

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	17 December 2020
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

I. Summary and Background

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 15 October 2020 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 On 18 November the Prime Minister launched the government's **Ten Point Plan** for a "Green Industrial Revolution". This is significant for the cultural change it signals, demonstrating that the environment is central to economic recovery, with the creation of a quarter of a million jobs linked to the ten points. The £5bn in the Plan for alternative greener modes of travel including cycling, walking, and buses, should create more opportunities for everyone to access our beautiful landscapes.
- 2.2 The ninth point is also of direct relevance to SDNPA – "protecting and restoring our natural environment, planting 30,000 hectares of trees every year, whilst creating and retaining thousands of jobs". This includes a promise that government will start the formal process of designation of new National Parks and AONBs in 2021. Our ambitious work with the Local Nature Partnerships and our neighbouring AONBs on a nature recovery network for the South East of England, and our excellent links with the leading candidates for National Park status position us well in relation to this part of the Plan.
- 2.3 The Ten Point Plan has been underlined by a series of related government announcements such as the "30 by 30" pledge to increase the area of England managed for nature to 30%, to include new National Park designations, and the 4 December announcement of a new target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 68% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.
- 2.4 On 25 November the Chancellor announced his **Spending Review for 2021/22** which is a one year only settlement. This included several items relevant to SDNPA:
- A £0.4bn cash increase in core funding for Defra from 2020/21 to 2021/22;
 - An additional £40m investment in nature recovery through an extended Green Recovery Challenge Fund. There will be a rapid new bidding round in the New Year and we are investigating the best route to re-submit our previously failed bids;

- Additional funding for National Nature Reserves which will, we assume, be delivered through Natural England and should benefit places like Kingley Vale, Castle Hill and Lullington Heath;
 - An increase in funding for National Parks and AONBs to more than £75m. We are pressing for further details of what all this will mean for our own budget but at the time of writing nothing more has been forthcoming from Defra or the Treasury. This increased sum will, however, have to cover extra resources for the future of farming, and for AONBs, as well as the emerging plans for the National Landscape Service (NLS) and for the designation of new National Parks and AONBs.
- 2.5 We hope to be able to provide more information about the Settlement as it relates to SDNPA at the workshop that precedes the NPA but it is possible that our budget will not be confirmed until well into the New Year, as has been the case on several previous occasions. In the meantime, we believe that the best working assumption is that our grant for 2021/22 will be flat in cash terms. We continue to hope that the Ministerial response to the **Glover Review** will provide the three to five-year financial security that the Review recommended and that is necessary to deliver the long term ambitions in our Partnership Management Plan (PMP) and our Nature Recovery and Climate Change Strategies.
- 2.6 On the subject of the Glover Review, which was published a year and a quarter ago, we have noticed that activity within Defra on preparing a response has increased significantly. We have made a series of excellent contacts with civil servants working on components of the response and I anticipate a Ministerial statement just before – or perhaps just after – Christmas. This is unlikely to be the point by point response we are seeking, for which we will probably have to wait until the Spring. It will, however, set out the direction of travel together with a commitment to the creation of a statutory National Landscape Service, rather than the less costly and more swiftly implemented Panel model which we had favoured.
- ### 3. Planning
- 3.1 In my last report I referred to the **Member Workshop** on the Planning White Paper. Since then we have submitted our response following the NPA discussion in October and subsequent consideration by the Chair and the Chair of Planning. Nine key matters were highlighted including the importance of Neighbourhood Plans, Environmental Protection, Climate Change, Design and Beauty and not diminishing public engagement or local input, in addition to detailed responses to the 26 questions.
- 3.2 It is gratifying to note that a number of other submissions, such as that from the Local Nature Partnerships, echoed some of our text. Similarly, a response on behalf of all the English National Parks was submitted which I signed off as Lead Officer for this area of work, ensuring our offer to assist in shaping appropriate policy for designated landscapes was highlighted.
- 3.3 It was significant that, at about the time of our submission the Housing Minister Chris Pincher confirmed, in a letter to the ex-Chair of the NPE, that all National Parks will be 'Protected Areas' – with the highest levels of protection - under the proposed zoning system. This was one of the key areas on which we were seeking confirmation.
- 3.4 **Planning performance** continues to be good with all government targets being met and a strong appeal performance. I am pleased to report that the Development Management teams at the host authorities and our own team have maintained speed of decision making and throughput of cases in the financial year to date at the same level as for the corresponding period last year. This is despite difficulties the pandemic has brought, such as the suspension of site visits for a time during the first lockdown.
- 3.5 In the financial year to date approximately £650k has been received from the **Community Infrastructure Levy**, compared to £1.3m at the same time last year. This is due to the impact of the pandemic as we have been granting deferrals of CIL payments where this has

been requested. The Government changed the legislation at the start of the pandemic to allow deferrals of payments for up to 6 months and in the South Downs this has been fairly widely taken up by developers. Note however that these are simply deferrals that affect the timing of when we receive the monies, they are not a reduction in the amount of CIL to be paid. This does however mean that we will have less money to fund infrastructure projects than we had in the last financial year.

- 3.6 The **Soft Sand Single Issue Review of the Joint West Sussex Minerals Plan**, which we are working on in partnership with West Sussex County Council, had examination hearings with the Planning Inspectorate in August. This was only the second local plan examination in England to have been held virtually. The hearings went well and I am pleased to report that the Inspector has suggested only very modest modifications to the plan. A public consultation on these modifications commenced in November and will run until January 2021. Subject to the comments received at this consultation we hope to present the plan to the NPA for adoption in March.
- 3.7 Highways England (HE) have said that they are planning to run a public consultation on their as yet unpublished proposals to upgrade the **M3 Junction 9** in February and March 2021.
- 3.8 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 Lovedean 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 (each up to 26 m in height).
- 3.9 The proposal is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Proposal (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. As is always the case with NSIPs, SDNPA are engaging fully with the examination process, including through written representations and appearing at examination hearings (the first of which will be held in December). A formal consultation response approved by the Planning Committee in 2019 provides the framework for our involvement.

4. **Progress of Existing Projects**

- 4.1 In October I reported on the high level of interest in the **COVID Recovery Fund**, established by Members in May, and extensively promoted through our networks of partners. We have received a total of 105 valid applications, and in recent weeks all five Theme Programme Boards (TPBs) have met to consider bids. I am pleased to report that £280,532 has been awarded to 61 different businesses/organisations across the National Park. In addition, a separate fund was also set up for collections at risk, and 14 museums, galleries and heritage sites received £18,491. Though the individual awards are often only a few thousand pounds, feedback indicates that they have made a real difference on the ground in helping small businesses, visitor attractions and others adapt in this very challenging year. A full report will be compiled at the end of the financial year.
- 4.2 The work on **Whole Estate Plans (WEPs)** continues to be an important way to build strong long term relationships with some of our biggest landowners – private, public or third sector. Relevant officers from CPM and Planning recently met with the Chair and Deputies of P&R Committee to improve the WEP process and strengthen and clarify Member engagement in it. After a tender process, Land Use Consultants (LUC) has been awarded the contract to undertake the WEP Evaluation. They have significant relevant experience – producing a Whole Estate Plan for the Lowther Estate in the Lake District National Park, and working on the South Downs Landscape Character Assessment. Members will have an opportunity to feed into this evaluation either by survey or via a workshop.

- 4.3 Earlier this year Members endorsed the Whole Estate Plan for the **Eastbourne Downland** which extends for approximately 4,174 acres within the National Park. The action plan is now being implemented with the first projects underway, including the revamp of the Beachy Head Visitor Centre and the development of “access for all” holiday accommodation at Black Robin Farm.
- 4.4 Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) has started wider consultation on the Whole Estate plan for its **Downland Estate**. This sets out a 100 year vision and a landscape-led approach for over 13,000 acres of the Eastern Downs, mirroring the progress made at Eastbourne. It takes into consideration opportunities to provide a connected landscape for improved soil health, habitat protection, biodiversity, climate change mitigation and carbon sequestration. Four key themes have been identified: natural systems, land use and management, climate change and cultural, and these are being used to shape consultation with stakeholders and residents. A series of online workshops were held during November and we expect to receive a first draft of the WEP in late spring. We will then arrange a site visit for Members. Other estates currently developing WEPs include Firle, Barlavington, and Bereleigh.
- 4.5 In 2019 we introduced a **Statutory Fundraising post**, which raises funds directly for the SDNPA. These bids are often large and complex, requiring a great level of detail. Some, such as our bid to the Green Recovery Fund or the Get Britain Building Fund, have had multiple partners and hold the potential to support a variety of delivery against the PMP. Since March we have submitted a total of ten bids, four of which have been won (at a value of £789,000), five of which are in progress with four at the Second Stage (presenting a potential further value of £815,000) and just one rejected. This funding will increase our resource for delivery across the PMP. In addition, having this function established in the current climate, with multiple funding windows presenting themselves, will provide many more opportunities to expand our work over the coming 12 months.
- 4.6 East Sussex County Council has received approval from the Secretaries of State at both Defra and MHCLG to proceed with the transfer of **Seven Sisters Country Park** to SDNPA. These approvals start the formal conveyancing process of between 2-4 months before we can become the official owners, so we remain optimistic that construction work will start in spring 2021.
- 4.7 We were granted full planning permission for our proposed Phase 1 works at Planning Committee on 8 October. We are now in the process of discharging our planning conditions and hope to have these completed by January 2021. We have also completed an initial tender process with potential contractors for our phase 1 works, and hope to issue the detailed tender in January 2021 for award on or before 1 April.
- 4.8 A regularly updated new Seven Sisters page is now available through the SDNPA website providing information on the project and FAQs. We are also developing a new Seven Sisters website which will be ready for day 1 of ownership, as a key communication tool for our local communities, stakeholders and visitors. The landscape management plan has been progressed and a draft is due before the end of the year. All baseline surveys have been completed and we hope to share this information with local community early in 2021.
- 4.9 Our new Commercial Manager, Peter Cousin, started in November and has been busy developing relationships on the ground with our future tenants at Seven Sisters as well as reviewing the detail in our business plan. Peter will be based at Seven Sisters and is already a key part of the project team looking to deliver the vision of the Authority at Seven Sisters.
- 4.10 Work has been progressing in the background on Phase 2 concepts since we last brought these to the NPA in July 2020. The proposals for the Phase 2 feasibility study and design work will come back to the NPA in March.

5. Volunteers and Delivery

- 5.1 On 17 March volunteering was suspended due to the pandemic. In October, volunteers returned in 'pods' of up to 6 people. Volunteers are required to confirm they are free of Covid-19 symptoms or contact with an infected person 24 hours prior to volunteering. Volunteers are only allowed to be involved with one pod and track and trace procedures are in place. If a Covid-19 case is identified within a pod, its tasks will pause.
- 5.2 The second national lockdown in November meant that volunteer pods were paused but they are being reinstated now that the National Park is in Tier 2, where the rule of 6 applies outdoors. The volunteering team is confident that the pod system is flexible enough to see out the pandemic, outside of national lockdowns. Due to capacity issues within the Western Area team, volunteer tasks there will not return until January.
- 5.3 A great deal of work has been undertaken by the Area Teams to bring volunteering back, and the Assistant Rangers deserve particular recognition for the effort they have put in to build pods of volunteers.
- 5.4 Our Youth Ambassador Cameron Macdonald gave a virtual presentation to the National Trust's Changing Chalk volunteer development group in November. Cameron provided advice for partner organisations about how to involve young people through volunteering. I'd like to record my gratitude for the invaluable contribution made by our dedicated Youth Ambassadors.

6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 The latest **Covid restrictions**, during the second national lockdown did appear to have some impact on visitor management and behaviour across the National Park. Honeypot sites and settlements experienced an increase in visitor numbers, with full/busy car parks, especially during fine weather. This resulted, on occasions, in inconsiderate and dangerous roadside verge parking, particularly at weekends. There was also some increase in reports of fly-tipping. Despite this, anti-social behaviour has not occurred with the frequency or degree that occurred during the first national lockdown and in the wider countryside, beyond the honeypots, it was largely observed that people were (and continue to be) respectful to both others and their surroundings.
- 6.2 Earlier this year, in line with good practice, we commissioned an external evaluation of the process of creating the new **2020-2025 Partnership Management Plan (PMP)**. The work was undertaken by Heritage Insider who have considerable experience in Protected Landscapes, and included interviews with partners, Members and officers. A Member workshop on 17 November provided an opportunity to meet the report author, discuss her findings and consider the implications for SDNPA. All agreed it was a good report, with a clear analysis that has highlighted some important issues for the delivery of the current PMP as well as any future reviews. We are now developing our response which will inform the upcoming Corporate Plan, Public Affairs Strategy and other ongoing work. Key messages include the need for clearer prioritisation, better impact measurement, and a stronger emphasis on the role of the whole SDNPA in building external relationships.
- 6.3 A number of the recommendations from the Heritage Insider report relate to the importance of building effective partnerships. In the light of this, and of course the Glover Review, the proposals for a reboot of the South Downs Partnership are on the agenda for this NPA.

7. Lessons from other National Parks and AONBs

- 7.1 For the last six months we have been working with the England's other National Parks to create four interconnected **Delivery Plans** under the umbrella of National Parks England (NPE), which address how we will collectively tackle changing priorities over the next 10 years in the post COVID world.

- 7.2 The Delivery Plans set out how the Parks will protect and enhance the natural environment, how they will become leaders in tackling the climate emergency, how they will support thriving communities where sustainable farming and land management deliver a wide range of public goods, and how they will support the health and wellbeing of the nation. Each has a key theme – Landscapes for Everyone, Sustainable Farming and Land Management, Climate Leadership and Nature Recovery and each defines key targets and how these will be achieved.
- 7.3 The plans make clear that the creation of new National Parks must not be at the expense of investment in our existing Parks. They also bid for the tools, resources and political support necessary to allow NPAs to deliver the government’s plans for a green recovery. They have been submitted to Government with a request for support for this vision.

8. Media and Communications

- 8.1 There was **award success** for the Authority, with our Meet The Farmer project winning gold in the CPRE Sussex awards for connecting people with the countryside and a further Europe-wide award for our Wild Chalk event, which came in the top 5 for “Covid 19 – Events and Online Podcasts” in the Digital Communications Awards alongside some major international brands.
- 8.2 It’s been a strong autumn for media amid a news agenda that has been dominated by the pandemic. From the start of October, we have issued 11 proactive press releases and gained 80 pieces of media coverage, with a PR value of over £40k and estimated reach of 800,000 people. Notable pieces have been the Authority’s work over the past year to meet recommendations in the Glover Landscapes Review, our response to the Planning White Paper, health and wellbeing work at Truleigh Hill, beneficiaries of the Authority’s Recovery Fund and the launch of our first astrophotography competition.
- 8.3 The success of the **Trust’s Trees for the Downs campaign**, with partnership delivery from the Authority, has gained significant traction, with 22 separate piece of coverage, including nationally in Farming UK, Farmers Weekly and Forestry Journal. BBC’s Escape to the Country produced a feature on the story – as well as the National Park’s 10th birthday – and this is set to go out on Netflix to over 100 countries worldwide next year.
- 8.4 An in-depth look at the life of a South Downs National Park Ranger was featured as a beautiful spread in Sussex Life magazine. Significant thought leadership pieces on the **People and Nature Network (PANN)** have been featured as double-page spreads in Public Sector Build Journal and ProLandscaper Magazine.
- 8.5 Our **digital presence** continues to go from strength to strength and our new website, launched at the start of lockdown, has continued to attract an increasing number of users. Between September and November this year we had three times as many visitors as the same period last year. We now have over 50,000 followers across social media with our posts reaching an average of 232,126 people. Our growing social media following has helped us to increase engagement across our projects, including take up of the “Wild Winter” Family John Muir Award, with 224 sign-ups compared with 77 who signed-up for the summer award. Returning this year is the South Downs Advent Christmas Quiz, starting on 1 December. We currently have 806 people signed up.

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 15 October 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.

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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

