

Report to	<b>South Downs National Park Authority</b>
Date	<b>15 October 2020</b>
By	<b>Chief Executive Officer</b>
Title of Report	<b>Chief Executive's Progress Report</b>
<b>Note</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. Summary and Background**

1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 07 July 2020 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

2.1 It has been a much busier summer than usual and our staff have risen to the dual challenges of safe (and often remote) working to protect against COVID coupled with the need to satisfy growing public interest in the landscape. Particular thanks are due to the Ranger teams who have become much more outward facing through their patrols of visitor hotspots, to the reception and office services staff and the communications team, whose efforts are described later in this report.

2.2 Heightened public interest in the National Park has been matched by increased activity at political level. The PM's speech in Dudley on 30 June promised a green recovery with major investment in the fight against climate change. On 24 September he followed this up with a statement to the UN Climate Action Roundtable that climate action "cannot be another victim of coronavirus". Four days later the PM pledged to protect 30 per cent of the UK's land by 2030 in a bid to put "nature and biodiversity on a road to recovery". This was widely interpreted as a promise to designate one or two new National Parks in line with the Glover recommendations but he did not say this and the commitment could be met in other ways. I cannot remember a time when our agenda has featured so prominently in Government thinking, aided by preparations for the UK hosting the delayed COP 26 next year.

2.3 It was therefore disappointing that the anniversary of the publication of the Glover Review on 21 September 2019 passed without comment from Ministers or any indication of when we can expect the long delayed Defra response. On the day of the anniversary I pressed the Department via Twitter to respond with the new powers and resources that the National Park and AONB family is seeking. Julian Glover picked this up almost immediately, sending it on to Defra Ministers with the comment "this is your moment".

2.4 When the Review was published SDNPA praised its breadth and ambition but Members commented that the most important information would be Defra's response. This is because the Review makes very clear (page 22) that "any increase in ambition will need to be matched with funds" and "at the very least we want to see existing budgets for National

Parks secured in real terms and sustained for at least a further five-year period so they can plan ahead with confidence”.

- 2.5 These are the pillars on which the rest of the Review is based and we need to know whether Defra support them. Without this any new work we take on in response to Glover will be at the cost of valuable activity elsewhere, or will need to be funded by time consuming and uncertain grant applications (of which we have many).
- 2.6 SDNPA has worked hard over the past year of adjusting our programmes and working methods to meet the challenges of Glover. We have done a great deal to meet his challenge to NPAs to “look out and up, not in and down” but the 27 proposals and 65 recommendations in the Review require more than an adjustment to our existing model, so we need Defra to indicate which they see as a priority and how they will fund additional activity.

### **3. Planning**

- 3.1 The **Planning White paper** continues to generate discussion amongst stakeholders and a Member workshop on 15th September provided a clear steer. We all recognised the deficiencies in the existing system but there was a general view that some of the proposals could hinder good place making. The workshop also noted that the lack of detail in many areas makes detailed comments hard to formulate. Colleagues are now working up a draft response to the specific questions as well as an overall response to the thrust of the changes. This will go to Planning Committee on 8 October and then to full Authority for formal sign off on 15 October, allowing time for any changes to be incorporated before the end October deadline.
- 3.2 **Planning performance** continues to be strong with all government targets being met and a strong appeal performance. We have seen a reduction in planning application submissions (and associated planning fee income) since the start of the pandemic. This was pronounced in April and May but has returned to near pre pandemic levels in recent months.
- 3.3 We have recently adopted two **Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)** related to Affordable Housing, adopted in July, and Sustainable Construction, adopted in August. These SPDs 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 Sustainable Construction SPD, helping to mitigate climate change through significant improvements in the environmental performance of new buildings.

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

- 4.1 Since our last **Seven Sisters Project** progress update to the NPA in July, we have completed the Heads of Terms with ESCC. The transfer forms were submitted to the Secretary of States for DEFRA and MHCLG in mid-August and we await a response. Once this has been received there will be a period of up to 4 months of legal conveyancing between SDNPA and ESCC before we become the official owners, so we remain optimistic that the construction work will start in very early 2021.
- 4.2 The project team have completed and submitted our Phase 1 planning application which is due at Planning Committee on 8 October. Further consultation with the parish councils took place via a well-received webinar on 30 September at which we outlined our wider vision alongside the details of the planning application. A regularly updated new Seven Sisters page is now available through the SDNPA website providing information on the project and FAQs.
- 4.3 An overall masterplan and vision for Seven Sisters has been approved by the Project Board, and this was presented to the NPA in July along with the revised business plan and a request for additional funding for Phase 1 delivery. This paper also included, for noting, the draft Phase 2 masterplan concepts for the Foxhole part of the site, that have been developed by the project team and architects. The Phase 2 proposals will come back to the NPA in December.

- 4.4 The landscape management plan has been progressed and a specialist consultant appointed and the baseline ecology surveys have now been completed. A separate land agent was also commissioned to help the Authority with grazing/landscape management options for the short term following the submission of notice by the existing farming tenant. The farm tenancy will end on 30 April and it has been agreed to deliver short term management through a grazing license which is being explored with potential interested parties locally.
- 4.5 A commercial manager has now been appointed to deliver the business plan and vision at Seven Sisters Country Park. Contractual discussions are underway and he is due to start in post on 1 November.
- 4.6 A paper was taken to the NPA in May regarding the proposed **Trading Company** to be set up by the Authority which was approved in principle pending a Member workshop which took place in September under the guidance of Eversheds, In the light of the Member steer from this session we are now working with Eversheds on the Memorandum of Association and other detailed documentation to allow final detailed decisions to be brought to the Authority in December.
- 4.7 Previous reports have described **Esso's** plans for an underground aviation oil pipeline between Fawley refinery in Southampton and Heathrow Airport. This would replace an existing pipeline and will run across 25km of the National Park in Hampshire, entering west of Bishops Waltham and leaving adjacent to Chawton. The 6-month examination mandated by law ended in April and the Examining Authority (a panel of four Planning Inspectors) delivered their recommendation in July. This recommendation is confidential until the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy makes his decision on whether to grant a Development Consent Order, which is scheduled to be on or before 7 October. This date may be extended but we have had no indication of this at the time of writing.
- 4.8 If the Development Consent Order is granted it would be only the second such Order granted in the National Park, the other being the Rampion windfarm. The cost of SDNPA officer time on Esso's proposal is covered by a Planning Performance Agreement.
- 4.9 Regarding the **A27 at Arundel** we are awaiting confirmation of Highways England's preferred route and also whether government funding will be forthcoming for the scheme.
- 4.10 In July we held our first virtual **Wild Chalk Festival** and there is a short update item on this later on the agenda for today's meeting.
- 4.11 Phase II of the **entry signage** is now fully back underway after a delay due to Covid restrictions affecting our contractors. All independent safety checks have now been completed and prototypes of the sign are being manufactured for sign off. An update and revised schedule will be brought back to Members through the P& R Committee in November.
- 4.12 At the previous NPA meeting Members agreed to establish a **COVID-19 Recovery Fund**, allocating £375,000 from reserves for this purpose. Of this, £25,000k went to strengthening our communications and engagement activities and the remaining £350,000 to the five Theme Programme Boards (TPBs) which deliver parts of the PMP. The launch of the fund was accompanied by a press release and extensively promoted through our own partner networks, a set of criteria drawn up and dedicated inbox set up for enquiries. The fund was designed to cover short term measures needed by small businesses, NGOs and heritage organisations to help them adapt to the Covid situation, with all projects to be completed by the end of the financial year.
- 4.13 I am pleased to report that since the launch there have been over 100 expressions of interest from across the National Park, with 84 considered to meet the initial criteria. Meetings of the TPBs have been taking place over the last few weeks and at the time of writing the situation is as follows:

1. Landscape & Biodiversity TPB:	awarded	£24,198
2. Cultural Heritage:	awarded	£82,480
3. Access:	awarded	£12,892
4. Connecting People and Places.	awarded	£52,947
5. Economy	awarded	£83,000
TOTAL to date		£255,517

- 4.14 As the fund is currently oversubscribed it has been closed for now but there are still bids in the system which need to be processed. The call for applications has helped us to learn about how organisations across the National Park are faring through the pandemic and will inform the development of the South Downs Enterprise Network.
- 4.15 In February this year, Defra released their **Environmental Land Management (ELM)** Policy Discussion Document, setting out their initial thinking on ELM design, providing an update on progress and review of high-level design options. With input from all English National Park Authorities, a response to the document was compiled and submitted to Defra in July.
- 4.16 **ELM Test & Trials (T&Ts)** continue across England. As of September, 65 T&Ts had been launched, with 62 still live and 3 complete (2 of which are SDNPA T&Ts). In August, the SDNPA's Farm Cluster / Land App T&T report was completed and submitted to Defra. Findings showed that The Land App (an on-line mapping tool designed to appraise and plan on-farm activities) provided a suitable tool for farmer groups to review, plan and deliver landscape scale objectives. Particularly useful features identified included the ability for users to collaborate online (sharing maps and information), being able to zoom between farm and landscape scale to identify linkages and connections, and the potential to use the system for on-going monitoring. Issues raised included the need for a strong reliable internet connection and for training and assistance for farmers to make the most of the system.
- 4.17 We have also been working on a permissive access project with farmers across the National Park. Permissive access is no longer supported through the **Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS)**, or rolled-over Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements, potentially resulting in many well used and practical permissive access routes being lost. Subsequent to a prioritisation exercise undertaken by the Local Access Forum, we have been working with 14 farmers who had permissive paths (both footpaths and bridleways) in now expired HLS agreements, to continue providing this access. The aim of the project is to draw up annual agreements and provide funding to retain these routes until 2024 when permissive access payments are likely to be available through ELM.
- 4.18 In September, Defra launched the **Green Recovery Challenge Fund**, providing grants of between £50,000 and £5 million to kick-start environmental renewal whilst creating and retaining a range of jobs in England. All six farm clusters in the SDNP were consulted and their project ideas included in an Expression of Interest submitted by the South Downs Trust. Projects put forward included; programmes for pond and hedgerow restoration, access improvements, public interpretation / education and landscape scale chalk grassland improvement. We are expecting a response from Defra in early October.

## 5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 On 17 March volunteering was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In July a **survey** was sent to volunteers to understand the mood regarding an October return to volunteer group tasks. There were 219 replies from 373 registered volunteers (59% response rate). For context, in 2019 there were 300 active volunteers over the entire year, with around 200 active each month, out of a total of 300. 97% of respondents were happy to return to volunteering. The main concerns, though few, were around social distancing and accessing tasks. Volunteers were then asked to re-register their personal information and agree to the new Covid-19 volunteering risk assessment.

- 5.2 Independent and paired volunteer roles, such as water vole and river fly monitoring, began to return from July onwards under new measures to ensure Covid-safe procedures. In August area teams began the process of creating volunteer pods of no more than 6 people. This generally includes one member of staff and five volunteers, though some tasks will be volunteer-led. The first pod task is set to take place at Church Copse on 1 October with volunteers and staff from the Central Downs.
- 5.3 Volunteers are required to sign in digitally and report any symptoms or exposure to others who have tested positive for Covid-19. In the event of a pod being exposed to an infection, the pod and all affected individuals will pause their involvement in line with SDNPA Covid-19 policies. This volunteering model will remain in force until the pandemic has ended.
- 6. Corporate Update**
- 6.1 **Response to latest Covid Guidance:** We are continually monitoring, evaluating and modifying our response to the Covid situation in line with government guidelines, ensuring we continue to keep our staff, members and stakeholders as safe as possible. Results from the recent staff questionnaire “Working Safely/Covid Recovery Plan” completed by 96% of staff, were positive, identifying that the great majority of staff were satisfied with the way in which the SDNPA was dealing with issues and felt well informed and supported by their managers. The report will be shared with all staff through Update and will form the basis for developing and implementing further changes and designing the SDNPA workplace for the future.
- 6.2 **Diversity/Equal Opportunities:** Work continues through the staff group following the “Black Lives Matter” campaign. An update was presented at the all staff event and work is now progressing on developing the consultant brief to go out to tender. The key objective will be to support the design and delivery of a programme of learning and development to identify where and how we can improve our organisational and individual awareness and understanding of equality and diversity issues and ultimately improve outcomes.
- 6.3 In our respective blogs over the last few months, both Andrew and I have reported on the numerous reports and extensive media interest in the state of biodiversity both nationally and globally. **The global reports** – including the WWF/ZSL Living Planet Report and the UN biodiversity assessment, paint a depressing picture. But these trends are not confined to rainforests and coral reefs – the Living Planet Index for Europe has declined by 24% since 1970 and this pattern applies in the UK. Whilst there are individual hopeful signs such as the successful reintroduction of beavers or red kites, these have to be put in context that the UK remains amongst the most nature depleted places on earth.
- 6.4 Good examples like the Knepp rewilding, or indeed the temporary resurgence of nature during lockdown, demonstrate that, given the right policies and conditions, nature can return with astonishing speed and power. This is the context within which the recent launch of our **People & Nature Network** generated considerable media interest. It sets out a guiding framework and principles for action within the National Park and across the wider SE, including twelve hotspots where there is great potential both to restore nature at a landscape scale but also to create accessible natural greenspace for communities which lack it. Examples include the Eastbourne and Hailsham area, the dip slope of the Downs and the coastal plain down to Littlehampton and Bognor Regis, and corridors north from the National Park to the High Weald AONB.
- 6.5 **Review of WEPs:** Following the endorsement of the Eastbourne Downland Estate WEP, there are a number of key pieces of work being undertaken with the WEP team. Firstly, the responsibility for managing the process is moving from Planning to Countryside Policy and Management with the continued support of the Governance Team, secondly an evaluation will be completed this autumn to assist in improving the process and outcomes of WEP and thirdly the WEP guidance will be revised following on from the evaluation. To date six whole estate plans have been completed with three nearing completion, the WEP team have been undertaking annual monitoring of the endorsed WEPs with each estate over the last quarter.

- 6.6 **Forestry Update:** The SDNPA responded to the Defra's England Tree Strategy consultation which will inform a new England Tree Strategy which to be published later this year. The strategy will set out policy priorities focused on expanding, protecting and improving our woodlands, and how trees and woodlands can connect people to nature, support the economy, combat climate change and recover biodiversity.
- 6.7 Our response was positive – National Parks should be seen as one of the arms of Government that will make this happen as our staff have enormous experience, trust and knowledge of working with and helping the land owning community as well as all the key partners including the Woodland Trust and the Forestry Commission.
- 7. Lessons from other National Parks and AONBs**
- 7.1 In line with the Glover report we are continuing to work closely with our **neighbouring AONBs**. For example, our new Chair has taken up the seat on Transport for the SE which represents the collective views of the **SE Protected Landscape (SEPL)** group and is a key point of influence on regional transport infrastructure plans. Our evidence base on the environmental landscape impacts of viticulture which is nearing completion has been undertaken jointly with Kent Downs and Surrey Hills AONBs. Under the umbrella of the **People and Nature Network** we are developing proposals for green corridors between Chichester Harbour AONB and the South Downs, whilst investigating the potential for restoring the network of Wealden Heaths north of the area covered by the Heathlands Reunited project and up into the Surrey Hills. Finally, we are looking at the very successful Surrey Hills enterprise partnership to see if this model would be transferable to the National Park.
- 8. Media and Communications**
- 8.1 There has been a strong media profile for the National Park over the summer months, with the **media highlight** being the launch of the People and Nature Network. This received 28 separate pieces of coverage in print/online, as well as two broadcast hits on BBC Solent and BBC Sussex. It was picked up notably in the big cities – Brighton, Portsmouth and Southampton – as well as in key influential publications such as The Planner. It was the main opinion piece in The Brighton Argus with the title pledging support. Interest continues with features in influential publications such as Public Sector Build Journal and ProLandscape.
- 8.2 The launch of the Heathlands Reunited sculpture trail was another success, with front page and a three-page inside spread in the Portsmouth News – a key target for reaching under-represented audiences.
- 8.3 Our **digital reach and engagement** continues to strengthen with our average weekly post increasing to just under 300,000 from 133,000 for the same period last year. Between June and August our new website had over 540,000 unique visitors. This is an increase of 26% on the same period last year. At the end of August our social media following was over 48,000, an increase of 31% from the same period last year.
- 8.4 All of this activity over the summer was focused on two key messages: continuing to inspire and bring the National Park to people, whether in their own homes as they isolated or to help them to get out and explore; and focusing on caring messaging as more and more people came to visit and we started to experience problems around litter, verge parking, BBQs, fires and wild camping. It was important that we kept the messages positive and welcoming and this had a positive effect with other users spreading the word about how to care for the National Park.
- 8.5 We continued our Covid information, with 14,000 people accessing the Covid webpage between June and August. We worked closely with the ranger teams to promote key messages and monitor social media (seven days a week) to pick up on cases of illegal camping and fires etc. This coordinated approach helped us to pick up on serious activities such as fires and take appropriate action including supporting partners with signage such as at sites like Kingley Vale, and to share screenshots of heritage crime with heritage crime officers as Sussex Police.

## 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 7 July 2020 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.

**TREVOR BEATTIE**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**South Downs National Park Authority**

Contact:	Trevor Beattie
Tel:	01730 819313
email:	<a href="mailto:trevor.beattie@southdowns.gov.uk">trevor.beattie@southdowns.gov.uk</a>
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>

This page is intentionally left blank