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| Report to | South Downs National Park Authority |
| Date | 25 March 2021 |
| 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. Summary and Background

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 17 December 2020 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Chair's report to this NPA has covered the wider political agenda, including the latest position on the Government response to the Glover Review, so I will focus on the corporate position at the end of a very challenging financial year.
- 2.2 During the latest national lockdown the National Park has not experienced either the frequency or intensity of inconsiderate behaviour that was seen in Spring/Summer 2020, with the colder winter weather obviously being a contributing factor. The National Park has nonetheless been busier than over a normal winter period, particularly at honeypot sites and popular villages during weekends, the half-term week and on winter days when the weather has been fine. The very welcome increase in the number and diversity of new visitors from our immediately adjacent urban areas has, however, inevitably been accompanied by additional pressures on the landscape, such as litter, verge parking and dog control issues.
- 2.3 Area teams have been providing support to landowners and partner organisations to lessen the negative impacts whilst our communications team has focused on positive messaging around behaviour change. SDNPA's dual strategy of thanking people for staying local and asking them to experience the National Park through our virtual walks and tours whilst championing positive behaviour on SDNPA social channels, rather than calling out negative behaviour, is proving highly effective. This type of communication is not only of more long term benefit than messages that suggest that the National Park is "closed" or unwelcoming, but also more likely to help achieve the positive behaviours we want to encourage. As our Take the Lead campaign has shown, positively engaging with our audiences is the most effective means to achieve behaviour change. It also promotes our work on equality and diversity, as I was able to explain in a recent interview for the Guardian.

3. Planning

- 3.1 I am pleased to report that planning performance continues to be good, with all government targets being met and a continuing strong record at appeal.
- 3.2 Recognising that some 18 months have passed since our **Local Plan** was adopted we ran a series of workshops in January with our own Members and officers together with Members and officers from the host authorities. These reiterated key Local Plan components and addressed any questions that have arisen from implementing the Plan in practice.
- 3.3 The **North Street Quarter Site in Lewes** is in the process of being purchased by a new developer, Human Nature, which has announced that they will not be implementing the planning permission which has been granted for the site and will be seeking a new permission in due course. Officers have already had early discussions with Human Nature about entering into a PPA (Planning Performance Agreement) to help shape and guide the new proposals and the submission of any application.
- 3.4 In relation to the proposals to upgrade **Junction 9 of the M3** we had been expecting, in February and March, a formal consultation on Highways England's (HE's) as yet unpublished proposals. This has been postponed by HE and I will update Members through this report when it is rescheduled. With regard to the unrelated **M3 J9-14 Smart Motorway** proposal to the south of J9, HE plan to begin works 'imminently' to clear vegetation along the route of the with the main works starting in August/September 21 and aiming to complete in April 24. The compound has now been moved out of the National Park at the request of SDNPA, subject to final confirmation of the actual site by HE. The Smart Motorway works are being carried out under permitted development rights, and we are encouraging liaison between the separate Smart Motorway and J9 teams, particularly around SDNPA proposals for extensive mitigation measures.
- 3.5 In my last report to NPA in December I noted that **Community Infrastructure Levy** receipts were much lower (£650k in total at the time) than for the corresponding period last year. This was predominantly because of the impact of the pandemic as we have been granting deferrals of CIL Payments (in line with Government legislation) where this has been requested. A number of these agreed deferrals have been paid in January and February and I am pleased to report that the Authority has, at the time of writing, collected £1.79m in CIL receipts for the current financial year. This compares to £1.88m collected for the financial year 2019/20.
- 3.6 Work continues to have been busy in Development Management, especially in the area of **Enforcement**. The team has continued to deal with a high number of complaints and correspondence about alleged breaches across the Park. We are currently engaged in several complex and high profile injunctions and stop notices which are particularly demanding on staff time. It is clear that we are at capacity in this area.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 In December 2020, Defra released the Agricultural Transition Plan (ATP) that provides a 'road map' for their planned changes to UK Agricultural Policy from January 2021 to December 2024. The ATP provided updates on key areas including:
- Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) reduction rates.
 - The Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme.
 - A new approach for farming regulation and enforcement.
 - Grants and other help to improve farm productivity and prosperity.
- 4.2 These updates provide an overview of the changes ahead, although the ATP does not contain detail, much of which is due to be published in Spring 2021. What is, however, clear is that two key areas that will be the focus of the SDNPA's farming work over the next three years.

- 4.3 The first of these is **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)**. FiPL is due to start sometime after April this year and will run for 3 years up to March 2024. The scheme is being launched to support farmers in Protected Landscapes (PLs) to make improvements to the natural environment, cultural heritage and public access on their land. It will fund:
- Farm level projects to diversify income and prepare for ELM.
 - Wider infrastructure projects on farmland to support farmers and rural economies.
- 4.4 All 44 PLs in England will receive some funding based on a set of allocation criteria, which will come from the reductions made to BPS payments. The ATP specifically mentions support for upland farmers, 75% of which live and work in PLs and SDNPA has been pressing hard for the needs of lowland farmers. The fund will be delivered through PL bodies. Defra are currently developing a national framework to guide the delivery of FiPL, and once received, the SDNPA is ready to plan for its implementation in the National Park.
- 4.5 The second is the **Environmental Land Management (ELM) National Pilot**. The ATP states that the ELM National Pilot will begin in 2021 (probably in the Autumn) and again run for three years. The National Pilot will be run in phases and cover all three elements of ELM; Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery. Defra aim to involve 5500 farmers and landowners during this time. Further information and invitations for Expressions of Interest (Eols) are due to be released in Spring 2021. There is significant interest from both farmers and farm cluster groups across the National Park to be involved in the National Pilot, which offers SDNPA the opportunity to influence the development of the final scheme.
- 4.6 The overall goal is that the SDNPA (as with all PLs) will be playing the leading role in the delivery of ELM within the National Park post 2024. Our work on FiPL, alongside any involvement in the National Pilot, will demonstrate to Defra the Authority's ability to deliver a high quality ELM scheme.
- 4.7 Following the approvals in December from the Secretary of State for ESCC to proceed with the transfer of the **Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)** to SDNPA, legal conveyancing is now underway. Although we are working to a completion date of 1 April, the process within ESCC is taking longer than anticipated and the transfer is likely to take place in mid April. The exact date will be updated on our website and notified to Members through Update as soon as we have confirmation.
- 4.8 The arrangements for the trading company are covered elsewhere on today's agenda so I will restrict this report to the focus of the project team, which for the next few months will be on securing ownership, the TUPE transfer of existing rangers, evaluating and identifying a preferred contractor for Phase 1 and ensuring we are ready for both ownership and commencement on site. At the time of writing we are evaluating contractor tenders for the Phase 1 works. These are likely to start at the end of May 2021 with a completion in January 2022.
- 4.9 The Member/officer Project Board will continue to meet on a monthly basis to oversee the project, ensuring that the phase 1 works are delivered within the budget approved by the NPA. It recently endorsed my decision to delay work on a possible phase 2 until SDNPA has built up considerable practical experience of the operation of the completed phase 1. Further details of the updated phase 1 business case will be presented to the NPA at a future meeting
- 4.10 A new website for Seven Sisters Country Park is ready to go live on the first day of ownership. This will be the key source of information for visitors as well as keeping our local partners and communities engaged throughout the construction process. In preparation for the launch of the new website we have arranged an online parish meeting for Friday 26 March. This will manage expectations of what changes visitors will see immediately, as well as impacts to the site during construction and our longer term plans for Phase 1. We will provide further engagement opportunities for our stakeholders and local

communities in the spring, particularly in relation to the draft Landscape Management Plan. SDNPA are currently undertaking a tender process to secure grazing on the site for the short-term following the imminent departure of the current farmer.

- 4.11 Following a submission of several applications for funding we were formally approved CIL funding in October of £100,000 and have also been successful in securing £25,000 from Rampion to deliver sustainable elements in the Phase 1 works. We have a further 3 funding applications out for determination and hope to hear about whether we have been successful in the next two months.
- 4.12 Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) are continuing to develop a **Whole Estate Plan** for their downland landholding. There has been an excellent response to the public engagement process for the draft City Downland Estate Plan with over 10,000 visits to the website and over 400 people attending online discussion groups run by Planning for Real.
- 4.13 BHCC's aspiration is to collate all feedback in the publication of the draft vision and key policies in May 2021. A draft version of the City Downland Estate Plan will then be published in September 2021 as part of a public consultation carried out by B&H with responses being made via the consultation portal throughout September and October. In parallel to the public engagement will be a SDNPA consultation and SDNPA Member site visit which is planned for 16 September. This should culminate in a final version of the WEP being submitted to the NPA for endorsement in early 2022.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 The return of volunteer pods was placed on hold again in January after the new national lockdown was announced. A very limited amount of traditional volunteering has therefore taken place in 2020-21. The new plan is as follows:

- Individual/paired volunteer roles (South Downs Way Wardens, etc.) can resume from 29th March;
- Volunteer groups can resume from 1st June.

In the meantime, a film to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Volunteer Ranger Service is in the early stages of development and will be complete by late summer. This will be an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the wider importance of volunteering to the National Park.

- 5.2 Our Youth Ambassador volunteers recently took part in a session with Amberley Museum staff providing advice on how to progress youth engagement work at the Museum. Cameron MacDonald and Kirsty Ferris will visit the site when it is safe to do so to provide more in-depth feedback and guidance.
- 5.3 The Authority's microvolunteering work is currently being developed for an April launch. All UK National Parks are supporting the project which will promote the iNaturalist app and the educational and outreach opportunities it provides through species identification and data recording. In the spring a public microvolunteering programme will be launched which will be a key future activity as visitors are encouraged to report wildlife, among other micro-tasks that benefit the National Park.
- 5.4 The first steps in developing SDNPA's new volunteering programme at Seven Sisters Country Park are underway. Key roles will include visitor centre/greeting volunteers and site-based wardens. These will commence when staff are ready to recruit, train and manage the volunteers, probably in May.

6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 Since my December report the **Income Generation** team have secured a further two grants, at a combined value of £300,000. This brings the level of statutory funding secured this year, for National Park Projects, to well over a million. This funding will bring much

needed resources to our work over 2021/2022. At the end of March, we will submit a bid with National Parks Partnerships and Palladium to the EA's Environment Investment Readiness fund, with which we seek to pilot a finance mechanism for nature recovery within the South Downs. The aim of this project is to provide a sustainable income stream to fund the necessary works through the ecosystems services they produce.

- 6.2 The **South Downs Trust** has continued to fundraise and, whilst the pandemic has temporarily slowed their growth ambitions, they expect to raise funds in line with last year (£500,000). Given the challenges we all faced in 2020/21 this is a fantastic achievement which has been delivered through the success of our joint appeals, such as Trees for the Downs and Beelines , which we now plan to run on a multi-year basis.
- 6.3 Now that there is better information about the timetable for the relaxation of Covid restrictions, we have been able to finalise the plan for our 2021 **Parish Workshops**. As agreed with the parish Members, in 2021 we are moving to a new way of engaging with parishes with an emphasis on parishes across the National Park being able to share and learn from best practice. Parish events will now take place three times a year, with a combination of online webinars and face-to-face (at the moment still virtual) meetings. The first event in 2021 will be a webinar on Wednesday 21 April starting at 6.30pm. The theme for the event will be Dark Night Skies and will focus on how communities can play an active role in maintaining our International Dark Night Skies resource, and will be hosted by Doug Jones who will shared the excellent work done by his own parish, Buriton.
- 6.4 Members will be aware that the Memorial Hall in Midhurst is being used by the Midhurst Pharmacy as a **vaccination centre** from Friday to Sunday. At the time of writing the centre has vaccinated over 6000 patients. The capacity in the Hall has increased from 17 bays to 21, which means there is capacity to vaccinate over 500 patients a day, subject to vaccine deliveries. The NHS has been in contact with the Midhurst Pharmacy team to say that numbers could really accelerate from mid-March onwards. The whole exercise has been a wonderful example of joint working between the Midhurst pharmacy, local volunteers (including Hugh Bonneville) and SDNPA staff. I am particularly pleased to be able to report that no patient has had to wait more than 12 minutes past their appointment at any time.
- 6.5 We have had another good response to the **second staff wellbeing questionnaire** with 83% of staff responding. Responses are currently being analysed and a report will be shared with SMT, OMT and staff over the next few weeks. Details from this and the first questionnaire will feed into the discussion around developing a new more flexible working model for the SDNPA over the coming months.
- 6.6 Following on from the launch of the Sustainability Policy for the SDNPA developed by the internal **Sustainable Solutions Group** they have undertaken an action plan, an audit of greenhouse gas emissions and launched a 'Staff Charter' for individuals to register their commitment to sustainability. The group is also undertaking research into appropriate independent sustainability accreditation for the SDNPA, an important step to show leadership to the wider National Park as we aim to become carbon neutral as an organisation.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 The Dark Skies Festival, which is on the NPA agenda, was a real success, reaching just under 240,000 people. The videos from the Festival have received more than 60,000 unique views.
- 7.2 It has been a strong start to the year for the National Park in the media, with the beauty of our landscape attracting the most attention and giving people across the UK a much-needed uplift. The winners of "My Tranquil Haven" photo competition were a good way to start 2021, with national coverage in the Daily Telegraph, i, and Daily Express, as well as regional coverage at ITV Meridian, Brighton Argus, Portsmouth News, Mid Hampshire Observer, and a clutch of the Sussex news sites. Since January we have issued eight press releases and picked up almost 500 separate pieces of coverage.

- 7.3 The National Park's first astrophotography competition attracted the most coverage in recent times for the National Park. Its coverage reached over 10m people with well over 225 pieces of coverage locally, regionally, nationally and internationally (on sites like Yahoo and MSN) and it has been featured by BBC, ITV, Daily Mirror, Daily Express, Daily Star, Guardian, Telegraph, and many more. This was followed by story about the winning image of the People's Choice, with a stunning image of bluebell woods linked to a safety message about protecting our woodlands. This was picked up by 190 news sites across the UK and featured in print in The Birmingham Mail and Western Morning News.
- 7.4 Between December and February we had 320,435 unique website users, an increase from 128,960 unique users in the same period last year.
- 8. Conclusion**
- 8.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the busy period since my report to the 17 December 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 |