

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **24 March 2022**  
By **Chief Executive**  
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**

**Note**

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**Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report**

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**1. Summary and Background**

1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 16 December 2021 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

2.1 The Health and Safety Committee met on 9 March to reviewed the current SDNPA **COVID guidance** in the light of recently published Government advice. Staff, Members and volunteers will still be required to stay away from the work place if they test positive for COVID. If a household member tests positive then the member of staff, Member or volunteer should act with caution and work from home wherever possible.

2.2 The restrictions on the number of people allowed in SDNPA vehicles has been lifted, but no one has to share a vehicle if they feel it will be unsafe. When sharing an SDNPA vehicle, the wearing of masks is encouraged but it is no longer a requirement; it is good practice to keep the vehicle well-ventilated. There will continue to be a supply of antibacterial wipes and hand gel, both in offices and SDNPA vehicles.

2.3 The small number of remaining restrictions will be considered at the next meeting of the Health and Safety Committee in June, or earlier if the Government tightens its guidance.

2.4 At the time of writing there is still no confirmation of our **grant settlement from Defra** but I hope to be able to provide a verbal update at the meeting. The latest indications from Defra officials are still 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. Members are aware that this will be the third year that there has been a flat cash settlement and with overall inflation in the economy gathering pace, the financial position is likely to become more difficult in the medium term. We will discuss all this later on today's agenda.

### 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 The Authority's **Design Review Panel** held its AGM in January. We are lucky at the South Downs to have a number of architects, landscape architects, urban designers and sustainability professionals who are experts in their field and volunteer their time and expertise for free to help us maintain and improve the design quality of new development in the National Park. This supplements our own strong officer resource in Conservation, Design and Landscape. I would like to record my thanks to the Design Review Panel here.
- 3.3 National Highways ran a statutory public consultation on their proposals for the **A27 Arundel Bypass** from 11<sup>th</sup> January to 8<sup>th</sup> March. The route of the new bypass lies outside of the National Park but is within its setting. A short extension of the consultation period was given by National Highways to allow consideration of our response to this important consultation by SDNPA's Planning Committee at its meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> March. National Highways refused to extend the consultation period to allow consideration by full Authority at this meeting but all Members were provided with a draft copy of our proposed response for any comment in the week before Planning Committee.
- 3.4 Members will recall that **Aquind Limited** were proposing to construct and operate an electricity interconnector between France and the UK. The development site was outside of, but in places only 200-300m from, the National Park boundary and the proposed convertor station would have had the greatest impact on the National Park given its scale and siting near to the boundary. In January the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy refused Aquind Development Consent because insufficient consideration was given to an alternative connection point into the UK grid at Mannington in Dorset. This weighed significantly against the development as he was unable to conclude that the proposed route was justified. He considered this to be important given the combination of adverse impacts from the proposed route through a very densely populated urban area (Portsmouth). The landscape and visual harm to the National Park was also weighed against the scheme but was not central to the decision.
- 3.5 Previous reports have described **Esso's plans** for an underground aviation oil pipeline between Fawley refinery in Southampton and Heathrow Airport. This will replace an existing pipeline and will run across 25km of the National Park in Hampshire, entering west of Bishops Waltham and leaving adjacent to Chawton. SDNPA played a full part in the examination process in 2019/20, securing improvements including legal protection for 97 trees and 4.8km of hedgerow on or adjacent to the pipeline route in the National Park and a route that avoids national and internationally designated ecological sites. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy granted the Development Consent Order in October 2020. Construction works in the National Park start this month and will progress over the summer with strict control measures to protect residents, visitors, wildlife, trees and hedgerows and our Dark Night Skies. Esso are in contact with Parish Councils in the vicinity of the route and other key groups to provide regular updates on the construction works

### 4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 In November 2021, to coincide with COP26, and as part of the SDNPA **Nature Recovery Programme**, we opened our first Call for Nature Sites. Based on the tried and tested approach used in planning, the aspiration was to pilot a similar approach to generate interest with landowners, managers, communities and partners to contribute towards the ReNature target of 13,000 ha of land for wildlife – uplifting the current 25% of land within the South Downs for wildlife to 33% by 2030. The call to action is based around submitting an expression of interest to work with the SDNPA on developing and delivering projects/ initiatives for nature.
- 4.2 The window for applications closed in January and we have received over 70 expressions of interest. These are distributed across the whole National Park and range from very small sites to whole estates and even a whole parish. The Nature Recovery Working Group is

now undertaking an assessment of all of the proposals that have been submitted. There will be some that do not meet the criteria we have set for the pilot, but we expect to identify a series of projects which we will progress with the landowner/ manager, community or partner to realise benefits for nature. This will include support with project development through to signposting appropriate funding mechanisms. These projects will form the core of our delivery of our nature recovery programme during 2022/23.

- 4.3 The **Call for Nature Sites** will also feed into existing mechanisms we have at our disposal such as FiPL and the grants managed by the South Downs Trust such as Beelines, Trees for the Downs and the new ReNature Grant. The ReNature Grant is a direct response from the ReNature Campaign. With a grant pot of £100k available for projects, we are looking to support enabling and capital works to restore nature. This £100k is drawn from a total of £365k raised for ReNature to date, with the other funds allocated towards seed funding private finance initiatives.
- 4.4 The **Income Generation** team have secured a total of £1,356,428 in the current year to date. This represents an additional £269,000 since my last report and includes £200,000 via SELEP for Seven Sisters from the Get Britain Building Fund. This funding will support a number of projects, including the renovation of the Pump Barn into a multi-use space celebrating South Downs produce.
- 4.5 The funding also includes new Major Donor contributions to the Trust, off the back of their November Development Board meeting and two new grants which are providing matched funding for projects being delivered by our Cultural Heritage Theme Board. Opportunities currently in the pipeline now equate to just over £4.4 million. This all adds up to an excellent result from our income generation team, achieved in a year that presented many challenges.
- 4.6 Over £20,000 has been awarded through the **Sustainable Communities Fund** over the last year. Since December this has included grants towards Petersfield Walking Festival and Roots to Resilience, a community outreach and organic growing initiative near Brighton. The next deadline for small grants (under £2k) is 26<sup>th</sup> May. A number of opportunities for young people will be available on the Trust website during March including mini- grants of £150 for schools, an eco- art competition and a final tranche of funding through the Youth Action Fund.

## 5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 **Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS)** groups are operating without a policy limit on numbers but with some remaining from impacts from lack of available parking at sites and reduced task availability from partner organisations. In Q3 2021-22, 169 VRS volunteers contributed 3300 hours for the National Park. During the pandemic VRS volunteer numbers have declined by over a third, to around 200 active volunteers. This is likely to be a temporary reduction due to the number of restrictions in place for both volunteering and wider society. **South Downs Youth Action** will resume in April 2022 with a programme of volunteer days and residentials for youth groups running from spring to autumn.
- 5.2 **Microvolunteering:** the SDNPA is working with the Universities of Brighton and Sussex, and the Living Coast to deliver the 2022 City Nature Challenge in Brighton and the Eastern Downs from 29 April. This is a global community science initiative using the iNaturalist app/website to record as many species of wild plant, animal or fungus (a bioblitz) in Brighton and the Eastern Downs, as far west as the Arun at Amberley.

## 6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 At **Seven Sisters**, poor weather in November and December meant disappointing visitor numbers and income, however some bright weekends in January made up for this. This has reinforced just how weather dependant the site currently is, which will be a factor in our future plans. SDNPA is now grazing the chalk grassland using a mixture of Sussex Cattle, Exmoor Ponies and Shetland Ponies, who are making significant improvements to the condition of this habitat. As an indication that our work is already showing results we were

pleased to see 5 rare Short Eared Owls spend their winter on the site which attracted major media coverage.

- 6.2 The **Phase I construction works** are progressing well as we move into our eighth month of construction. The new toilet block has been vastly improved with external cladding and the building is being finalised internally ready for completion in early April. Works have started on the Grab and Go building which historically was the original toilet block so this has been gutted internally and temporary toilets have been provided onsite to enable us to try and minimise the risk to our overall programme. The basic fit out works at Foxhole cottages is nearing completion with all scaffolding now removed. The Ranger Office is also nearing completion ready for the team to move back into. The internal fit out of the new Visitor Centre is being made by a local craftsman and will be installed shortly. Interpretation works for the Visitor Centre and road signage is going well and will be installed by late April. Final preparations are being made with the Seven Sisters team to be ready to open the new buildings to the public in the coming months.
- 6.3 **South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd**, the teckal company owned by SDNPA, will be taking over management of Seven Sisters from April 1<sup>st</sup>. The company have elected a new (5<sup>th</sup>) director Iain Skinner, an experienced chartered surveyor who has worked on many relevant projects such as Alice Holt for Forestry England.
- 6.4 The company directors have met several times in the run up to taking over the site on 1 April. Recent meetings have included agreeing the Annual Business Plan (which is elsewhere on this agenda) and adopting, subject to some minor changes (referred to in the later paper) the Operating Agreement, which was agreed by the NPA in December.
- 6.5 Work progresses on our **EDI programme**. This focuses on the way we go about our day to day work and how the way we do things impacts on EDI. This relates to all our work, whether through our processes, projects, recruitment and also externally by including specific groups to work with in delivering projects. A paper will be coming to P&R and then to the NPA will include a plan to highlight our direction of travel and progress to date and will seek support for this important area of work.
- 6.6 The second phase of our **entry signage** is now complete, with 30 new signs installed at key locations across the National Park. This completes the entry signage project with a total of 49 signs now in place. These signs welcome people to the National Park and emphasise that it is a unique place to be treasured and cared for. We have already received a great deal of positive feedback on them.

## 7. Media and Communications

- 7.1 The **Dark Skies Festival 2022** has been a great success, with a two-week, hybrid programme of events. The festival opened with the announcement of the winners of the Astrophotography competition. This received widespread coverage. A conservative estimate is that the story has reached well over 3m people in the UK. Our online content reached just under 500,000 people, with the videos being viewed over 20,000 times.
- 7.2 Despite challenging weather during the Festival we were able to run 3 of our 4 in person events – in Seven Sisters, Brighton seafront and Queen Elizabeth Country Park. Overall we spoke to over 736 people at our new Walk the Planet and star gazing events. The festival was aimed this year at enabling people to get out and explore our dark skies for themselves. A key element was the creation of 500 Dark Skies Packs with bookmarks, Dark Skies Top Trumps, a jigsaw and much more. Around 420 of these packs were targeted at underserved communities, being distributed through food banks, young carers groups, refugee groups and more.
- 7.3 The last three months have seen nearly 350,000 unique visitors to our website. Our social media following and reach has continued to grow with a following across our SDNPA channels of over 65,000 – an increase of 10,000 followers in a year. Our content across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter has an average weekly reach of just under 250,000 people.

## **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 16 December NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

### **TREVOR BEATTIE Chief Executive Officer South Downs National Park Authority**

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager.
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None

