



South Downs
National Park Authority

Agenda Item 9
Report NPA21/22-14

Report to	South Downs National Park Authority
Date	16 December 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 21 October 2021 NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The recent small increase in the number of SDNPA COVID cases has required us to take some additional short term precautions. These may have some implications for delivery but will not affect Member meetings or our statutory responsibilities.
- 2.2 At the time of writing there remains a possibility that the Government's response to the Glover Review will be published before Christmas, perhaps on 13 December, but there have been no recent meetings of the Contact Group so I do not possess any up to date information. I have been using my weekly blogs to keep staff and Members informed of the latest position and will continue to do so. I will provide a full update for Members at the workshop that precedes the NPA. There is a possibility that we will have just received the response by then, which would be timely.
- 2.3 The latest indications from Defra officials are that National Park Authorities in England can expect to receive a flat cash settlement in National Park Grants for the financial year 2022/23. We are expecting a three year settlement and have sought positive flexibility in the two succeeding financial years, although flat cash remains the most realistic expectation for these years as well. This will be the third year that there has been a flat cash settlement and with overall inflation in the economy beginning to gather pace, the financial position is likely to become more difficult in the medium term. The prudent decisions SDNPA has made in previous years means that we can deliver a balanced budget in 2022/23 and that we have sufficient reserves to support any changes we need to make to the operating model in response to adjusted funding levels.
- 2.4 On 22 November I attended SDNPA's annual performance review meeting with senior officials from Defra. The aim of these sessions is to demonstrate that we are delivering good value for money for our government grant and to seek Defra feedback on our performance and future plans. SDNPA was given a clean bill of health and we were praised for our imagination and innovation, particularly in relation to the Nature Recovery

Campaign, CIL, the delivery of Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL), the creation of the trading company and the acquisition of Seven Sisters. It is clear that these initiatives and our emphasis on income generation are particularly well aligned with Ministerial priorities.

- 2.5 I used the meeting to underline the serious impact on SDNPA of the three year flat cash settlement that has been mooted. I explained that, at a time of inflation and fast rising costs, this would necessitate a significant reduction in many SDNPA activities. Our grant will not be confirmed until late January (at the earliest) so SDNPA is not waiting for the Settlement but is currently developing our new budget and Corporate Plan on the basis of flat cash. We will be able to consider the implications of this at the workshop that precedes the NPA.

3. Planning

- 3.1 **Planning performance** continues to be good, with all government targets being met and a continuing strong record at appeal.

- 3.2 In respect of the **Community Infrastructure Levy** I am pleased to report that in the current financial year to date we have received £1.7m. This compares well with the total of £1.84m received across the full 2020/21 financial year and will ensure that in 2022 we can again make relatively large payments to the Parish and Town Councils where growth has occurred, in addition to having a relatively sizeable pot of funding for allocation to projects through our established processes and by approval of the Authority's Planning Committee.

- 3.3 National Highways have said that they are planning to run a statutory public consultation on their proposals for the **A27 Arundel Bypass** in the New Year. Whilst the proposed route for this bypass is known (it is outside of the National Park but in close proximity to it) we are expecting the consultation to include National Highways' detailed proposals including the crossing of the Arun valley, key junction arrangements and the de-trunking of the original A27. Officers will review the proposals when the consultation is launched and prepare a formal response for consideration by Members.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The **Environment Bill** which received Royal Assent on 9 November requires the Secretary of State to set 15 year targets for air quality, water, biodiversity and resource efficiency/waste. There will be an additional 2030 target relating to the abundance of species. These are designed to reflect some of the European Directives (to which the UK was a signatory before Brexit) in UK law. It also establishes the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), which in effect replaces the European Court of Justice as the final arbiter. Amongst other things the OEP must monitor progress against the above targets and give advice to Ministers on any proposed changes to environmental law. It is required to act objectively, impartially, proportionately and transparently.

- 4.2 The clauses on water attracted widespread media coverage and were the subject of much negotiation between the two Houses. The final situation is arguably weaker than interim versions, but it does strengthen the requirements on water companies to produce Water Resource Management Plans, and mandates the need for Drainage and Sewerage Management Plans. Specifically, by 2022, the Secretary of State must produce a plan to reduce discharges from storm overflows of sewerage.

- 4.3 A Biodiversity Duty will be placed on public bodies and the NPA, like others, will have to publish a Biodiversity Report within 3 years, then every 5 years thereafter. The requirement for 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in developments has become law, and will include Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). A consultation on BNG is imminent, and it is anticipated that there will be a two year transition period to Autumn/Winter 2023.

- 4.4 As predicted, the Act establishes the requirement for **Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)** for the whole of England. NPAs are named as possible Responsible Authorities for these Strategies but it is anticipated that LNRS will be at County or even wider geographical scale. In the meantime, the final SDNPA response to the Defra LNRS consultation was submitted on 27 October. We also contributed towards responses by NPE, Sussex LNP, Hants & IoW LNP and the South East Nature Partnership. We have

subsequently learnt that Defra received approx. 430 submissions as well as 70 separate letters in response to the consultation.

- 4.5 Finally, a new requirement in the Act, arising from amendments, is for Natural England to produce Species Conservation Strategies and Protected Sites Strategies. LPAs are required to cooperate with NE on their development and implementation, and have regard to them in the exercise of their functions.
- 4.6 The South Downs **Nature Recovery Campaign #ReNature** continues to stimulate interest and keep the profile of nature high, and was given a further boost by the Call for Nature Sites which we launched on 4 November during COP26.
- 4.7 We have received a number of enquiries from land managers, community groups, parish councils etc, and four completed EOIs to date. The window for EOIs will be open until 17 January. Meantime, the Nature Recovery Fund currently sits at approximately £250k. The South Downs Trust's Development Board was held on 19 November, seeking further donations. The meeting generated a lively debate and the team will be following up with current and potential supporters over the coming weeks.
- 4.8 The **Health and Well Being workshop** on 16 November focused on our work to date and the findings from a research project, looking at how social prescribing is operating and how we might use it as one of the mechanisms to connect people to the National Park. The report contained 5 broad recommendations for the NPA to consider. The workshop agreed to produce a briefing note for Integrated Care Systems as they come into being, to make them aware of the research findings and to offer up some areas where the NPA can work in partnership.
- 4.9 The workshop was followed by a report to the P&R Committee setting out learning to date and suggesting a future approach. The Committee endorsed the proposals for the future focus of our H&WB work, which should be placed in the broader context of all our work engaging people with and connecting them to the National Park.
- 4.10 The impact of Covid on our **Entry Signage** suppliers has caused some unavoidable delays, but 13 new signs have now been fully installed: 2 in Brighton & Hove, 7 in Hampshire and 4 in West Sussex. Due to issues obtaining the necessary licenses from ESCC, we have been unable to install any of the East Sussex signs to date, but I am happy to report that we hope to have the remaining 17 signs installed by the end of December.
- 4.11 The **Income Generation** team have now secured £1,073,168, across both the Authority and the South Downs National Park Trust with additional funding for Beelines and our education Travel Grant and our ReNature campaign. The funding for ReNature will be focused on supporting landowners to leverage additional funds for nature Restoration from Private Finance.
- 4.12 We have also had a further success with Expressions of Interest, with our £435,000 bid to the "Tree Call to Action Fund" invited to full application. This adds to the ongoing "Downs to the Sea" and "Ouse Valley Cares" lottery bids, resulting in £4.5 million in opportunities that are currently being progressed.
- 4.13 After a long process we have finally been informed that our bid to the National Grid Landscapes Enhancement Initiative has been approved. This fund seeks to support landscape enhancements close to electricity pylons where cables cannot be put underground. This is a £240,000 investment, with £170,000 coming from the National Grid and remainder being matched by SDNPA and Hampshire County Council.
- 4.14 The partnership project with Hampshire County Council comprises works to three areas on Butser Hill National Nature Reserve that will enhance both landscape and biodiversity, open up a new walking route away from the pylons and increase close-up wildlife interest for visitors. In addition, we will be enhancing the attractiveness of the car park and reducing its rather 'municipal' feel, helping to emphasise the strong sense of remoteness, tranquillity and the timeless quality of this dramatic landscape.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 **Volunteering** is now fully operational but with some continued limitations on tasks and volunteer numbers due to essential vehicle sharing safety restrictions and some ongoing impacts on capacity within partner organisations to host tasks.
- 5.2 The **South Downs Youth Action** programme has continued into the autumn with a total of 16 days of activity attended by 212 young people. We held our first Youth Ambassador training weekend residential at YHA South Downs on 2-3 October in partnership with the YHA and Sussex Clubs for Young People. Following this successful event we have recruited a further three youth ambassadors, bringing the total to five young people in this key role.
- 5.3 Wider support for volunteering activity across the National Park continues with the opening of two grant schemes in collaboration with the SDNP Trust and the Volunteer Ranger Service Committee. **The Volunteer Conservation Fund** is about to re-open for applications with revised criteria promoting diversity and inclusion and providing increased flexibility for applicants by removing the need for direct involvement of the VRS. Following the great success of Round 1 of the **Youth Action Fund** earlier this year, the second round of this grant scheme is now live with applications closing on 29 November. This grant, supported by Clarion Housing and the #iwill fund, encourages youth led social and environmental action and has already led to strong engagement from new audiences.

6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 Alongside the budget we will be developing fewer clearer corporate priorities and top level **Corporate Plan** targets for the organisation. The targets relate to Nature recovery, Climate Action and A National Park for All. Draft priorities, and proposed areas that we might stop working on, will be presented to Members at the pre-NPA workshop on 16 December. Feedback from this workshop will inform the development of a draft Corporate Plan for P&R Committee in February and a final Plan for the NPA in March.
- 6.2 As expected the visitor numbers at **Seven Sisters Country Park** have now reduced as we enter the winter months. Weekends (particularly Sundays) remain busy and the team continue to offer a visitor welcome service every day as part of our commitment to be open 364 days per year. They are now busy planning for 2022-23, preparing for opening up the new visitor centre, the grab and go outlet, accommodation and all the complex logistics and staffing that will come with this new operation.
- 6.3 Seven Sisters has been inspected by Visit England and passed, despite the ongoing construction work, meaning that it is now a 'Quality Assured Visitor Attraction'. The report particularly praised the quality of the website and social media, the onsite staff's knowledge and friendliness and the cleanliness and presentation of the site.
- 6.4 Baxall Construction are delivering our Phase 1 programme of works at Seven Sisters. Construction started on site on 9 August and is scheduled to be completed by April 2022. The work includes a new toilet block in the old workshop, which we hope to open in early 2022, a new grab and go facility and a visitor centre with improved access, as well as office and staff welfare facilities in the old dairy barn, external improvements and works to the area of Foxholes including refurbishment of the cottages 1, 2 and 3 and a new facilities block for the camping barn.
- 6.5 The overall programme is showing a 4 week delay due to procurement on long lead time items, supply chain issues and a couple of delays at the start. The Visitor Centre flooring is now installed and we are awaiting the new glazed doors and new heating and M&E before it can be fitted out in the new year for retail and interpretation. The Rangers Office is being refurbished, the Dairy Barn has been cleared and the old floors and foundations removed with new drainage and doors created for the new layout. New drainage has been installed in the new toilet block as well as stud walling, and plasterwork.
- 6.6 External works have included the new car park entrance for Saltmarsh to improve pedestrian safety as well as opening up and resurfacing the courtyard outside the Visitor Centre and Pump Barn. The Foxhole cottages have had pointing and render work on the exteriors as well as new roofing. Internal work has also been carried out to refurb and

redecorate the cottages. The Facilities Block for the Camping Barn has been stripped and foundation work started. Feedback on the contractors has been positive from a Health and Safety point of view and from the Seven Sisters Country Park staff.

7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 It has been another high-profile period for the National Park in the media. Our biggest news story was the launch of the “Call for Nature Sites”, which attracted 29 separate pieces of media coverage, including BBC Sussex, Farming UK and a good spread of regional newspapers across the National Park. The story reached over 2m people. Another highlight was the launch of the Writer in Residence at Seven Sisters Country Park – an inspiring project looking to explore diverse voices – which was covered by ITV Meridian and a clutch of local news sites.
- 7.2 An unexpected, but welcome hit, was a push to encourage people back to using buses and sustainable transport in the National Park for World Car Free Day – attracting over 60 pieces of media coverage.
- 7.3 Across social media, we have 62,526 followers at the end on 26 November. This is up from 51,053 at the end of November 2020. Since its launch in August, the Seven Sisters website has had 83,188 unique visitors.

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 21 October 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

