



South Downs
National Park Authority

Agenda Item 9
Report NPA21/22-07

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	21 October 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 6 July 2021 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 With the continued easing of lockdown restrictions the frequency and intensity of anti-social issues that have taken place in the National Park during past lockdown periods have generally subsided to pre-pandemic levels. Where issues do occur relevant officers work closely with farmers, land managers and local communities to ameliorate the impact and seek long term solutions.
- 2.2 On 21 September we passed the second anniversary of the publication of the **Glover Review**. It is disappointing that we are now two years on from this important assessment of the potential of National Parks and AONBs with no response from government. In this vacuum discussion has focused on Glover's proposal to create a National Landscapes Service (NLS) but this has detracted attention from many of his other – in my opinion far more important – recommendations that would support the government's ambitions in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment and our own efforts here at SDNPA, particularly in relation to nature recovery and our climate change action plan.
- 2.3 I have used recent workshops to update Members on the preparation of the consultation document that Ministers propose to issue in response to the Glover Review. I had hoped that this would be released in time for us to discuss it at the NPA but the timetable has been pushed back again and I do not now expect to see the response until November at the earliest. I am, however, maintaining close contact with senior officials in Defra, both through National Parks England (NPE) and on my own account, which should give us early warning, as well as allowing me to make the case for the good practice we have developed here in the South Downs.
- 2.4 These contacts with Defra are also helpful in providing information on the progress of the Government's **Comprehensive Spending Review**, which we discussed at our first budget workshop on 23 September. We should know more after the Chancellor's 27 October

autumn budget statement. There will be a further budget workshop on 16 December, after which the formal budget report will be prepared for NPA in March 2022.

- 2.5 In the summer Defra launched a consultation on how the Government should implement **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** (LNRS) – in particular how they should be prepared and what they should include. The consultation started on 10 August and runs to 2 November. LNRS are to be a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies for nature recovery or “nature plans”. The Defra Secretary of State will decide the area each LNRS will cover and will appoint a ‘responsible authority’ to lead preparation. It is expected that the LNRS geography will be county based. This consultation is about the detail of the forthcoming regulations that will cover how LNRS should be prepared and what they should include. The format is a questionnaire consisting of yes/no questions or options to select so there is little opportunity to add additional comments or clarify answers.
- 2.6 An SDNPA response to the questionnaire is being prepared and officers are exploring how more detailed comments about LNRS can be provided to Defra. We will also be contributing to responses being prepared by NPE, the Sussex Local Nature Partnership, and the South East Nature Partnership. Further information was provided in a Member Briefing Note circulated on 16 September.

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 As Members are aware, we have **Section 101 contracts** with 5 Councils who take planning decisions on our behalf. This arrangement brings a number of advantages including established and effective partnership working and allowing the Authority to concentrate on the more significant applications. The contracts are 5 years in duration and come to an end in 2022. They are generally based on payment per application and have resulted in cost savings being achieved by the Authority at the same time as planning performance being maintained. Officers have been negotiating heads of terms for new S101 contracts and two of these are presented for approval at this month’s NPA. We are hopeful that other contracts will follow at future Authority meetings.
- 3.3 In relation to the **Community Infrastructure Levy** (CIL), Planning Committee on 14 October will consider the allocation of some £1.37m in funding for projects right across the National Park. This funding is from CIL receipts in 2020/21 and is in addition to £370k of CIL funding which has already been distributed directly to 30 Town and Parish Councils in the financial year 2020/21.
- 3.4 Our formal response to the proposed expansion of the **Rampion** Offshore Windfarm has been sent to the applicant. Following consideration at Planning Committee in September and after seeking the views of Authority Members the wording of our objection was strengthened. Our response draws attention to the lack of consideration for the National Park when assessing alternatives, and in so doing, the failure to provide sufficient evidence that the assessment for Major Development exceptional circumstances had been fulfilled. We also make clear that we are disappointed to discover that wind turbines would be located east of the existing Rampion array (and hence closer to the Sussex Heritage Coast), despite part of this area being specifically excluded in the consent for the original Rampion 1 windfarm. Our response includes evidence gathered from our recent aerial photography survey of the existing Rampion 1 onshore cable corridor, which demonstrates the ongoing impact on the National Park of the existing cable route. Whilst the benefits of the scheme in terms of renewable energy generation are clear the ball is now firmly in the applicant’s court to address our points.
- 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 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. 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 scale, including two large convertor halls, each up to 26 m high. A decision on whether to permit this development will be taken by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and is due by 21 October. When SDNPA participated in the examination process we achieved a number of improvements, not least a significant Section 106 contribution toward woodland planting in the National Park if consent is granted.

- 3.6 Work has re-started on the **Area Action Plan (AAP) for Shoreham Cement Works**. The purpose of the AAP is to deliver the allocation of an exemplar sustainable development and a substantially enhanced landscape. A Member Task & Finish Group was set up in July to oversee the timely development of the 'mini local plan' for the site. Several evidence based studies have been commissioned including transport and viability, which are testing different development scenarios. A Design Review Panel workshop was held in September when the developer's team presented their initial ideas. A public consultation on Issues and Options will be held next year.
- 4. Progress of Existing Projects**
- 4.1 Despite a further delay to the Environment Bill, the **South Downs Nature Recovery** programme is progressing at pace. This year has already seen the launch of the South Downs Nature Recovery Campaign #ReNature and the establishment our overarching ambition of an additional 13,000 ha, or 33%, for nature by 2030 with action being taken by partners and land managers across the National Park.
- 4.2 We are still in the early days of our campaign. The majority of our philanthropic funding is anticipated to come from major donors, with the South Downs National Park Trust launching this aspect of the campaign at their Development Board meeting on 19 November. The campaign has , already generated £103,040 in cash and ongoing commitments. This is excellent progress in the few months since the campaign was launched. Initially this funding is being used to develop a Nature Based Solutions pilot at Broadreed Farm, with further projects likely to be supported through the call for sites.
- 4.3 From a communications perspective, the #ReNature launch saw over 200 pieces of online, print and broadcast media coverage across local, regional, national and global media. One BBC tweet alone reached over 12m people. The reach specifically from printed publications across the UK was 3.47m and the regional radio and TV coverage reached over 1.6m people. The ReNature film "The Night We ReNatured" has been shown in many local cinemas and has had over 114,000 views.
- 4.4 The first meeting of the new **South Downs Partnership (SDP)**, chaired by Dame Clare Moriarty, took place virtually on 7 July, shortly after the last NPA. This allowed the group to meet each other and to get to grips with the role of the SDP in supporting and championing the PMP. Although some places were yet to be filled and there were a few apologies, there was excellent engagement by those present. The meeting was reported in the Authority's internal communication bulletin "Update". A system of pre and post meeting briefings has been established so that Ian Phillips, Clare Moriarty and Andrew Lee can plan the agendas together and discuss any next steps afterwards.
- 4.5 Since its first meeting the SDP is now up to full strength with all fifteen places filled. Since July, most of the SDP members have had an initial induction meeting with their officer point of contact either virtually or face to face where possible, and are already getting up to speed with the PMP and the range of activities currently underway. All have been asked to provide a biography and photograph so that we can populate the website.
- 4.6 On 1 July the **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** Programme was launched by Defra and went live across all 44 Protected Landscapes in England. National Park and AONB local teams are administering the programme; in the South Downs this is the responsibility of the SDNPA Farming Team led by Nigel James.
- 4.7 The SDNP Local Assessment Panel (LAP) was formed in July to consider and decide on applications for projects over £5,000, whilst the Farming Team considers applications under

- £5,000. The Panel consists of seven farmers, one Natural England representative and Andrew Lee from SDNPA. The farmer members are geographically spread across the Park and represent a range of farming systems; arable, livestock and mixed, and land ownerships; owner/occupiers, managers and tenants.
- 4.8 Initial interest has been high with 58 enquiries in the first three months. Projects put forward have varied from infrastructure to facilitate effective conservation grazing, machinery to reduce inputs and better manage natural resources, farm diversifications to produce value added products to sell more locally, data collection and project planning. The LAP has met twice, in August and September, and have so far approved 12 projects totalling £120,000. Funding for individual projects has ranged from £40,039 to £2,249. Further LAP meetings are planned for October and December to continue allocating FiPL funds across the National Park.
- 4.9 Getting FiPL up and running in the SDNP has been a considerable undertaking, and the appointment of two FiPL funded part-time Advisers has enabled greater interaction with potential applicants. The Farming Team is working towards allocating the SDNPA year one budget by December.
- 4.10 Since my last report the **Income Generation team** have secured (meaning either banked or pledged) a further £430,000, bringing the total this year to £1,027,695 across both the Authority and the South Downs National Park Trust. This includes our successful bid to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for £140k of hedgerow restoration in Hampshire. This is a great result in a particularly difficult year.
- 4.11 Though our larger “Downs to the Sea” bid was unsuccessful, it received excellent feedback. The team quickly responded by repackaging the project for the Heritage Lottery Fund, submitting an EOI in September. I am pleased to say this was successful and we have been invited to submit a full application in March, for circa £1.2 million. Downs to the Sea now joins the Ouse Valley Cares project, for which we are currently receiving a development grant from the Lottery Communities Fund, with a £2.5 million bid being planned. This, alongside other prospects being pursued, either for the South Downs National Park Trust or directly, gives a total of well over £4 m in opportunities that we are currently progressing.
- 4.12 Phase 2 of the **entry signage** project is now being installed with signs going up across Hampshire and Brighton & Hove, and more to follow across West and East Sussex by the end of November. These 30 new signs will take the total to 48, with all of the suitable key routes into/out of the National Park soon to signal that you are entering/leaving one of the most important landscapes in the UK. The new signs have already received positive feedback from local communities.
- 4.13 A contractor for Phase 5 of the **Egrets Way** (Piddinghoe to Riverside Park) has been appointed and work is scheduled to begin in early October, with completion expected mid-December, thanks to £398k of project funding from LDC CIL, SDNPA CIL and our Strategic Fund. Legal agreements with the Iford Estate on phase 6 tied to a planning application and separate licence to operate are with the Estate’s solicitors.
- 4.14 The 2.5km **Falmer to Woodingdean path** refurbishment is now complete and the path reopened on 31 August. SDNPA contributed £100k to this £356k project. The new surface has been well received by the public and will encourage a much wider range of users. We are working closely with BHCC and ESCC on new and better signage.
- 4.15 **‘Shifting the Gaze’ Micro Bursary Scheme.** This scheme, delivered in partnership with Writing Our Legacy and New Writing South, is working with Black, Asian and ethnically diverse writers to support the production of new creative work reflecting experiences and perspectives of the South Downs. So far, 15 bursaries have been awarded to a wide range of established and emerging talent. The stories shared at application stage alone have highlighted just how important this work is in providing both space and a platform for people to explore what landscape means to them, its role in their sense of identity and belonging, in their wellbeing and hopes for the future.

- 4.16 **Butser Ancient Farm: Bronze Age Build.** With funding from SDNPA and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund, Butser Ancient Farm have been constructing a Bronze Age building, modelled on the archaeological remains of a structure from a similar chalk grassland setting in Wessex. The project is being delivered in partnership with Operation Nightingale and Step Together. Operation Nightingale is a charity that uses archaeology as a means of aiding the recovery of service personnel injured in recent conflict, particularly those facing long term physical and psychological impacts from serving in Afghanistan. Step Together uses volunteering as a catalyst to change the lives of people experiencing extreme isolation and social prejudice. Not only has the project brought together new volunteers but the structure itself adds to the story of the site, giving Butser Ancient Farm a new attraction to support its reopening after the pandemic.
- 4.17 **Cissbury Digital Interpretation.** In July, we launched a series of 10 films at Cissbury Ring. Developed in partnership with the National Trust and Worthing Museum, the films are accessible on site using NFC and QR technology, giving people a chance to 'Meet the Archaeologists' and learn more about the archaeology under their feet. Utilising the NFC and QR approach has avoided the installation of any interpretation panels or new structures on site, using instead existing features such as gate and fence posts.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 **Volunteering** has now resumed to pre-pandemic status but with continued limitations on tasks and volunteer numbers due to vehicle sharing safety restrictions. The Volunteer Ranger Service groups are operating without a policy limit on numbers but with some impacts from lack of available parking at sites.
- 5.2 This summer the Countryside, Poicy and Management team has delivered 11 days of **South Downs Youth Action** activity engaging 151 young people. The programme is being funded in part by the Ernest Kleinwort Foundation and Clarion Futures. Partners supported by youth volunteers include the Weald & Downland Living Museum, Midhurst Green Volunteers and site support at Seven Sisters Country Park and Lancing Ring. The SDNPA's first Youth Action residential has been taking place this year, with a residential for Worth Unlimited (a youth group from Waltham Forest, London) as part of our Generation Green activities. A youth ambassador residential will take place on the weekend of 2/3 October in partnership with the YHA and Sussex Clubs for Young People.
- 5.3 **Microvolunteering** is being promoted through South Downs Youth Action days, staff training sessions and the public microvolunteering mailing list. In the NPUK iNaturalist LookWild project, the South Downs is the most active National Park, with the most sightings, species and users in the project.

6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 The **vaccination centre** closed on 5 September having vaccinated 45,500 people over 8 months. Raj Rohilla, the local pharmacist who led the centre, plans to deliver the booster jabs in the Midhurst Pharmacy. He has been able to convert part of the pharmacy building into 4 consultation rooms and, through the volunteers he met working at the vaccination centre, is looking to offer a range of health care services to the local community. This would not have been possible without the various volunteers coming forward to help at the vaccination centre. Kate Miles was invited to an event on 24 September where thanks were offered to the Authority for the assistance given since the idea was first raised just before Christmas last year. A video compilation of the daily tasks, along with thanks from the more famous customers of the vaccination centre (Des Lynam, John Bishop and Tim Peake to name a few) was played.
- 6.2 SDNPA took ownership of **Seven Sisters Country Park** on 30 July. Peter Cousin immediately started work on site with our new Seven Sisters staff team. Our principal contractors, Baxall Construction, were awarded the £1.64million contract to deliver our Phase 1 programme of works and started on site on 9 August. The programme is progressing well with only minor delays resulting from some supplies and sub-contractor availability.

- 6.3 The principal works currently underway include the installation of the new suspended floor in the Visitor Centre to provide access for all and maximisation of the space; the workshop and old toilets/storage associated with the Pump Barn have been cleared to create the new toilet facilities, and some external public realm work has started on the wall to create a new access point for the Saltmarsh car park. Works have also started at Foxhole cottages and the facilities at the camping barn have been cleared, together with a complete asbestos removal from all Phase I buildings. The outline completion date is the end of March 2022.
- 6.4 Plumpton college will be providing grazing using approx 30 Sussex Cattle from late October/early November. This is part of a 2 year grazing licence that will enable us to make significant improvements in the highly important chalk grassland on the site as well as the wet grassland.
- 6.5 We have launched a new Seven Sisters Country Park website and associated social media channels which are growing a steady following through inspiring, informative and practical content delivered by the local team.
- 6.6 The first meeting of the **Seven Sisters Stakeholder Group** took place in early October. This brings together key stakeholders including East Sussex County Council, Cuckmere Parish Council, the South Downs National Park Trust and a representative of the new Trading Company to discuss issues related to the operation of the site and provide input to inform future decision making.
- 6.7 **South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd** (the Trading Company) was incorporated on 23 July. The Company Limited by Shares is owned entirely by SDNPA and is set up as a “Teckal Company”. It will be responsible for the management of Seven Sisters Country Park from the beginning of the new financial year in April. The Company will enable the Authority to undertake activities for a commercial purpose whilst still delivering on our Purposes and Duty. It has its own board of directors who are: Stephen Whale (Chair), William Meyer, Vanessa Rowlands and Tim Slaney.
- 6.8 OMT have now finalised a new **Blended Working Model**, which meets organisational needs alongside supporting as far as possible, individual requests for working more flexibly and remotely. The new Blended Working Policy makes it clear that SDNPA employees are not considered as “homeworkers” and are expected to spend at least 50% of their time at a SDNPA workplace. The model was presented to staff at the all staff event on 21 September and will be implemented from 4 October. The new working arrangements will be reviewed in 6 months.
- 7. Media and Communications**
- 7.1 Between March and September this year we have reached more than half a million people with our latest round of the **#takethelead campaign**. Over the coming weeks we will be posting some dog-focused top tips videos which have been created with the New Forest National Park and other partners.
- 7.2 Between April and August we delivered 41 **pop-up events** at 32 different hotspots, engaging with over 3,000 people, many of them first-time visitors.
- 7.3 We have had another strong quarter for **media coverage**, not least the very successful launch of the ReNature campaign mentioned above. The launch of the National Park’s viticulture study made a big impact, being picked up prominently in most of the nationals. It also made it on to Sky News and was included in their Climate Show. In all the story had 190 separate pieces of coverage across the UK and attracted such interest that it was debated in Parliament.
- 7.4 The announcement of our ownership of Seven Sisters attracted strong and positive local media coverage, with reports from BBC South East, BBC Sussex, The Argus, and Eastbourne Herald. We also continue to champion and publicise smaller projects, such as access improvements at Idsworth in Hampshire picking up prominent spreads in local press, and our first big public event in 18 months, “Secrets of the Heath” receiving positive coverage in the local papers.

7.5 We have been engaging with thousands of visitors since taking over ownership of **Seven Sisters Country Park** and have achieved a total of 15,000 visitor introductions in the first two and a half months of ownership. Many are visiting for the first time and are from the urban fringe areas and London and from groups that are normally under represented across the rest of the National Park. This has provided an opportunity to enable people to better understand the site's context within the wider National Park and to explore further.

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 6 July 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

