with the Forestry Commission. Other areas of common interest such as planning/illegal felling enforcement, good forestry practice and appropriate tree planting were also discussed. It was agreed that a local accord would be beneficial, building on existing work while allowing scope for enhancement between the SDNPA and the Forestry Commission. The accord would consider information sharing to maximise effectiveness, data to inform tree planting and a joint effort to attract new people into forestry.
- 4.5 On 20 January the ESCC Lead member confirmed the acquisition by the SDNPA of **Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)**. This decision is now subject to approval by the Secretary of State. The exact date of transfer is currently unknown as the timeline for this approval is not within our control. Members will be aware that a Member/Officer Project Board is overseeing project delivery. Phase I is outlined to start construction in October 2020 which relies on a planning application submission in the next few months. The initial construction work will be undertaken between October 2020 and May 2021, as specified in the Business Plan which was presented to the NPA in May 2019 and is currently unchanged.
- 4.6 Works completed by the project team to date include the appointment of the Architects and QS who are currently drafting designs for Phase I. All forensic and planning surveys have been completed to inform our overall master-planning of the site. A landscape consultant has been appointed to help us draft a landscape management plan. Discussions have also started with existing tenants. Phase I includes the signage, refurbishment and interpretation works in the Visitor Centre with improved toilet facilities at Exceat, the renovation of the Foxhole cottages into self-catering holiday accommodation and renovation of the Camping Barn and Facilities to provide a robust holiday offer to visitors.
- 4.7 A two day resident consultation event was held at the Seven Sisters Visitor Centre to engage with the local communities about what they would like us to change at SSCP. These events were well attended by 250 people. Further consultation events will be held as part of our wider communication plan for the project.
- 4.8 Further works in Phase 2 and Phase 3 are part of the developing masterplan for the entire site and will include our landscape management plan delivery, as well as longer term aspirations. These elements are currently outside the approved business case and would require additional funding and a further approval from the NPA.

- 4.9 On 30 January we held a Member Workshop on Biodiversity and Rewilding which included presentations by: Prof Sir John Lawton (author of “Making Space for Nature”), David Ellin (Paythorne Farm), Alistair Driver (Rewilding Britain) and Adrian Thomas (RSPB). Our new Partnership Management Plan and the Local Plan establish a clear policy framework, and the Environment Bill when made law will require the SDNPA and all LPAs to produce a Nature Recovery Strategy. But the workshop agreed we need to go further – to stimulate more action on the ground, and work with the Local Nature Partnerships and the AONBs to develop a SE wide Nature Recovery Campaign. The combined outcome should be a Nature Recovery Network joining areas inside and outside the National Park.
- 4.10 Internally, this work is being driven by the Landscape & Biodiversity Programme Theme Programme Board, which is developing a rolling 5 year programme of projects and core work and has a sub-group specifically focused on nature recovery. There is a strong interlock with the draft Climate Change Strategy & Action Plan, as nature based solutions have a crucial role in locking-up carbon “*net zero with nature*”.
- 4.11 As with the Climate Change work triggered by the previous Member Workshop, the proposals to scale up work on nature recovery will come back to members in the near future.
- 5. Volunteers and Delivery**
- 5.1 In Q3 2019-20, 6568 hours were contributed through 1365 individual days from 233 volunteers in the **Volunteer Ranger Service**. 6318 hours were put towards practical conservation of the landscape, admin volunteers contributed 100 hours, and 87 hours went in support of access management. Working with area teams and external partners, volunteers contributed 244 days on Access Land and over 500 days in support of partners. The most common task was scrub management with 459 volunteer days.
- 6. Corporate Update**
- 6.1 Following approval by the NPA on December, the new 5 year **Partnership Management Plan (PMP)** has been readied for publication. A limited run of hard copies in a refreshed and simplified format has been printed. A new addition to the promotion of the PMP, is the ‘at a glance’ booklet, which is a summary of the outcomes and priorities. The plan and the associated action plan, and background evidence and indicator information will also be available as a set of web pages. There is a supporting programme of Communications activity that will run across the whole year. Once a year we will write out to partners who are helping to deliver PMP outcomes - and with the information provided, celebrate our joint achievements.
- 6.2 When the Member Task and Finish Group completed its work on the PMP, it agreed that it would be useful to carry out an independent evaluation of the process of the review. This will help inform and improve the approach for carrying out the periodic reviews of the PMP in future. The Performance and Projects Team have successfully let a framework contract to support SDNPA evaluative work. The evaluation of the process for reviewing the PMP will be the first piece of work that we will undertake as part of this framework. The evaluation will be commissioned before the end of March.
- 6.3 The **Health & Well-Being Strategy** is being refined and honed with partner input, starting to define and develop proposals for Health & Well-Being hubs in the NP. There have been a number high level meetings with Directors of Public Health, to increase awareness of the National Park and seek opportunities for work together. A meeting with all of the Directors of Public Health for areas in the National Park scheduled for February was postponed due to the Coronavirus understandably taking their attention elsewhere.
- 6.4 SDNPA is jointly delivering a Social Prescribing conference in Bournemouth on 20 May 2020. The purpose of the conference is to build on the 2017 national accord between National Parks England and PHE, which supported joint action on improving health and wellbeing through our National Parks. It will bring together a wide range of stakeholders with the shared goal of improving physical and mental health and overall wellbeing through interaction with National Parks.

- 6.5 We are also working with the Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team on developing relationships with social prescribing link workers to address ways of overcoming barriers for them and their clients to using the National Park to support Health and Well-being. There are a number of projects in delivery and under development including 3 pilots developing activities within the National Park linked to social prescribing pathways, in addition to the work that has been going on at Truleigh Hill to develop a community led landscape management plan.
- 6.6 We are in the process of finalising a new bespoke **Management Development Programme** to support middle managers in developing their skills and expertise in all aspects of management. It will be a 3 day course supported by facilitated learning sets targeted at identifying any issues and developing plans to address these to deliver defined organisational outcomes. This programme will be introduced firstly to Countryside Policy and Management in the Autumn, and will then be rolled out to other areas of the organisation.
- 6.7 We are currently supporting 6 members of staff who are undertaking professional university courses (MSc/MBA) as part of our well-established strategy to “grow our own” expertise and skills.
- 6.8 In November 2019, we completed a full comprehensive programme to train staff at all levels in **Mental Health Awareness**. The programme involved training 16 employees to be mental health first aiders. All directors, managers and staff were trained in mental health awareness.
- 6.9 We are continuing to develop our **e-learning system** which has been a successful example of working with other National Parks and is now used by 14 out of 15 NPAs.
- 6.10 The **apprenticeship programme** is continuing with support for 6 countryside worker apprentices at various stages in their training and also an apprentice in each of facilities, planning and business administration.
- 6.11 The **10th Anniversary** theme will be carried through the whole 2020 events programme with new activities around the 10 areas of achievements. Members are aware that on 31st March we will be running two events. The daytime session will run from 11–2 and will see 170 staff, partners and members come together with speakers and 10 market stalls celebrating the top 10 achievements of the last 10 years. This event is now fully booked, as we are limited to 170 spaces due to fire safety regulations. It will provide the formal launch for our new Partnership Management Plan. The evening event will run from 7.00–10.30 pm with around 80 invited guests including all Members and key figures instrumental in the setting up of the National Park.
- 6.12 Our strategy for taking the National Park out to underrepresented groups will continue for the 2020 event season, which has begun with record breaking attendance at our events for the **South Downs Dark Skies Festival**. We engaged with 3,340 at our key headline events, with the number for the Midhurst event increasing from 600 last year to 1100 this year, and Petersfield increasing from 500 to over 850.
- 6.13 In the coming weeks we will be bringing the National Park to 10 town centres around the National Park that are being visited by our Ranger Roadshow in Discover National Parks fortnight during the Easter holidays: Worthing, Havant, Bognor Regis, West Wittering, Bordon, Portsmouth, Shoreham, Brighton, Alton and Burgess Hill.
- 6.14 In other moves to broaden our reach the **Dog Fun Day**, which has been held at Woolbeding Parkland for the last five years, is moving to be part of the two day South Downs Show being held at Queen Elizabeth Country Park, bringing our Take the Lead messages to an estimated audience of 10,000.
- 6.15 Our **Wild Chalk Event** in East Brighton Park will be expanded to include aspects of Nature2020, an initiative set up by The Living Coast to celebrate the UN Decade of Biodiversity. We will have a presence on the Long Man Brewery stand at the South of

England Show and will be helping our partners celebrate their own anniversaries, including the 350th birthday of Gilbert White, and 70 years of the YHA.

7. Lessons from other National Parks and AONBs

- 7.1 In line with our approach and with the Glover Review, the SDNPA continues to strengthen its links with the **South East England Protected Landscape Group (SEEPL)** and other National Parks.
- 7.2 Nature Recovery is one element, and by the time of the meeting we will have launched our People & Nature (Green Infrastructure) Framework, whose principles have been adopted by our SEEPL colleagues. Some of the priority areas identified in this framework connect the National Park and our near neighbour AONBs. For example, we are now working with Chichester Harbour AONB and Chichester DC to identify green corridors between the two landscapes, and conversations have started with the Surrey Hills AONB and Natural England about extending the Heathlands Reunited Approach to encompass all of the Wealden Heaths if funds can be secured for a Phase II.
- 7.3 The Chichester Harbour AONB is linked with the South Downs Learning Network, attending meetings and featuring on our Learning Map, and its volunteer cohort are similarly linked into our SDNP Volunteer Network. The High Weald AONB is also linked in with the Learning Network.
- 7.4 We have provided Dark Night Skies talks and support to various AONBs as they consider International Dark Sky Association applications, including the sharing of policy material from our DNS Technical Advice Note. The SDNPA also contributed to the development of a UK-wide Dark Night Skies network for protected landscapes.
- 7.5 In support of the Chair's role representing SEEPL on the board of Transport for the SE, our officers have worked with seven AONBs with regards to the proposals for the powers and functions of the body, and with the High Weald AONB we have recruited Alex Pringle as a Transport Planning Officer who will, as part of his role liaise closely with the SEEPL members to initiate research, collate evidence and identify common issues.
- 7.6 Between the SDNPA and our local AONBs there are a number of Test & Trials underway to inform Defra's work on the new England Land Management Scheme (ELMS). For example, we are working closely with the Surrey Hills, and with the Kent Downs on viticulture.

8. Media and Communications

- 8.1 Since the last report in December we have had 190 pieces of earned media coverage across local, national and sector media, covering the wide variety of the Authority's work, including preparations for the 10th anniversary, the Dark Skies Festival, our Take the Lead campaign and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding. Our social media continues to grow, in particular, Instagram, where we are expanding our reach to new audiences including young people and those in urban areas surrounding the National Park.
- 8.2 In addition to the events mentioned above, there are a number of key dates to note:
- Refreshed interpretation for the South Downs Centre will be installed by 20 March.
 - An entirely redesigned website will be launched by Monday 23 March. The draft site is currently undergoing user testing with key audience groups. The launch of "Your National Park" campaign on 31 March will share the Partnership Management Plan with a wide audience.

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 19 December 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