

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	7 July 2020
By	Chief Executive Officer
Title of Report	Chief Executive's Progress Report
Note	

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report

I. Introduction and Summary

- I.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my verbal report to the 21 May NPA. My last written report was presented to the 26 March NPA and looking back now it seems to describe a different world, so great has been the impact of COVID-19. The health of staff and Members has been our primary concern but the whole organisation can be proud of the speed and flexibility of our response to the challenges of the pandemic that has brought us to the position described in the papers for this Meeting.
- I.2 The flexibility already built into our structure and work patterns has shown its worth during the current crisis, enabling momentum to be maintained as we moved to a virtual model. Our interactive map of local suppliers and support networks was produced only a week into the lockdown and is still one of the best available. Our Recovery Fund was launched on 26 May and is now in full operation. Our website has been entirely remodelled and relaunched and we have extended the reach and impact of our social media channels.
- I.3 Over the last four weeks we have been gradually resuming fieldwork, whilst complying with government guidance on social distancing. Alongside other activities such as reaching out to partner organisations, we have put the emphasis on getting out to key hotspots, engaging the public and gathering information.
- I.4 It is important to appreciate, however, that we are only nearing the end of the first phase of the impact of the pandemic. The acceleration in unlocking the economy on 4 July is welcome but will pose its own challenges. We must maintain maximum vigilance, not least to ensure we guard against the possibility of a "second spike". The approach of "calm and watchful" that I stated back in March is more relevant than ever in the current phase.
- I.5 In recent blogs I have noted how the growing public interest in nature is generating an encouraging increase in the number of people visiting this and other National Parks for the first time. This is particularly relevant in the light of the very different experience those living in urban areas without access to green space have had over recent months and the current,

and long overdue, high profile that race and equality issues are receiving in the national news. Whilst we need to take into account some of the challenges extra numbers bring to the landscape and to residents living near hotspots, it is wonderful to see so many people connect with the National Park for the first time, especially when we have acknowledged in our own Communications & Engagement Strategy that we must better engage with the urban fringe and underrepresented groups. We must offer a warm and open welcome to these new visitors.

- 1.6 Our call to make National Parks central to the recovery of the nation after the virus is making real headway amongst decision makers in Whitehall and the vision of a “natural health service” may soon be within our grasp. The Government has also been developing its response to the Glover Review throughout the lockdown and we have been actively involved through National Parks England (NPE).
- 1.7 With the unlocking must come a greater focus on the needs of the hard hit rural economy and pressure to ensure that the national recovery is both sustainable and green. This is becoming an increasing theme in the work of officers and in our day to day contacts with partners and local businesses. I dislike the phrase “new normal” but it does convey the breadth of the issues that need to be addressed and we are preparing for a session for all Members on this subject that will take place as part of the P & R meeting on 24 September. The outcomes from this meeting will, alongside the Department’s response to the Glover Review and the shape of the new public spending round, be an important input to our Corporate Plan and budget for the next financial year and may have significant implications for how we deliver the PMP over the next five years.

2. Planning

- 2.1 Year-end **planning performance** is subject to a comprehensive report at Policy and Resources Committee on 16 July so I will keep my comments here short. 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 was good and we have seen generally strong support from Inspectors for the ground breaking policies in our Local Plan. Our planning service won a Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Award for the Local Plan in 2019. This adds to the three other RTPI Awards accumulated over the last three years.
- 2.2 In terms of the **Community Infrastructure Levy**, which Members will recall we are the only National Park to operate, £1.87m had been collected in the 2019/20 financial year (compared to £1.095m in 2018/19). In accordance with England-wide CIL regulations £280k was distributed to 33 parishes across the Park, providing Parish and Town Councils with important funds for improvements in their areas. I can confirm that those payments have all now been made.
- 2.3 We are currently reviewing over 400 applications for CIL funding from the 2019/20 CIL receipts. The Autumn Planning Committee will decide which projects will receive a total of £1.5m of CIL funding in accordance with the SDNPA’s Infrastructure Business Plan. In March CIL officers received a number of applications for deferrals of CIL payments given the economic impact of the current pandemic. We were dealing with these requests sensitively and pragmatically before Government advice was published asking us to do just this.

3. Progress of Existing Projects

- 3.1 With in-person events remaining out of the question for now, we are unable to hold our successful **Wild Chalk Event** which we have run for the last few years in partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council. Instead we will be running our first ever virtual Wild Chalk Festival over six days from Sunday 19 July to Friday 24 July. Each day will be a mix of digital live and recorded events, sharing crafts and activities designed re to engage a wide public with chalk grassland. While there will be a focus on Brighton and its surroundings, the great advantage of going digital is that we can also spread out to other urban areas adjacent to

chalk grassland including Winchester, Eastbourne and Worthing. We will also use this as a learning experience to see how we could run other events virtually.

- 3.2 Highways England (HE) are due to publish their response to the public consultation on **M3, Junction 9** that took place last year. When this takes place we will update Members on the scheme and the revised timetable for the Development Consent Order process.
- 3.3 Members will recall that HE have undertaken their second public consultation on the plans for the **A27 at Arundel** following the JR concession, during which they released further survey and research evidence regarding the route options, including the route option which is outside the SDNP boundary, but within its setting. We are awaiting confirmation of their preferred route, and also whether government funding will be forthcoming for the scheme.
- 3.4 The scheme for the **A27 East of Lewes** is progressing under permitted development and not as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Proposal (NSIP) and is currently being geared up for construction with site clearances now complete. The orders for the land needed to construct the Non-Motorised Users route are almost complete and will be confirmed shortly. The works are on schedule for completion in March 2022.
- 3.5 Members will recall that **Aquind Limited** are proposing to construct and operate an electricity interconnector between France and the UK. This will include a new marine and onshore High Voltage Direct Current ('HVDC') power cable between Normandy in France and the south coast, converter stations in both England and France, and a fibre optic data transmission cable. The development site is outside of, but in places only 200-300m from, the National Park boundary, in the vicinity of Horndean on the East Hampshire / Winchester District boundary. Within the proposal it is likely that the convertor station will have the greatest impact on the National Park given its siting near to the boundary and its range of buildings, including two large convertor halls.
- 3.6 The proposal is an NSIP and will therefore be determined by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy after a 6 month examination by the Planning Inspectorate. At the time of writing the examination has yet to commence but is expected to do so shortly with many of the hearings carried out virtually. As is always the case with NSIPs, SDNPA will be engaging fully with the examination process, including through written representations and appearing at examination hearings. A formal consultation response approved by the Planning Committee in 2019 provides the framework for our involvement.
- 3.7 With regard to **Health & Well-Being**, much of our work since the last NPA has been focused on dealing with the impact of the lockdown on communities and partners. There have been a number of high level meetings to prepare the National Parks England (NPE) response to Defra on COVID recovery. The offer for health and well-being is based on linking with organisations and businesses that employ key workers to provide low cost but replicable experiences in National Parks to support their mental health and well-being. We will define which organisations we might link with when it is clearer whether this approach will be adopted. A related offer is from the education and learning strand of work, which has its own set of proposals which involve a national "Great Big Walk" and the further development of the John Muir Families scheme.
- 3.8 The **Connecting People and Communities Theme Board** has approved two community climate change projects. The first is the Community Energy Pathway project, working with our local communities to support their transition to a low-carbon future. The aim is to help them develop community energy schemes that can contribute to achieving the UK 'Net-Zero' target. They will achieve this by working with Community Energy South (CES) and other partners to develop community owned renewable energy and establish a network of community energy groups across the National Park. The second is Net-Zero Parish Planning in Winchester District, to support local communities to take control of the climate emergency, to demonstrate how net-zero planning at the parish level can empower them to take positive action on climate change and develop more resilient communities. The

project will provide Parish Councils with a baseline for their carbon footprint which will allow them to compare their performance and develop specific improvements.

4. Volunteers and Delivery

- 4.1 On 17 March 2020 volunteering was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pause took effect in Q4 2019-20, 3600 hours were contributed through 594 individual days from 194 volunteers in the Volunteer Ranger Service.
- 4.2 During the pause on volunteering, a series of webinars have been held twice-weekly. Topics have covered SDNPA projects, and subjects such as trees, fungi and pollinators. The webinars have attracted 255 attendees and are available to view online. There have also been two Zoom meetings held with South Downs Volunteering Network (SDVN) to provide support during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Network is made up of partner organisations including charities such as the National Trust and local authorities who involve volunteers in support of the National Park.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 In the light of the current “Black Lives Matter” campaign a staff group has been formed which is critically assessing our operation and our public profile preparatory to a workshop with all senior and middle managers to seek practical improvements. SDNPA has, of course, always operated within a strong framework of equality and diversity and provides all staff and Members with training to support, enhance and embed understanding of these issues. We undertake monitoring across all our activities including details of numbers of applicants, those short listed and candidate appointments. Having said this, there is undoubtedly more that we can do, for example by looking again at our advertising, our policies and procedures.
- 5.2 Since March there has been much discussion about our approach to **Whole Estate Plans (WEPS)** with questions raised by some Members as to the process of creating them and their weight in the planning system. In response a meeting was held of the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of both the P&R and Planning Committees, along with the officer team who support WEPS. This endorsed the overall approach and recognised the importance of WEPS as a long-term tool for working with the estates who own so many of the assets of this National Park, but also made a series of changes to the process to strengthen the level of Member input and scrutiny. It was recognised that many of the benefits of WEPS are in relation to delivery of PMP outcomes, for example on biodiversity, access, education or tourism, and that they are not planning documents per se. We currently have 5 endorsed WEPS, with 8 currently being prepared and 28 land holdings in discussions with the SDNPA.
- 5.3 The Local Plan (Strategic Policy SD22: Development Strategy) recognises the significant influence of estates and farms across the National Park, and the impact the management activities of these estates have in the short, medium and long term. Since WEPS do have material weight in the Local Plan it is also important to be very clear (for ourselves and the host authorities) about how they are taken into account when planning applications are brought forward. The existence of an endorsed WEP provides helpful context for the Planning Committee in making an informed decision but does not automatically mean approval. This was demonstrated recently in determining applications – one of which was approved and one rejected - for two estates which have endorsed WEPS. We have commissioned an independent review of the WEPS to identify further improvements. This will seek input from the clients, Members and officers and its findings will help us improve the process further and start to identify the outcomes from those already completed.
- 5.4 There is a great deal of thinking underway about what a **post lockdown rural economy** might look like, not least in Defra, and we and our NPA family have been feeding in our thoughts and experiences to officials on a regular basis, and also having regular virtual meetings with local partners such as the economic development teams of the County Councils and the LEPS. We have a survey out with a wide range of local businesses, heritage

and other organisations to obtain their feedback on what they see as the impacts of COVID-19 in the short, medium, and long term. This will help shape our future work and guide the use of the Recovery Fund.

- 5.5 Following the two successful **Micro Forums** on Climate Change and Cultural Heritage we have now finalised the programme up until December. Micro forums are one way that Members can continue to engage in the key issues facing the National Park whilst we are unable to meet face to face. They run alongside our now resuming virtual committees and NPA meetings and make the best use of the technology available to us to keep these essential conversations going during lockdown. I would like to thank those that have participated in them to date and encourage all Members to take part in the future programme:

- 28 July – Health and Wellbeing
- 15 September – Seven Sisters trading vehicle
- 20 October – Theme programme board's
- 5 December – Rural Economy

- 5.6 We now have **expenditure figures for the first two months of the financial year** and based on those the full year outturn is showing a projected overspend against budget of £127,000. The largest single variance, as we suspected, is on planning income, where we are forecasting a reduction of 14.5% over the year, equating to a £189,000 reduction in income. This should be partly offset by a corresponding reduction in our expenditure on delegated planning agreements of £55,000 over the year. It should be emphasised that these projections are made on only two months of actual expenditure this year in a situation that is more volatile than most, and also it is not unusual for modest overspends to be forecast this early in the year. I am therefore confident that our budget remains under firm control in the current climate and that actual expenditure is on target to be within budget at the end of the year.

- 5.7 The financial position is obviously much less certain beyond the current financial year, given the overall damage suffered by public funds because of the pandemic, and we will need to be prepared for changes in the extent and methods of government funding as the country emerges from the current emergency position.

6. Lessons from other National Parks and AONBs

- 6.1 The response to COVID-19 has prompted very close joint working between National Parks and AONBs. At the height of the pandemic National Park Officers were holding a weekly virtual meeting and NPE has rapidly developed and submitted to Ministers a set of key “asks” to allow NPAs to support national recovery. It has also developed, alongside the AONBs, a proposal for a National Landscapes Panel as a means of creating the national champion for Protected Landscapes sought by the Glover Review without the need for a new statutory body or the duplication of responsibilities. We await the government response on all these proposals as well as its official response to Glover. I will inform Members as soon as anything is received.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 Since my last report we have made great strides in our **communications and digital engagement** work. We have had over 205,000 visitors to the new website since its launch, more than twice the number for the same period last year. We have added nearly 4,000 new followers on social media since March and are reaching nearly 300,000 people a week through our social media. Video content is leading the way during a period when so many people have looked to us to bring the National Park to them. The communications team are looking at how the virtual can form a positive part of our engagement in future. Our first “Your National Park” video bringing the outcome of the Partnership Management Plan to life

has been viewed by 17,000 people. Our 3Rs messaging on using the National Park safely has been very well received and shared online, drawing positive feedback from the public and key figures.

- 7.2 It has been a strong quarter for **media**, despite the headlines being dominated by news of COVID-19. The 10th anniversary of the National Park made global news, with 182 single pieces of coverage locally, nationally and even internationally, including the London Evening Standard, Daily Express, Yahoo News and Mail Online.
- 7.3 The unveiling of the new **Partnership Management Plan**, together with a launch video featuring partners who will help deliver the outcomes, was covered widely in the regional media, with 25 separate pieces of coverage, reaching more than 190,000 people. Follow-up stories on local champions who will help deliver on the outcomes have been positively received, with the inspiring story of Head Forester Nina Williams making spreads in several Sussex newspapers and a feature in Forestry Journal.
- 7.4 The work of the Authority in helping our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as steps being made to aid recovery preparations, have been widely covered in the local and regional media. The launch of the interactive map, together with the launch of the Authority's COVID-19 Recovery Fund and our recovery work with the tourism sector, has attracted 50 separate pieces of media coverage. In addition I was interviewed by ITV Meridian and BBC Sussex about our 3Rs advice.
- 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 21 May NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or 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