

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 15th JULY 2021

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 10.30am

Present: Tim Burr, Angus Dunn, Melanie Hunt (Chair), Doug Jones, Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, Michael Lunn, Martin Osborne, Henry Potter, Isabel Thurston and Stephen Whale.

Independent Members of the Committee: Tom Fourcade and Carole Nicholson

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Morris Findley and Lawrence Leather

SDNPA Officers: Andrew Lee (Director of Countryside Policy & Management), Janice Austin (Legal Advisor), Robin Parr (Head of Governance) and Catherine Sydenham (Governance Officer).

Also Attended by: Trevor Beattie (Chief Executive Officer), Roni Craddock (Infrastructure and Environment Strategy Lead), Katherine Stuart (Planning Policy Lead), Jeremy Burgess (Landscape and Biodiversity Lead (Water), Amanda Elms (Learning, Outreach & Volunteer Lead), Claire Kerr (Countryside and Policy Manager – Eastern Downs), Nick Heasman (Countryside and Policy Manager – Central Area), Nigel James (Countryside and Policy Manager – Western Area), Andy Beattie (Countryside and Policy Manager – Wealden Heaths), Ruth James (Communication and Engagement Manager), James Winkworth (Head of Marketing and Income Generation), Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor) and Alan Brough (Head of Business Services).

OPENING REMARKS

1. The Chair opened the meeting.
2. The Chair welcomed all those present and stated that:
 - The meeting was being webcast by the Authority and would be available for subsequent on-line viewing. Anyone entering the meeting was considered to have given consent to be filmed or recorded, and for the possible use of images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purpose.
 - SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthers the National Park Purposes and Duty. Members regarded themselves first and foremost as Members of the Authority, and would act in the best interests of the National Park as a whole, rather than as representatives of their appointing body or any interest groups.
 - The Chair welcomed new Member Amanda Morris to the Committee.

ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

3. Apologies were received from Annie Brown and Amanda Morris.

ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

4. Angus Dunn declared a Public Services interest as a West Sussex County Councillor.

ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 29TH APRIL 2021

5. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 29th April 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

ITEM 4: MATTERS ARISING

6. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management gave an update on the new South Downs Partnership (SDP) which had had its first meeting. The SDP was chaired by Clare Moriarty and would be independent from the NPA, but follow a similar meeting cycle.

ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS

7. There were no urgent matters for discussion.

ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

8. There were no members of the public who had requested to speak.

ITEM 7: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

9. Officers advised that there was no requirement to consider any item in private session.

ITEM 8: PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN DELIVERY – NATURE RECOVERY

10. The Countryside and Policy Manager (Eastern Downs) introduced report (PR21/22-01), reminded members of the report content and gave a presentation. Questions were also answered by Infrastructure & Environment Strategy Lead, Planning Policy Lead, Landscape & Biodiversity Lead (Water).

11. The Committee commented that:

- With regards to conservation covenants landowners and farmers must be clear with what they were signing up to in order that they did not get locked in to long term commitments without realising.
- It would be helpful if a list of partners that SDNPA would work with and hope to work with could be listed.
- The South Downs Wildlife Delivery Plan and Nature Recovery Campaign was inspiring and encouraging.
- Communities had to be brought along on the journey with education of what nature recovery looked like in reality as in some cases there was a conflict between public expectations and what was best for nature e.g. verge cutting.
- A potential opportunity could be for exemplar packages to be developed to show how public bodies such as schools, health services, emergency services, etc. could make a difference to nature recovery on land that they owned.

12. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- SDNPA was involved in Nature Recovery work at national, regional and local levels with involvement in the Local Nature Partnerships, National Parks England and via a Member of the Authority sitting in the House of Lords. There was a sense of urgency on the Nature Recovery work beginning in earnest rather than waiting for the Environment Bill to become enacted. Once there was clarity on the policy, any required changes would be addressed.
- Conservation covenants could be one of the mechanisms used to help the nature recovery work. There would also be other mechanisms and it would be a process of matching the appropriate mechanism to the appropriate site.
- There was a rapidly growing green financing market developing which needed clear Government regulation. National Parks Partnership (NPP) was working with National Parks England (NPE) and finance group Palladian to develop new green financing methods. Two pilot projects were running to help assist landowners and farmers navigate how to get funding from their land for other sources than just food production.
- The South Downs Biodiversity Monitoring Framework would outline all biodiversity surveying and data collection within 3 broad areas: habitat extent and condition; species of key groups; and projects (which included planning). Within the habitat, monitoring work would be undertaken with partners to randomly select sites to monitor each year giving an overall picture of condition. Within the species, monitoring four or five national monitoring programmes would be adopted which would allow data from inside

the SDNP to be compared with that from outside. Within projects monitoring, the site condition would be looked at before any work was undertaken and then reassessed once the work was completed.

- Nitrate off set schemes that covered the Solent were put in place by Natural England.
- Nature recovery was about having the right habitat in the right place. The targets in the South Downs Wildlife Delivery Plan were high level targets and were not currently broken down into individual species types.
- It was currently estimated that £100 million was needed over 10 years to fund nature recovery projects. This finance would be raised through a variety of funding sources and not through direct fundraising alone.
- A minimum of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain was consistent with emerging legislation which was determined by Government through detailed impact assessments looking at different percentages and viability. It was determined that 10% was good for nature and still viable for housing developments.
- The larger the range of groups and channels for the Nature Recovery Campaign to reach the better. Collaboration was the key to Nature Recovery work with everybody playing their part.
- The recent Southern Water fine would be paid to the Chancellor of the Exchequer but smaller fines were paid to the Environment Agency and could be applied to local projects.
- Rivers within the SDNP were not in as good condition as the SDNPA would like.

13. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:

- 1) Support and recommend to the NPA the adoption of the South Downs Wildlife Delivery Plan (Appendix 2) and South Downs Nature Recovery Delivery Prospectus (Appendix 3), including its high level targets and opportunity map.
- 2) Note the launch of the South Downs Nature Recovery Campaign #ReNature
- 3) Endorse the proposed approach to Biodiversity Net Gain and a Call for Nature Sites

ITEM 9: YEAR END REVIEW 2020/21 (CORPORATE PERFORMANCE & PROJECT PERFORMANCE)

14. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management and the Countryside & Policy Managers and the Learning, Outreach & Volunteer Lead introduced item PR21/22-02 gave a presentation on the work of the Theme Programme Boards during 2020/21.

15. The Committee commented that:

- Congratulations went to the Theme Programme Boards for their achievements over the past year. Having the presentation structured around the Theme Programme Boards was very useful and maybe helpful to have future 'Year-End' reports structured in the same way. It would also be helpful for the overall report to record not only the number of people that have participated in SDNP activities, but also their equality and diversity characteristics as far as possible.
- It would be helpful to have a future report on the 'lessons learned' from projects.
- Small projects were very helpful in enabling organisations to get a project off the ground but did take a disproportionate amount of administrative time compared with fewer larger projects and it may be helpful to reflect on the balance of the project programme at the upcoming budget workshops.

16. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- Staff Health and Wellbeing had been monitored closely over the past year with 2 short wellbeing surveys undertaken. There had been lots of support for staff through Line

Managers and HR. The Operational Management Team was working on how to bring staff back to the office safely.

- There was no data presented on the number of young, BAME, people with disabilities and number of females participating in volunteering opportunities because due to Covid-19 restrictions the amount of volunteering had been restricted. Over the past year the volunteer programme had seen a number of new opportunities created to allow a greater number and range of people to participate in volunteer work. Monitoring was back up and running for current financial year.
 - Reporting back on some indicators within the Partnership Management Plan was difficult due to some of the comparative data sources being produced infrequently. It was also thought that - due to the circumstances of the past year - asking partners to report back on data when staff were on furlough was not feasible. A progress report on PMP Performance Indicators would be presented to the Committee at the end of the current financial year.
 - Phase I of the Centurion Way was currently closed due to 'Ash Die Back'. Each of the Ash Trees needed to be surveyed for roosting bats and the landowner had taken a cautious approach of closing the route until the works were complete.
 - SDNPA was not chosen by Natural England to pilot the Green Infrastructure National Standards projects but this had not stopped the People and Nature Network work from happening. If any lessons learnt from the pilot were shared to SDNPA they would be shared with Members.
 - Funding for the 'Challenge Fund' was still being sought through the South Downs Trust.
17. The Communications and Engagement Manager gave a presentation on the Communications work during 2020/21.
18. The Committee commented that:
- New targets needed to be set for the Communications work within the Corporate Plan as the targets were already being exceeded.
 - It would like to see more information on the demographic breakdown of social media followers and their location.
19. In response to questions officers clarified that:
- It was hoped that the legal work around SDNPA taking ownership of the Seven Sisters Country Park would be completed by 26th July with building contractors starting in early August 2021.
 - Social media audiences had increased by 50% and were used as a communication tool for spreading the message.
 - The Communications team would be happy to provide advice and tips to Members on how to make best use of social media.
 - The Communications approach taken by SDNPA was to try and not villainise inappropriate behavior, but to embed good practice through positive messaging i.e helping you and your dog have a better time out.
20. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:
- 1) Receive and note the year-end review of Corporate Performance & Project Performance
 - 2) Receive and note the Annual Review
21. The Committee adjourned for a 30 minute lunch break.

22. Stephen Whale left the meeting.

ITEM 10: ANNUAL REVIEW OF PLANNING PERFORMANCE: FINANCIAL YEAR 2020/21

23. The Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager introduced PR21/22-03 and gave a presentation on how planning helps to deliver the Partnership Management Plan.

24. The Committee commented that:

- The statistics presented within the report were fascinating, and clearly reflected the Government's reporting requirements for Planning Services, but did not tell the story of how Planning within the SDNP was helping to deliver the Partnership Management Plan. The case studies within the presentation were excellent and illustrated some extremely positive benefits and the Committee would like to see more qualitative data added to this report for future years.
- Would be useful for future reports to have a macro figure on Biodiversity Net Gain for all planning applications.

25. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The past year had seen an increase in unauthorised land use and an increase in neighbour complaints which had led to an unprecedented increase in enforcement issues, including that of complex cases.
- SDNPA engaged with housing developments outside the National Park and expressed SDNPA views. Section 62 of the Environment Act 1995 meant that Local Authorities were required to have regard to the purposes and duty of National Parks.
- The Authority had to produce an Annual Monitoring report which in future would include a figure for Biodiversity Net Gain. Policy SD2 and SD9 both sought Biodiversity Net Gain with the challenge now to ensure that monitoring was in place for when it became statutory through the Environment Bill.
- Policy SD28 set out a requirement for residential development of 3 or more homes to provide for affordable housing with a 50% minimum on sites of more than 11 houses. This explained why 21% of total new homes were affordable as not all housing developments were over 11 houses and it was expected that this total percentage of the number of affordable houses provided would increase. Grants were available for affordable housing delivered through community led initiatives such as Community Land Trusts.
- Current planning laws allowed pop up campsites to operate for 56 days a day without planning permission.
- There was a national recruitment issue for Planning Officers with SDNPA faring slightly better than some. It was hoped that the new hybrid model of working would address the issue of Midhurst as a base being a long way from either end of the Park. SDNPA took the approach that it would rather appoint interim, consultants than appoint the 'wrong people'.
- Within the SDNPA Planning department there were 34 Full Time Equivalent posts and approximately a further 35/40 planners within the Host Authorities.
- The increase of chalk grassland and lowland heath figures would be included in future reporting and could be counted towards the 33% target area being managed for nature, as planning was an essential tool to help deliver nature recovery.

26. The Committee recommended the following areas to Officers relating to the performance report :

- The continued use of case studies which were extremely helpful

- Use of Community Infrastructure Levy for Green infrastructure and the impact this had on Nature Recovery in the National Park
- Explore with colleagues ways of illustrating how planning fed into Nature Recovery by area/ habitat / Biodiversity Net Gain

27. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:

1. Receive and note the Annual Review of Planning Performance
2. Make recommendations to Officers relating to performance arising from the report as discussed by the committee

ITEM 11: ANNUAL REVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FUND

28. The Head of Marketing and Income generation introduced report PR21/22-04 and reminded members of the report content.

29. The Committee commented that:

- The report demonstrates that the contribution of a small amount of money can make a big difference and was a good example of seed corn funding. Projects were scattered across the entire National Park and all help to deliver the Partnership Management Plan.
- Their thanks were passed to Mark Rose who until recently had been the Officer who co-ordinated the Sustainable Communities Fund.

30. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- Each year £35,000 was allocated to spend on projects and the reason that this had not been spent in the 2020/21 financial year was due to Covid-19. The remaining funds would be allocated in addition to the £35,000 for 2021/22. Projects were awarded funds through a rigorous application process assessed by an independent panel.

31. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:

- 1) Receive and note the year-end position of the Sustainable Communities Fund.

ITEM 12: INTERNAL AUDIT – ANNUAL REPORT AND OPINION

32. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR21/22-05 and reminded Members of the report content.

33. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The customer satisfaction reported of 100% was representative of the entire service provided by the Internal Auditors and not just to SDNPA. The questions asked would be reviewed so as to provide a more informative view.

34. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:

1. To note the content of the Annual Audit Report (2020/21) and the Audit Opinion (2020/21); and
2. Taking into account the content of the Annual Audit Report, to conclude that the Committee was satisfied with the effectiveness of Internal Audit during 2020/21

ITEM 13: INTERNAL AUDIT - PROGRESS REPORT

35. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR21/22-06 and reminded Members of the report content. The Head of Business Services also helped answer questions.

36. The Committee commented that:

- It needed to be alert to the findings of the Internal Auditor, ensure that management provided the Committee with assurance and that the actions were followed through with vigour.

37. In response to questions officers clarified that:
- A medium risk was identified taking into account all the factors and was to do with the audit control environment as opposed to project details.
 - Medium Risk was a fair assessment of the risk as there were several managers responsible. The construction phase of the Seven Sisters project was imminently due to start and therefore Officers felt monthly reporting to the Project Board was more appropriate due to approximately £1.6 million being spent over a 6-7 month time period.
 - A paper would be presented to a future P&R Committee on procurement risk management to seek the Committee's views on contract risk exposure.

38. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to note:

- 1) Progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2020/21).
- 2) The implementation of audit actions previously agreed by management

ITEM 14: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

39. The Head of Governance and Support Services introduced report PR21/22-07 and reminded members of the report content.

40. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The upcoming budget workshops would be considering the implications of the Defra flat cash settlement. A financial model had been created to show Members the impact of a flat cash settlement with rising core costs. The model would highlight the squeeze on the headroom that was used for the Authority to deliver its part of the Partnership Management Plan. Over the next couple of months all areas of discretionary spend would also be assessed and would also be presented to members at the upcoming budget workshops in order that members could make an informed decision on the Medium Term Financial Strategy before setting the budget for 2022/23.

41. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:

Note the Corporate Risk Register as at July 2021

CHAIR

The meeting closed at 2.44pm

