

Unconfirmed minutes – to be confirmed at the next meeting of the Committee

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 30TH SEPTEMBER 2021

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

Present: Annie Brown, Tim Burr, Angus Dunn, Melanie Hunt (Chair), Doug Jones, Baroness Jones of Whitchurch and Henry Potter.

Other SDNPA Members: Ian Phillips (Authority Chair)

SDNPA Officers: Trevor Beattie (Chief Executive Officer), Andrew Lee (Director of Countryside Policy & Management), Louise Read (Monitoring Officer), Nigel Manvell (Chief Finance Officer), Alan Brough (Head of Business Services), Robin Parr (Head of Governance) and Catherine Sydenham (Governance Officer).

Also Attended by: Liz Gent (Project Management Lead), Tanya Hibberd (Performance and Research Lead), Vicky Patterson (Human Resources Manager) and Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor).

OPENING REMARKS

42. The Chair opened the meeting
43. 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.
44. The Chair informed the Committee that the Eastbourne Member, Amanda Morris, had resigned her position on the SDNPA.

ITEM 1: ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR

45. The Chair informed the Committee that nominations for the positions of Deputy Chair closed 5 working days before the meeting. Baroness Jones of Whitchurch was the only nomination.
46. **RESOLVED:** Baroness Jones of Whitchurch was duly elected as Deputy Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee until the Authority AGM in 2022, or the end of her term of appointment whichever was soonest.

ITEM 2: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

47. Apologies were received from Morris Findley, Tom Fourcade, Lawrence Leather, Michael Lunn, Carole Nicholson, Martin Osborne, Isabel Thurston and Stephen Whale.

ITEM 3: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

48. Angus Dunn declared a prejudicial interest in Item 19 and withdrew from the meeting for this item.

ITEM 4: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 15TH JULY 2021

49. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 15th July 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

ITEM 5: MATTERS ARISING

50. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management updated the Committee on the

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following:

- The review of the Whole Estate Plan process was now completed. The full review and report would be presented to a future meeting of the Committee.
- Work with the ‘Nature Recovery’ campaign was ongoing. Back office functions were being developed ahead of the ‘call for sites’ launch, which would provide farmers and landowners with the opportunity to put forward projects.
- All the positions on the South Downs Partnership had been filled and the next meeting would happen by the end of 2021.

51. The Committee commented that:

- When considering Nature Recovery careful consideration needed to be given to the balance between Purpose 1 (Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage) and Purpose 2 (Promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of national parks by the public) for example if road verges were allowed to grow freely (to support wildlife diversity)(this could inhibit public access by making narrow roads difficult or dangerous to use.
- The Authority needed to be active and alert to the emerging markets and metrics around nature recovery.
- The next round of Parish workshops would be devoted to the ‘Nature Recovery’ topic.

52. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The aim of the ‘Nature Recovery’ campaign was to enable more land to be managed for nature, which included land that was being put forward for nitrate credits.

ITEM 6: URGENT MATTERS

53. There were none.

ITEM 7: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

ITEM 8: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

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

ITEM 9: QUARTER I CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND PROJECT PERFORMANCE REPORT

56. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management introduced report (PR21/22-08) and reminded members of the report content. The Performance and Research Lead and Project Management Lead helped answer questions.

57. The Committee commented that:

- Congratulations went to the Farming in Protected Landscapes Team (FiPL) which was an example of good practice in efficient project launch and management.
- The character of the Seven Sisters Country Park had already positively changed positively since SDNPA had become the new owners and suggestion was made for QR code installation to provide walkers with more information, similar to the “meet the farmer” QR codes.
- It was important that the Performance and Projects Reports not only showed whether projects were on time and in budget but also showed the impact they were having and overall progress towards the outcomes in the Partnership Management Plan.

58. In response to questions officers clarified that:

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- Officers continued to work closely with projects in Eastbourne and provided reassurance to Members that the recent Member changes were not a reflection on the strong working relationship with the Council.
- A meeting had recently taken place with the new Regional Director of the Environment Agency with a discussion on the topic of shingle clearing at the mouth of the Cuckmere Estuary. The Environment Agency had 2 key priorities within the SDNP, one being the Cuckmere and the other the Adur and Arun river catchments. The Environment Agency had a budget to clear the shingle, which would be undertaken under their own timescale.
- Meetings with relevant Project Managers had taken place to discuss why some projects had remained amber. A large number of the issues were linked to Covid-19 with many projects also relying on input from partners who had themselves been affected by Covid-19. Reference was also made to the fact that Quarter 1 closed in June and many of the reported delays were now beginning to pick up.
- A new Research and Evidence Officer had been appointed and was due to start work in November 2021.
- The introduction of a pre application fee charging schedule, had a red RAG status and was significantly behind due to competing priorities within the Planning Team but Officers confirmed that this was still a priority and would be targeted and dealt with quickly.
- The legacy for the Heathlands Reunited project was in 2 parts with the management of the sites falling into the Nature Recovery campaign and through the outreach community and engagement work funded by East Hampshire District Council and Whitehill Town Council Section 106 developer contributions. The S106 money was available in perpetuity but the contract with SDNPA wasn't. The outreach work to date had been successful.
- Further up to date information would be presented to the NPA on the Seven Sisters Project. The transfer of ownership took place on 30th July 2021 and much of quarter 1 had been taken up with the legal work around the transfer of ownership. Since transfer a full team of staff had been employed, more than 6000 people had been engaged with, Phase 1 contracts had been allocated and although there were a few slight delays to get hold of supplies it was anticipated the building works would be completed on time. More recently work on the cottages, toilets and raised floor in the visitor centre had also begun as well as a new contract signed for cycle hire.
- The South Downs Enterprise Partnership would be referred to as 'Our South Downs' and launched early 2022. The initial sign up would be free to businesses and they would then be able to unlock different levels of support for subscription.

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

- 1) Note the content of the Performance Report.

ITEM 10: BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2021/22: MONTH 4

60. The Section 151 Officer introduced report PR21/22-09 and reminded members of the report contents.

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61. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:
1. Note the 2021/22 revenue forecast position as at month 4 of a net £80,000 below budget variance.
 2. Note the 2021/22 capital forecast position as at month 4 of a zero budget variance.
 3. Note the reserves position as at month 4.
 4. Note the Treasury Management overview and position as at month 4.

ITEM 11: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

62. The Head of Governance & Support Services introduced report PR21/22-10 and reminded members of the report content including that discussions were currently taking place to assess whether there were any further actions the Committee could take, within its remit, to consider the risk register and further develop the Committee's understanding of the management of risks faced by the Authority. .
63. In response to questions officers clarified that:
- SDNPA had chosen the approach to outsource many of the services needed for the Authority to function, such as IT, and although there were still many benefits to this, one of the negatives was that there were single points of potential failure. The organisation had an extremely good and well-tested disaster recovery plan, which had been used in the past and had proved to be robust.
 - Vacancies within the Planning team were not due to low salaries as SDNPA planning salaries were competitive within the public sector. The Authority was often good at attracting new employees but not so good at retaining trained staff as employees often left for promotion or to move to the private sector. The Authority was also very good 'at growing our own', with particular mention made of one skilled planner who had started their career with SDNPA on reception.
 - Officers were in regular contact with officials at Defra. Having been delayed several times, the latest indication was that the Government response to the Landscape Review would be published at the earliest in late Autumn 2021. SDNPA had not waited for the Government response to the Glover Review as the issues identified, such as Nature Recovery, were urgent and much work was already underway. Through both the Chief Executive and the Chair of the Authority every opportunity was taken to promote the work of SDNPA to Senior Government Officials.

64. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:
- 1) Note the Corporate Risk Register as at September 2021

65. The Committee adjourned for a 10 minute comfort break.

ITEM 12: EXTERNAL AUDIT – AUDIT RESULTS REPORT 2020/21

66. The Chief Financial Officer introduced Report PR21/22-17 on behalf of the External Auditor, from Grant Thornton, who was unable to be present at the Committee.
67. The Committee commented that:
- They were concerned that there was not a representative from the External Auditors present at the Committee to be able to answer the Committee's questions.
68. In response to questions officers clarified that:
- The Chief Executive expressed his similar concern about the absence of the External Auditors, and the consequent impact of the discussion.
 - The Audit Results report presented was not a draft report and although it referred to

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outstanding queries, if the resolution of these resulted in no further changes, the report would come back as was presented to the Committee.

- A final audit opinion would be issued by the External Auditor once the Authority had approved the Audit Results report and the associated Statement of Accounts, and the final queries were concluded.

69. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to receive and consider the findings as set out in the 2020/21 Audit Results Report.

ITEM 13: AUDITED STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2020/21 AND LETTER OF REPRESENTATION

70. The Chief Finance Officer introduced report PR21/22-18 and reminded members of the report content.

71. The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2021 required that local authorities publish their statement of accounts and supporting documents (together with any certificate or opinion of the local auditor) for the 2020/21 financial year by 30th September 2021, but as there were outstanding audit queries the Committee could elect to defer approval of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts to the Full Authority meeting on the 21st October 2021 by which time the outstanding queries should be resolved, provided that the Authority published a notice on its website to explain why it had not yet published the statement of accounts.

72. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- Pension Liabilities were calculated by professional actuaries, whose experience and professional competency is assured through a comprehensive procurement process undertaken by the Pensions Administrator (WSCC), with reliance consequently placed upon their professional judgement and assessment. However, the Chief Finance Officer reviews actuarial judgements and can challenge these where they appear to be out of line with national or local factors, for example, assumptions concerning annual pay uplifts.
- The increase in the value of creditors on the balance sheet was a timing issue and was linked to payments owing at the year-end in relation to the delegated planning arrangements with the District Councils.

73. A revision to amalgamate recommendations 2 & 3 was proposed, seconded and approved. The revised recommendation read '*subject to the completion of the outstanding external audit work and final audit opinion, the Committee recommends the NPA to approve the Statement of Accounts 2020/21 as set out in Appendix 2 and the Letter of Representation as set out in Appendix 3*'.

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

- 1) Note the Commentary on the Statement of Accounts set out in Appendix 1.
- 2) Subject to the completion of the outstanding external audit work and final audit opinion, the Committee recommended the NPA to approve the Statement of Accounts 2020/21 as set out in Appendix 2 and the Letter of Representation as set out in Appendix 3.

ITEM 14: ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT AND UPDATED LOCAL CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

75. The Head of Governance & Support Services introduced report PR21/22-11 and reminded members of the report content.

76. The Committee commented that:

- It was thanks to the work and inventiveness of the Governance Team that Covid-19 had not adversely affected the Governance operations of the Authority.

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- The actions identified for 2021/22 should be reported back to the Committee in due course in order that the Committee could be assured that they were completed.

77. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The Annual Governance Statement refers to the work of the internal Governance of the Authority rather than the internal workings of other functions, such as the HR team. Although Covid-19 did have an impact, there were no significant Governance issues during 2020/21 with meetings switching to becoming virtual when the Government temporarily removed the legal requirement for local authorities to hold public meetings in person during the coronavirus pandemic.

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

- 1) Approve the Annual Governance Statement for 2020-21 to accompany the Authority's Statement of Accounts; and
- 2) Note the updated Local Code of Corporate Governance

ITEM 15: ANNUAL HUMAN RESOURCES AND HEALTH & SAFETY REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2020-21

79. The Human Resources manager introduced report PR21/22-12 and reminded members of the report content. Within the introduction, it was highlighted that there was an error within the sickness data analysis, within Appendix 2, and it should read that there were 7 individuals affected, with Covid -19, as opposed to 5 individuals reported.

80. The Committee commented that:

- It would be helpful for a future report to show the Equality and Diversity and Inclusivity characteristics of the current workforce.
- Their thanks went to all managers and staff for all their work in managing their teams during a challenging year.
- The 2021/22 report should include progress against the key priorities for the HR team as identified in the report.

81. In response to questions officers clarified that:

- The new blended working arrangements were a cross organisational priority and would see staff coming into the office for approximately 50% of their working week, with it being made clear in staff diaries where and when they were working. Training for Managers on managing remote teams was being organised and a significant amount of time had been spent reviewing policies and work practices.
- The best applicant with the desired skill set for the job was always the one appointed. The equal opportunities monitoring data showed that the Authority was not attracting applications from a diverse pool of candidates and an action plan was being drawn up to address this.
- A new tracking system was being put in place for lone working within the area teams. The device would have an alarm and Rangers would need to report into a call centre ensuring a reliable way to monitor staff safety. There were other procedures in place for staff not given the tracking alarm.

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

- 1) Note the content of the Human Resources and Health & Safety Report and highlight any areas requiring further clarification or action.

ITEM 16: INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT

83. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR21/22-13 and reminded Members of the

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report content.

84. The Committee commented that:

- It felt reassured that the 2022/23 Annual Investment Strategy would contain some parameters for investment with BHCC, including a summary of triggers and circumstances which would result in a review by the SI51 Officer as to the appropriateness of the proportion of investments held with BHCC compared to externally.

85. In response to questions, officers clarified that:

- The audit opinion of partial assurance was provided in respect of the New ICT contract arrangements as patches were not rolled out quickly enough.
- The Internal Auditors were working closely with the ICT Strategy Manager and were aware that progress was being made on 3 of the ICT actions and a further report being presented to the Senior Management Team. The Internal Auditors would follow up on the new ICT Contract Arrangements audit a year later.
- The most up to date information was provided in the report at the time of writing.

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

- 1) Progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2021/22).
- 2) The implementation of audit actions previously agreed by management

ITEM 17: SDNPA PROCUREMENT – STRATEGY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

87. The Head of Business Services introduced report PR21/22-14 and reminded members of the report content.

88. The committee commented that:

- Could Members help to narrow down the environmental issues that contractors would need to abide by?

89. In response to question, officers clarified that:

- The Sustainability Policy had to be robust and not simply just ask companies to provide an environmental statement. Companies should be asked to provide actual deliverables which were proportionate to the contract cost and therefore not place unrealistic expectations.
- The Procurement Officer was currently on Maternity Leave and Officers were therefore unsure the process of developing a Sustainable Procurement Policy over the next 24-months could be speeded up. The Committee urged development at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Public liability insurance would be tailored to the type of contract being procured. For example, when the contract was to provide advice Professional Indemnity Insurance was more important than Public Liability Insurance.
- It was hoped that the Green Paper on 'Transforming Public Procurement;' would provide advice on adding social value to be added into tenders.

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

- 1) Approve the SDNPA Procurement Strategy 2021-2026
- 2) Note that, through the Procurement Strategy, the SDNPA will take a proportionate view of risk in procurement, to strike a balance between mitigation and accessibility for small and medium sized enterprises, and in doing this, Officers will normally adopt the approach detailed in paragraphs 4.5 and 4.7 to relevant contracts.

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ITEM 18: FINANCIAL SERVICES CONTRACT 2022 ONWARDS

91. The Chief Financial Officer left the meeting.
92. The Head of Business Services introduced Report PR21/22-15 and reminded members of the report content.
93. The Committee commented that:
 - It welcomed the review of the Financial Services Contract and accepted that there were advantages to the current outsourced system. In regards to the S151 Officer the Committee could see how contracting this function out in the early days of the Authority was the right decision but as the Authority evolved and the financial systems became more complex the S151 Officer was more than a supporting role and it welcomed the opportunity for the review.
94. **RESOLVED:** The Committee resolved to:
 - 1) Approve the commencement of a procurement process leading to the appointment of a contractor to provide corporate financial services to SDNPA for a period of 3 years (and up to 5 years with extensions) from April 2022.
 - 2) Approve delegation of authority to the Chief Executive to award contracts for the above, following a competitive process carried out under the terms of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015
 - 3) Subject to a successful retendering of the Financial Services Contract, endorse the undertaking of a detailed and fully costed option appraisal for delivering financial services, to include an in-house model, the results of which are to be presented to the Committee for consideration during the first half of the initial contract period.

ITEM 19: INSURANCE SERVICES CONTRACT 2022 ONWARDS

95. Angus Dunn withdrew from the meeting for Item 19.
96. The Head of Business Services introduced report PR21/22-16 and reminded members of the report content.
97. The Committee commented that:
 - The collaboration with other National Parks was fully supported and a significant achievement.
98. In response to questions, Officers clarified that:
 - Some of the other National Parks who had not signed up to the consortium were keen to join but had taken up the option to extend their current arrangements. Those that had expressed they would like to join up next time, could align their current provision with the time scales of the consortium of National Park Authorities.
 - Scottish National Parks' insurances were funded by the Scottish Government.
99. **RESOLVED: The Committee resolved to:**
 1. Approve the commencement of a procurement process leading to the appointment of a contractor to provide insurance services to SDNPA for a period of 3 years (and up to 5 years with extensions) from April 2022.
 2. Approve delegation of authority to the Chief Executive to award contracts for the above, following a competitive process carried out under the terms of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.

CHAIR

The meeting closed at 13.27